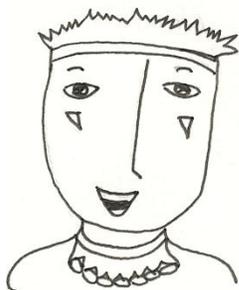


CHAPTER 1

ACTING HUMAN RIGHTS AND THEATRE OF THE OPPRESSED

By Mariana Leal Ferreira



Hello, let me introduce myself. I am the Joker, a master of ceremonies who will guide you through this remarkable handbook. Like a “wild card,” I jump in and out of scenarios to help you use Theater of the Oppressed techniques to educate our brothers and sisters about human rights. My artistic disposition to look into habits of thought, action, and time can offer deep insights into Paulo Freire's and Augusto Boal's exciting work. I am an educator, too, interested in promoting the human rights of all peoples, just like you. Welcome!

When theatre insinuates itself into the classroom or out onto the street, human rights education becomes an inspiring and powerful experience. Acting out skits or exploring different characters within a human rights framework makes alternative scenarios and endings turn out to be real possibilities. Drama promotes critical thinking so that students can reflect upon and formulate their own ideas of the world they'd like to help create. This manual is designed to make the teaching of human rights exhilarating for actors and non-actors alike. Whether you have experience or not using theatre as a pedagogical tool, the stories, plays, and detailed learning activities presented here will guide you through the principles and practice of **Augusto Boal's**¹ revolutionary **Theatre of the Oppressed (TO)** methodology. The goal is to show how theatre can be used to create a world where human rights are appreciated and protected.

For those already using TO, challenging connections between plays, short stories, and Indigenous Peoples' rights provide substantial stimulation for further action. Whether your work is dedicated specifically to Indigenous Peoples or to some other human rights and social justice concern, you will find in this handbook essential ideas and practices to promote the human rights of all peoples on this planet. Moreover, this manual also reflects important educational theories and strategies conveyed by the world-renowned Brazilian educator **Paulo Freire**, who first inspired Augusto Boal to publish his book *Theatre of the Oppressed* in 1975.

¹ Words in **bold face type** are defined in the Glossary.



Did you know that Paulo Freire (1921 - 1997) created his philosophy of popular education working with the illiterate poor of the Brazilian Northeast? Starting in the late 1940s, his innovative approach to literacy emphasized peasants' ability to generate knowledge collectively, using "generative terms" – such as land, water, food, transportation – that conveyed their life conditions and worldviews. Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed enabled people to see themselves as historical actors, capable of organizing on their own and creating social change.

The main characters in these plays and stories – IronHawk, Antonio, Mollie, and many others – testify to staggering experiences based on documented facts. I myself, a Brazilian citizen, cannot help but imagine how different their life trajectories would have been had their human rights been respected. The plays stem from my experience working as a school teacher and practical nurse in Brazilian Indigenous territories in the late 1970s, '80s and '90s, and also as a medical anthropologist and human rights educator in North and South America at the turn of the third millennium. From the very beginning, the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire oriented my work in both health and education. Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, first published in Portuguese in 1970, provided substantial insights for the development of a system of popular education in Brazilian Indigenous schools during the oppressive military dictatorship of 1964 to 1985. Following Freire, the indigenous students and I posited that learning should be viewed as an act of culture and freedom through "conscientization"-- developing consciousness, but consciousness understood to have the power to transform reality. The actions of the protagonists in these plays and stories reflect just that – an attempt to liberate themselves from oppression and humanize the world they live in and help create.

In my own work, Paulo Freire's emphasis on dialogue and on people working with each other to transform the world materialized into short stories, memoirs, drawings, photographs, and maps published collectively in numerous newsletters, first-readers, atlases, and history books in the Xingu Indigenous Park and other reservations or territories where I worked. Through dialogues and debate, students were challenged to adopt more critical positions about the country and their lives. Like Freire, many educators viewed education as an effort to liberate people and not as yet another instrument to dominate them. In this respect, the narratives in this manual offer a portrait of what Indigenous community members were - and to a large extent still are - thinking, saying, and doing to claim justice for themselves and make their communities flourish. Freire's insistence on situating educational activity in the lived experience of participants has opened up a series of possibilities for the way education has been put into practice in Brazilian schools, including Indigenous ones. Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed is one such methodology, which closely mirrors the dialogical and transformational aspects of Freire's critical pedagogy.



*The legendary Brazilian theatre director Augusto Boal (1931-2009) founded the "Theatre of the Oppressed" movement. He was deeply influenced by Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed, using the stage as a platform for social dialogue to ultimately change society. In this handbook, we use Boal's methods of **Image Theatre** and **Forum Theatre** to encourage the participation of audience members as "**spect-actors**," as he liked to call them, rather than mere spectators. Like Boal, our goal is to engage you in a theatrical rehearsal for real-life human rights issues.*

Theatre of the Oppressed, or TO for short, is a set of collective and creative techniques, games, and practices invented by Augusto Boal to promote social and political change. In this book, TO gives educators, students, individuals, and communities the tools to analyze and transform their actions within contemporary situations affecting indigenous peoples' lives. Forum Theatre and Image Theatre are the main TO techniques used throughout the chapters to explore, rehearse, and enact community-oriented and community-building solutions to problems of oppression, conflict, inequality, and injustice.

Forum Theatre begins with the enactment of a scene – such as IronHawk's encounter with the prison warden in Chapter 4, or Antonio's insistence on giving his twin sisters a piece of bread in Chapter 6 – in which the protagonist tries unsuccessfully to overcome oppression. The Joker then invites the spect-actors to replace the protagonist at any point in the scene and offer an alternative action that could lead to a different ending or solution. The result is a rehearsal for real situations, based on the enacted dialogues stemming from the suggested alternatives.

Image Theatre, in turn, is a series of silent exercises in which participants create embodiments of their feelings and experiences. Beginning with a selected situation, such as Joaquin's first encounter with the farmer's peons in Chapter 7, participants form images with their own bodies or sculpt images onto others' bodies. These frozen images can then be *dynamized* or brought to life, through a sequence of movement-based and interactive exercises explained below in detail.

TO came rather naturally to students from seventeen distinct Indigenous communities who attended the Diauarum School in the Xingu Indigenous Park, where I taught mathematics and Portuguese in the early 1980s. Dialogue and communication, so essential to Freire's theory of liberation, was often difficult given the students' varied cosmologies or worldviews and the seventeen different languages they spoke. Only a few male adults who worked at the Diauarum administrative post knew some Portuguese. I developed educational materials in the Kayabi, Suyá, and Juruna languages, but these represented only three major spoken tongues. Therefore, the students and I had to develop other ways of

communicating and producing knowledge. Aside from drawing, theatre kept insinuating itself into our activities, whether we were studying math, creating map books, writing newsletters, or re-writing history – from Indigenous perspectives, of course!

In 1981, we put together our first play at the Diauarum School: using no words but only actions, “Fishing on the Xingu River” conveyed the everyday practices of local communities, who relied heavily on fishing for survival. The techniques for attracting and catching a huge variety of freshwater fish in the Amazon basin were so wide-ranging that we quickly developed games to introduce these practices to the local villagers and to our neighbors and visitors, Indigenous or not. We then wrote about these varied practices in different languages in our multiple community-based publications.



Good news: the Diauarum School, located on the margins of the Xingu River, is now operated exclusively by the local communities with its own curricula and Indigenous teachers. The Xingu Indigenous Park, located in the state of Mato Grosso in central Brazil, was created in 1961 by the Brazilian military government. To the government, the Xingu Park conveniently confined Indigenous Peoples whose lands were being taken away by incoming settlers and multinational corporations.²

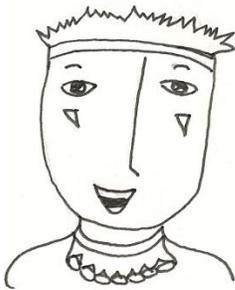
Right then at the Diauarum School, we were putting into practice the true spirit of Boal's methodology and experimenting with new forms of interactive theatre. As the celebrated theatre director, writer, and politician liked to say, "We are all theatre." As Boal had predicted, practicing theatre openly helped reveal forms of oppression, subtle or not, experienced by the distinct peoples in the Xingu Park. For instance, the “Fishing on the Xingu River” workshop revealed different problems that affected the various local communities, such as the pollution of the rivers caused by cattle farms, mining, and logging businesses. We practiced possible forms of interaction, impersonating our main antagonists – farmers, loggers, and gold miners. While the Kayapó and Suyá Indigenous Peoples, for instance, usually proposed more aggressive strategies, our TO games revealed that the Kayabi and the Juruna peoples, among others, developed tactics that were oftentimes more effective than using violence. Rather than watch our plays and workshops as mere audiences, communities from all over the Xingu Park – sometimes traveling in canoes for one or two days - would join our informal educational activities to suggest novel possibilities to liberate themselves from the ill effects of extensive land invasion and widespread appropriation and contamination of natural resources.

² For current information about the Xingu Indigenous Park educational program, see www.socioambiental.org .



*After more than thirty years of negotiation between nation-states and Indigenous Peoples worldwide, the **UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples** was finally adopted by the UN General Assembly on September 13, 2007. An overwhelming majority of 143 voted in favor, with only four negative votes (Canada, Australia, New Zealand, United States), and eleven abstentions. Such human rights declarations become universally applicable upon their adoption by the UN regardless of how individual states vote.³*

The new Constitution of Brazil in 1988 helped further empower the Organized Indigenous Movement in the country, reflecting a victory of its own making. The initial draft of the **UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)** had just been put together in 1985 by the **Working Group on Indigenous Populations**, the world's largest human rights forum. The right to cultural diversity, the right to quality education and health care, and the fundamental right to occupy ancestral territories, featured in both UNDRIP and the new Brazilian Constitution, are main themes fully addressed in the plays and learning activities presented here. Like other Indigenous organizations across the globe, the Organized Indigenous Movement in Brazil helped push for the adoption of the UNDRIP. However, despite the provisions of the Declaration, the concrete implementation of such rights is far from reality. Indigenous Peoples in Brazil, Australia, China, India, and all over the world still live in poverty and ill health and face tremendous racial discrimination in their daily lives.



*I'm sad to say that the United States has a very poor history of human rights protection. So far, the US Senate has failed to ratify most key human rights treaties, including the **Convention on the Rights of the Child**, the **Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women**, or even the **Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights**, a cornerstone of the international human rights framework.*

The situation for Indigenous Peoples in the United States is not much better than elsewhere in the world. In fact, while the Indigenous population in the US (two million individuals) occupy less than .02% of the total national territory, in Brazil the 400,000 Indigenous persons have secured rights to about 2% of the country's land – ten times more than in the USA. Furthermore, the incidence of degenerative diseases such as cancer and diabetes in Indigenous communities is at least five times higher in the USA than in Brazil. This is a direct consequence of the United States' refusal to support the human rights of women,

³ In Dec. 2010 President Obama announced the US would lend its support to UNDRIP. However, since UNDRIP has not been ratified by the US Senate, it is not a law, but a resolution. For more information, see International Indian Treaty Council www.treatycouncil.org.

children, and ethnic minorities, and thus guarantee health equity for all. Support for the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples – as well as other international treaties – is crucial!



The theatre plays portrayed in this handbook offer a glimpse into the lives of Indigenous Peoples today in Brazil and the United States. Their lives in North and South America are quite similar to the predicaments of Indigenous Peoples worldwide, as well as to the dilemmas faced by ethnic minorities around the globe, broadly speaking.

The narratives in this manual point to the importance of understanding the breadth of human rights instruments of protection, most notably the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Because it relies on individuals' and communities' perceptions of how to overcome oppression and achieve liberation, Theatre of the Oppressed emerges as an extraordinary methodology to explore different possibilities to create and re-create worlds anew. You may, of course, apply the games and exercises proposed here to better understand and suggest new possibilities for the liberation of Indigenous Peoples in your community or anywhere else in the world. But keep in mind that you may also follow our suggested learning activities to address oppressive situations closer to you and your communities and the different venues for liberation that are locally situated and contextualized. Ultimately, by using this handbook you will learn how to apply TO to strengthen your work and to contribute to the enjoyment of human rights everywhere and for all peoples.

You'll like the Joker! Augusto Boal calls him a "magical reality." His imagination and ability to travel through time and space invite us to understand individual dramas within broader social and political scenarios. Here in this book, the Joker is an advocate for Indigenous Peoples' rights, as is the character representing myself in Chapter 5, *Diabetes Jackpot*. The Joker's friendly manner encourages us to engage in theatrical action, beginning with his commentaries embedded in the text of the Declaration itself (See Chapter 2, "The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples"). He then weaves in and out of the plays in order to provoke dialogue and transform you from a mere audience member or spectator, into a spect-actor ready to take action to transform the world. The detailed learning activities suggested in each chapter are precisely designed to make theatre more participatory and interactive. Whether you are an actor or not, you will enjoy playing the exciting games and exercises we have adapted from Boal's magnificent TO repertory.