



People are great. Great men have learnt from the people:

Any great teacher inspires in people a strong desire to capture the essence of the person and their philosophy. Augusto Boal is no different. Some people question how true he was to Marxism, others want to see him as having gone beyond Marxism, still others want to see him as an extension of Brecht. For me, the greatness of Boal lay in his ability to learn from people and this required him to be constantly open to multiple perspectives and practices. To try to capture this man in terms of one defining feature then is like searching for one true statement about the complex world we live in. In what follows I will describe a few stories that highlight why and how we came to see and understand Boal's work and philosophy in these terms.

Let me start with a time when Jana Sanskriti was still a propaganda theatre group. Our audience did not always perceive the propaganda as propaganda. In part this was because the actors and spectators came mostly from the same background. They were agricultural workers and their experience would constitute the ground and content of our plays. We always held discussions with the spectators after the performances. After the performance, the discussion between actors and spectators sometimes continued till midnight. As a result of performing and continuing discussions till this hour, sometimes we would not be able to return home. We would get stuck at the river bank if we had performed in villages that were only connected by manually-operated boats. When it got this late, at the river we would find boats without the boatmen. We would find ourselves waiting by the river for dawn to arrive when the boatmen would return and we would be able to cross the river. We frequently had these kinds of experiences.

We still operate in the delta region of West Bengal, India where you find a web of intersecting rivers forms the landscape. We paid little heed to the consequences of missing the boat because the discussions were our primary inspiration. In each village, spectators would serve us a simple dinner after the performance. Night stay was out of the question since all members of the travelling troupe of actors except for two – one actor and the director - were wage labourers. These actors were engaged in soil excavation, some were employed in garden estates, others worked as carpenters, and some were busy in the cultivation of crops common to this area such as chillies, tomato, sunflower etc. Sometimes, we cycled 15 kilometres or more to reach the performance site. If one person's cycle had a punctured tyre,

then we would all walk the entire distance with our cycles to keep pace with the one person. We entertained ourselves with a steady supply of jokes and songs till we reached home.

Now Jana Sanskriti has developed a number of satellite groups in this deltaic region as a result of which one team does not have to cover a large area. Things are much less tiring and run much more smoothly. In other words, our actors live and work in relatively limited areas with which they are very familiar as residents and activists. Over time, Jana Sanskriti actors and Forum Theatre spect-actors have not only collaborated in performances onstage, they have also acted collectively offstage. As community activism increases, the tension in the community increases, as does the need for ongoing activism and mobilisation.

I have described this in order to explain the degree and depth of our conception of and connection with the audience. For us, the question of constructing a spect-actor could not have stopped onstage. During those propaganda days we developed our understanding of spectators' power as social critique and their ability to conceptualise philosophy through social practices. We realised the intellectual faculty of our spectators and understood how the 'uneducated' cultivate their philosophy. In fact, we realized how learned they truly are. What concerned us however was the challenge of how to engage this thoughtful opinion and intellect in public space in a public debate on an ongoing basis. Public debate is the recognition of the intellectual faculty of the people. We also noted the sad absence of public debate and recognition of its important in the political culture of our times. To us, this was a violation of human rights. We knew without doubt that the public debate would extend our intellectual horizons.

Augusto Boal made his entrance into Jana Sanskriti's lives at this crucial historical conjuncture in 1991. Since then a new age started in the theatre practise of our group. Boal's voice delivered the most powerful inspiration to us- *"In all human being, all sensations arouse emotion. Equally the human being is a rational creature, it knows things, it is capable of thinking, of understanding and of making mistakes."* While talking about actors we see him saying- *"We have within us such a wealth of possibilities! And we know so very little of it, so little about what we have, and almost nothing about what we are!"* Perhaps Boal's message sunk in because we had heard in it an echo of Vivekananda's teachings.

Vivekananda was a saint but also a full-fledged politician in nineteenth century India. He said, *"Education is the manifestation of the perfection already in man. Only problem is that the people are not aware of this perfection."* He perceived a political culture that would manifest the already existing perfection in human beings. For him radical reform would entail giving people more information so that their thinking takes multiple factors into account. Vivekananda also wrote *"working class in India needs information, rest of it will be done by their rational intellectual capacity which they already possess."*

Herein lies the connection between Vivekananda and Boal's gift to the world – forum theatre. Forum theatre is nothing if not the publicising of information among actors and spectators. Spectators then engage themselves in a conflict with this information to the information they already have when they interact with the oppressive character in the play, rationalise the whole situation, and provide ways to end the oppression shown in the play. Considering what Boal had said on the human being as bearer of

a “wealth of possibilities” the question is: can we understand what made a political theatre personality and a spiritualist feel and express the same thing though they lived across the world from each other and with a divide of 80 years? How did Boal’s theatre and Vivekananda’s spiritualism come to express the same politics? ***Why dont we see this as the politics of spirituality. The spirituality according to Vivekananda is the understanding about equality and the greatness of human being from heart. Our theories die often in practice as it starts from head and does not reach to our heart. We lack seriousness, commitment, dedication and thus get coopted ,nevermind to compromise, head discovers new ways of interpretation of a phenomena to cover up the compromise. As an off stage actor I have experienced such thing several times in my life and that has inspired me to understand the politics of spirituality and has taken me away from organised religion.***

Arguably, the answer lies in how they both perceived people – with utmost gratitude and respect for the potential of thought and intelligence in people. Both Boal and Vivekananda discover the very same truth. What matters is not whether Boal or Vivekananda is an atheist or not. What matters is how each founds ways of coming closer to people to nurture an attitude and curiosity for learning, deliberating, and discovering. This is where politics of spiritualism and politics of theatre become synonymous. The theatre of Boal is entirely based on relationships between fellow humans – between actor and spectators. Boal envisioned spectators and actors as one, where sharing prevails in the form of arguments, counter-arguments, and deliberations so that everybody learns from everybody!

In other words, Boal elevated the art of knowing by making it a public and collective process of exchange and debate through the medium of theatre. Richard Schechner commented, “You have achieved what Brecht only dreamt of and wrote about”. I have been asked often if Boal is Brechtian, Marxist, and so forth. That Boal has learnt from Brecht and Marx is undeniable. Yet, Boal remains such a humanist and much of what he learnt came from the working classes and the deprived masses.

We all know the story of Vergillio and Boal’s all important encounter with him when performing in a village back in the 1970’s. The play that ended with the song, “We have to spill our blood to get our rights from the landlord”. We know how, once the play finished, Vergillio invited them to join the action and urged them to come along with him to the house of the most oppressive landlord to attack him, bring him down by “spilling of blood”. We know too that the brave actors withdrew at this suggestion. Vergilio had said to Boal and the actors, “*So when you true artists talk of the blood that must be spilt, this blood you sing about spilling- it’s our blood you mean, not yours, isn’t that so?*” Those words led to the awakening!

What happened next is very interesting. Boal saw himself very deeply. He became the spectator of his own actor. If such a thing as spilling of blood was such a good solution, why did he himself not want to be a part of it? There had to be alternative ways! Boal said here “*This helped us understand our error. Agit-prop is fine, what was not fine was that we were incapable of following our own advice.*” The unforgettable experience convinced Boal that this kind of awakening should be the purpose of theatre. Many Vergillio’s should speak and rescript the play, not on occasion, by accident, but by design, prompted by the structure of the play itself.

I have heard friends in slums saying 'dil dimaag se baat karo' – speak from your head and heart. For them, the connection between head and heart is central to politics. We believe this is how political practice must complement theoretical ideas. This is similar to the lesson Boal himself learned and taught others after encountering Vergillio. Boal said, *"I have never again written plays that give advice, nor have I ever projected "messages" to the audience again. Except on occasions when I was running the same risks as everyone else."* Boal reminds us of Che who at that time said, *"Solidarity means running the same risk."*

Boal showed us that the methods of change ought to be revised by keeping in mind that the alternatives we seek are in sync with the solidarity we are willing to extend. Those who do theatre of the oppressed must be committed to this form of change. **Boal created a method which revealed how much he loved the world! That he learnt from Vergillio and discovered a Che in that old, uneducated, landless, farm worker. To be substantiated.**

The next story I want to recount is one I have heard Boal tell many, many times. This is the story of the "clear conversation" woman. Each time I heard him tell the story about the genesis of Forum Theatre with the same passion in his narration and the same respect for her. Boal and his troupe were enacting a scene about a man who takes money from his wife to spend on his mistress. He returns to an upset wife who he manages to placate every time. At that time, Forum theatre interventions were enacted by the actors themselves. A woman tried to suggest how the husband and wife should have a clear conversation. But each depiction of a 'clear conversation' failed to impress her. She remained unsatisfied till the actors invited her to enact the clear conversation on her terms. She did so, showing the woman threatening her husband with a broom, sitting at the dining table, declaring her fatigue and asking him to make the dinner for the evening. With the woman showing for herself what she would have done, she certainly gave her husband a rather hard time. But with it, she also gave birth to a historical moment in world theatre - Forum theatre was born. With this, Theatre of the Oppressed became a movement, a practise, a way of doing theatre that spread throughout the world like a gigantic flood.

Here too, Boal is the student and the woman from an ordinary background is the teacher. Boal's understanding of the woman's desire to express her point of view wholly, exactly the way she wanted, made him compromise on his "stage for actors only" belief. This openness to transform even a fundamental belief about the stage led to the search for the right solution and the invention of forum theatre. Ways do change as it did in this case but this happens because Boal had the will to transform. He had that the political will of transformation.

Hearsey the change we made in forum.

Finally, we end with Mary. Mary is a house maid. She has acted in a Forum play for the first time in her life. The play is over, it is a success and Mary is found crying in the green room. People are curious and ask her the reason for this. Mary says *"Today for the first time in my life I was visible as opposed to the total invisibility I experienced so far in my life until and before today. Today I feel I am a woman, a human being."*

Now let us understand what Boal had to say about this. *"This is the theatre I believe in: the place where we can stand and see ourselves. Not see what others tell us we are, or should be- but see our deepest selves! Theatre is the place where we look at ourselves and say: 'I am a man, I am a woman, I am me'.* ***Theatre is collective action between actors and spectators and at the same time it is also followed by an introspective action.*** People in theatre discover their strength and potentials. Really it is here where Boal truly attains the stature of a people's playwright. We also see him saying *"I believe that all the truly revolutionary theatrical groups should transfer to the people the means of production in the theatre so that people themselves may utilize them. The theatre is a weapon and it is the people who should yield it."*

Each of these stories is a testimony of a part of what made Boal and how he came to be the great teacher that he is. To return to my opening point then, a number of people go searching in Boal for Marx and Brecht. Most people find similarities and continuities and some regret that there has been a gradual journey away from Marxism. Let the reader be the judge of the significance of this search. I wish to end on the note of saying that Boal remains an ocean made up from the waters of many rivers and streams of thought. Do we really intend to turn Boal's philosophy into a doctrine –just as “they” did to Marx? **I have argue here.**