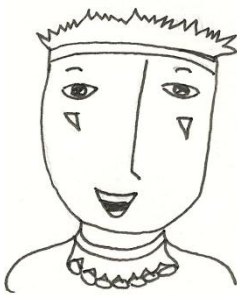


CHAPTER 3

GIVE WINGS TO YOUR IMAGINATION AND CHANGE THE WORLD: WRITE AND PERFORM YOUR OWN PLAY!

By Jiwon Chung and Mariana Leal Ferreira¹

PART 1: CREATE YOUR OWN PLAY!



Have you ever envisioned writing plays and eventually directing and performing them yourself in your community or other public settings? Have you ever experienced the pleasure of fully expressing in prose or in dramatic action your life experiences and ideas for a better world for yourself and those around you? Have you even considered the fact that we are all innate actors, the main protagonists of our own lives, who fashion the world we live in and help create the world day by day in everything we say, feel, think, and do?

*Well, here are a few hints on how to get started writing your own plays, following **Augusto Boal's**² ideas about **Theatre of the Oppressed (TO)** and his original and exciting games for actors and non-actors alike.³ Just like Boal, I believe everyone's life is a play in itself – and in this respect you're the main character of your own trajectory and life experience. Your motivation to make this a more just and peaceful world for all provides the basic inspiration for your creativity on how to end oppression today and achieve liberation towards a more free and just society. So let your imagination fly high!*

All of the plays in this book highlight a very specific conflict or crisis that requires a resolution. And here's a very important point to keep in mind when you write your own play: an issue only becomes an issue if there is conflict involved. The protagonist wants something very badly — to get out of prison, to regain control of her health, to get a job, to save his children from starvation — but something and someone keep it from happening.⁴

¹ All photos by Mariana Ferreira, used with permission.

² All terms in **bold typeface** are defined in the Glossary.

³ Augusto Boal, *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*. New York: Routledge, 1992.

⁴ Jiwon Chung, "Theater of the Oppressed as a Martial Art." In T. Emert and E. Friedman (eds.), *Come Closer: Critical Conversations about Theater of the Oppressed and Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2011.



Writing your own play is not difficult:

“A play is a passion and a platform,” as theatre director Augusto Boal, the founder of the Theatre of the Oppressed, often referred to this interactive form of theatre throughout his career in Brazil and around the world from the 1960s until his death in May 2009. Simply put, we all know how to tell stories. Devising a play is just telling a story with characters brought to life, speaking, moving, and acting. The basic process is to create an engaging story from an idea that involves an encounter and a conflict of wills. This story is told through a sequence of physical and emotional actions that results in the transformation of one or several characters in the story.

Kairos Theater Ensemble at UC Berkeley, May 2011,
play-backing Professor Nancy Scheper-Hughes’
narrative about worldwide organ trafficking.
The 8th Annual SFSU Human Rights Summit.
© Kairos Theater Ensemble, used with permission.

If you feel enterprising, you can also do a **forum play**, as we do in Theatre of the Oppressed. A forum play differs from other plays in that you write the story in such a way that it invites the audience to intervene and take action to change the outcome of the play. The story itself is usually one of oppression, limitation, or injustice. This type of play does not simply describe a situation, but asks a question, poses a problem, and invites the audience to look for ways to solve or change the situation.

While you can write a play by yourself, we recommend that you get together with a group of people and create a play together, as the results are usually richer and more interesting. It is also easier to perform a play if everyone has had a hand in creating it.

Steps to Creating Your Own Play

1. **Decide the theme, topic, or issue that your play will address.**
For example, you might decide you want to make a play about family, racism, sexual harassment, growing up, or love.
2. **Discover the world in which this story happens.**
 - a. Start by making a still image (or series of still images) using your bodies. Imagine you are creating a photograph or a sculpture about this theme with your bodies. Have all the participants share comments about this image: what they see, what they think is happening, and what they think the relationships are. Allow this to inspire some ideas about what the story is.

Alternatively, ask, “If I were to create a movie poster about this story, what would it look like?” Make an image of this movie poster with your bodies.
 - b. Dynamize/animate this still image with sound, words, movement, and action/interaction.

You can use some of the following techniques to help you animate the image:

- 1) What does your character want? Speak a line from the character’s thoughts or wishes. What is your character afraid of? How does your character feel? Make a sound that expresses your character’s feelings.
- 2) Make a movement that shows what the character would do next. Try moving first one by one and then everyone together, preferably in slow motion. What happens? What, if any, are your obstacles? What’s at stake or at risk if you don’t succeed? How will you get what you want?
- 3) What is your relationship to the other characters in this world? Who is your ally? Who is your antagonist/enemy/opponent/oppressor? Who is an obstacle? Who has power over you? Over whom do you have power? Put your hand on the shoulder of these respective characters.
- 4) Where does this all take place? What is in the space? If the elements in the environment had a voice, what would they say?
- 5) When does this take place? What is the time of day? What is the temperature and weather?
- 6) Collect all the ideas from above and then improvise. Bring this scene to life with action and dialogue for a few minutes. If you have made a movie poster, think of improvising a short trailer for the movie.

3. **Develop the story line.**

Gather comments from the group on what they felt and saw as actors and as audience members. What did they see in the story? Use this discussion to develop the story. You may want to break the story down into episodes or acts. Make sure everything has a reason for being in the story.

4. **Develop the characters and their relationships.**

Use body sculptures, improvisation, and rehearsal techniques to explore the characters, their relationships, their environment (e.g., the time, weather), and their desires. This is called “exposition” or “platform” in dramaturgy.



a. Build in opposing desires/conflicts, both within a single character and among characters. Is everyone in agreement, for instance, about same-sex marriages?

b. Find a way to make us care about what the characters care about. Do “**spect-actors**” convey the crisis or conflict, (e.g., about the human right to good food, and economic justice broadly speaking) in a way that draws in “spect-actors” who want to voice their own opinions about these important issues? How about communities that don’t have knowledge or access to the realization of their human rights in the crisis or conflict (e.g., don’t have access to or can’t afford fresh produce)?

SFSU student Hien Dinh presenting her final TO project in the Foundations of Anthropological History (ANTH 300) class, Spring 2012.

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c. If necessary, find the crisis point of the story. The crisis point is the turning point in the story, an unstable moment when the characters need to make decisions under critical conditions. These moments may define the outcome of all future events. In some stories there is an obvious crisis, which demarcates a turning point, such as the death of a loved one, the start or incursion into a war zone, or the decision to have an abortion. Show clearly what is at stake in this conflict. Show how things are transformed through this. Make sure everything has a reason for being in the story.

d. If you are creating a forum play, where you invite the audience to intervene, structure the story so that there are places and opportunities for interventions. Interventions may be placed in relation to the crisis or at any other moment when “spect-actors” stand up in the audience, say “Stop!” and thus freeze the

scene, walk onto the stage, tap onto the shoulder of the character they want to replace, take over that character's role, and take action to change the sequence of events.

You may repeat the prompts in Step 4. Develop the characters and their relationships so that there are multiple forum theatre interventions that may help develop, animate, and eventually offer solutions for the crisis at stake.

5. From this point on, you can do several things:

- a. Walk the story backwards in time, until the history leading up to that point becomes clear and coherent with the rest of the ideas and characters you have developed for the story. You may discover that some elements need changing, including the introduction of new characters who make different arguments and propose new ideas.
- b. Create several core images that reflect key moments or points in your story (if you can think of a four-panel cartoon, you have the right idea). Explore each scene and develop the connections and transitions between them, as well as the characters and ideas within them.
- c. Ask one or more narrators to improvise the story as they see it. For example, play the images and ask the narrator to improvise a narration about the sequence of images. Say, for instance, you have a woman reporting an act of domestic violence against herself or her children to a police officer. How does the image unfold when it is the women reporting the incident, as opposed to the police officer?
- d. Improvise the scene or scenes between the individual characters. Each character should explore his/her objectives and try to overcome obstacles and resistances. See where each character and relationship leads the story. For instance, you may have two candidates running for public office with completely different political agendas. Bring in some controversial propositions, such as the ban on capital punishment or the labeling of genetically modified organisms.



SFSU student “tiger” Lauren Culleton presenting her final TO project in the Foundations of Anthropological History class, Spring 2011. Her group used Marxist theory to discuss budget cuts to the educational system in California. Each character performed as an animal, following Boal's prompt in *Games for Actors and Non Actors* (1992).

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6. **Write the entire play together as a group.**

Look for elements that cohere and hold the story together. Pay attention to dialogue, action, staging, and pacing.

If you build a forum play, make sure to construct a play that shows the main character (protagonist) oppressed, but not depressed or destroyed. Write the scene in a way that engages the audience while showing some room for possibilities of transformation without being artificial or unrealistic. For instance, if you address the medicalization of “hyper-active” children, who are increasingly given chemical drugs for being “too active,” you may want to invite and involve students’ parents in the interaction to learn from their perspectives.

7. **Try out your play.** (See some techniques below).

8. **Enact the play for others.**

Invite viewers to give you feedback about the story. Have them ask questions of the character. Flesh out details of character, relationship, motivation, environment, story, and conflict. Remove unnecessary elements, simplifying the relationships and story to its essential dramatic elements.

9. **Jazz it up!** (Optional)

Feel free to add music, sound effects, narration, soliloquy, song, dance, or poetry. If you have the resources, you may want to add costumes, props, scenery, or even lighting, but keep it simple. If you have a good story, you have a good play.

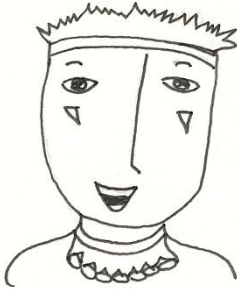
10. **Perform the play.**

See “Performing Your Own Play” below for suggestions on awakening the actor in everyone. Be sure to take a bow!

11. **Replay** (Optional for a Forum Play)

If you have created a **forum play**, where the audience can intervene to change the outcome, first play the story once, and then tell the audience you will enact it again. During this second enactment, tell the audience that anyone can intervene in the story, by shouting, “Stop,” replacing the protagonist, and trying out something different. The actors should continue to try to achieve their original goal, while being flexible to the new actions taken by the intervening “spect-actor.” Think of this process as a laboratory where different possibilities are explored. After each intervention, acknowledge the “spect-actor” and have a brief dialogue on what worked or didn’t and why. Repeat this process and wrap up the event with a large group discussion. Congratulations!

Techniques for Trying out Your Play



Does your play work? Here are some group techniques used in Theatre of the Oppressed to clarify and sharpen the story and the acting. You do not need a director for this. You can try some or all of these techniques during both the development and rehearsal stages.

1. **Do the scene/play silently**, without making a single sound or speaking a single word.
2. Do the scene, stop it, and **ask the actor to speak the inner thoughts (monologue) of the character.**
3. Have audience members stop the scene at any given moment and ask questions of the character **by putting the character on the “Hot Seat.”** Continue the scene and repeat this process.
4. Play the scene **with different emotions**, focusing on one emotional color at a time.
5. Play the scene **in different styles/genres** (e.g., slapstick, operatic, tragic, farce).
6. Do the scene with the actors acting both **in very close proximity and at a distance** from each other.
7. Do the scene **exaggerating all movements, emotions, conflicts**, etc.
8. Play the scene with the actors **swapping characters.**
9. Play the scene with characters **speaking only one word for each phrase** of the dialogue.
10. Designate **an animal for each character** and play the scene with each character playing the scene with the energy and characteristics of the animal.
11. Have the actors **create a physical action for each line** or phrase of dialogue.
12. Play the entire play **from each different actor’s perspective**, exaggerating or changing the dialogue to show the subjective world of each character.

An Example of Devising a Play

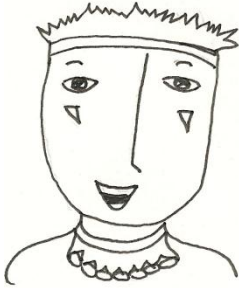


Poster by Christina Abram-Davis, graduate student at SFSU, final project for the TO presentation on racial discrimination, Foundations of Anthropological History (ANTH 300), Fall 2011.
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Imagine that racial discrimination and unemployment are important issues in your community. You could get together with some friends and create an image or several images of the issue of unemployment and discrimination. They might be images of people looking for work, of people suffering the consequences of unemployment, or of racial profiling while driving. You may even create an abstract or metaphorical image, perhaps someone hanging off a ledge or wandering through a desert. What is important is that you build the images with care and detail and use them as a jumping-off point to generate ideas, images, thoughts, and feelings.

Explore where the story takes place, the world in which this is happening, and what is happening. Now bring the image to life, noting the characters, the environment, their relationships, and their motivations. Ask the characters what they want, what they are doing, what their next logical step is, what their relationships are, etc. Improvise this scene for a few minutes in front of the group and see what happens. See if any story ideas arise for the group at this point. If they do, great! Devise the story together.

If a story does not seem clear, then find a crisis point that might arise in a story that involves unemployment and/or discrimination. For example, in order survive unemployment, someone may be forced to do something injurious to herself or himself or to another, such as denying his or her own ethnic identity. Build an image of this moment and explore this situation. What is the person doing? Why are they doing this? How did they get to this point?



At this point you can do several things:

Act out a series of panels that show this sequence, like a cartoon. For example, the first image might be someone working. The second might be this person losing their work. The third might be a scene of an eviction notice, or their last employment check. The fourth might be an unethical proposition. The fifth?

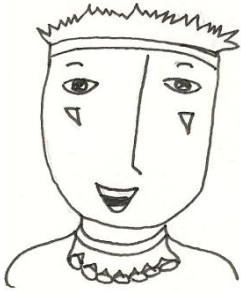
*Alternatively, you could start from the point of the crisis or conflict and keep **walking the story backwards toward the beginning** of the story. For instance, what do you do once your home is foreclosed? Do you accept the first notice of foreclosure or do you find out what your rights are and how you can fight foreclosure from the start? Define the characters and improvise these scenes and the relationships within it.*

You should now have some ideas you can explore. Play the scene using the outline of the story and improvising where necessary. Select certain elements you might consider the weight-bearing pillars or key points that are essential to the story. How can you enhance the chances of fighting against unemployment? How can you find out more about your right to health care? As you improvise, notice what works and what doesn't and keep the things that do. Be very open about the multiple solutions to these and other important social issues.

If you feel you are ready, show the draft play to your group and get more feedback. Pay close attention to whether the audience feels that the character is engaging – that they care what happens to him or her – and whether they feel the choices made seem credible and justifiable. Note also whether the audience feels that you did the issue justice and whether it is a real and honest engagement with the issue itself. If appropriate, ask whether you have addressed the larger social structures and institutions involved, and if not, what it would take to bring that into the picture.

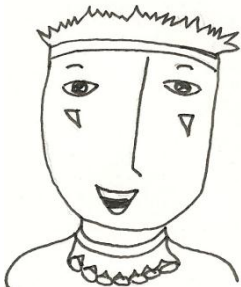
If the response overall is positive and the structure of the play feels solid, then start to rehearse it. This is essentially the work of a director, but it is possible to do this democratically as a group. The play and your ensembled work will be stronger for it. You can use some or all of the rehearsal techniques outlined above, as well as any other ideas that you may have as a group. Last but not least, take time to make something aesthetically pleasing. Explore all creative possibilities and options, and feel free to incorporate music, sound effects, dance, or any other aesthetic or artistic element to get your message across.

PART 2: PERFORMING YOUR OWN PLAY



Doing theatre is easy. In Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) I say, “Anyone can do theatre, even professional actors.” I think theatre is a birth right, something that everyone can do. I’ll show you how in just a minute.

You’ve never acted? You can’t act? Not a problem. In TO, we believe, *everyone* human can act, and everyone is an actor. Acting is fundamental to our humanness because it brings out action, play, sociality, storytelling, sharing, and self-reflection/observation. These elements are some of the defining characteristics of being human. If you have either a body that moves or a voice that makes sound, you can act. If you have both, you are ahead of the game. We’ll show you how to stop “acting” (which is what we do most of our lives) and start taking real action. This requires really acting, which involves relating genuinely with each other and bringing our full selves, including our desires and passions, to the experience. It’s easy, fun, and transformative. Most of all, it’s liberating.



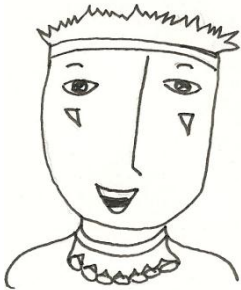
You’re not interested in changing the world? The world’s all right with you? If you answer “yes” to these two questions, you can stop reading here. All theatre is about change, but I believe that theatre does not merely describe change, but is a way to bring about change!

We all recognize aspects of ourselves, others, and life in general through theatre. Things can be changed, transformed, or improved. Theatre changes us; it changes our thinking and our relations to each other and also changes the world, especially the things that need to be changed, that we call “oppression.” We’ll show you how to do that, too. It’s not so difficult with the right tools.

Food security and genetically modified corn:
Mask by Erdem Durgunoglu, performed by
Mary Brown. SFSU, 2011. © Mariana Ferreira,
with permission.



Becoming Actors



All you need is (1) a group of people, (2) a space to move in, and (3) another group of people to whom you can show your performance. In theatre we call the first group of people “actors” (who can be anybody). The space, the “theatre” or “theatrical space” can be literally any space. Finally, the other group, the “audience” can also become the actors, using the different Theatre of the Oppressed techniques. Oh, and you need some ideas you want to express or explore, perhaps something you want to change.

Let's think of cooking. It's very simple. You need some ingredients, a cooking vessel, some friends or family with whom to share food, and a recipe or an idea. You also need some heat or fire.

It's similar in theatre. You need a fire (a source of energy), a space in which to cook or transform things (a theatrical space), some ingredients (actors), and an idea or a passion to explore, examine, express, or transform (this can be a play, which you can write together).

Here's how to get started:

1. Raise the Energy:

First, we take the ingredients (that's us) and start raising the energy. This is basic; it's like building a fire. We begin with raising the physical energy, literally increasing physical movement. We practice, explore, and rehearse acting/action. It takes more energy to act and imagine than to think, daydream, or dawdle. This is easiest to do with a whole variety of enjoyable games and exercises. (See a list of exercises below that will “raise” the energy.)

2. Focus:

The second thing we do is focus; We want to raise the energy, with a certain power that we can use in a very focused way. It's like a directed flame, not a random fire. We want a higher quality of energy that is engaged, coordinated, and imaginative, not haphazard excitement. We sometimes call this “presence.” (See a list of exercises below that increase focus).

3. Connect:

The third thing we do is connect, both physically and energetically. It's subtle and obvious at the same time. We work with physical connection (e.g., touching, mingling, making contact, and feeling) and then move to all the subtle ways in which we connect and relate to one another (e.g., our thoughts, feelings, and energies). This is essentially a heightening of awareness and attention, as well as an increase of our relatedness in the present moment.

As these exercises help us to energize, focus, and connect, a strange and marvelous thing starts to happen. We start to feel more alive, energetic, and engaged. We feel both more in our bodies and our imaginations. Creativity and spontaneity arise. Hidden sensations and feelings come out. Our bodies and minds are playful and alive. They are liberated from habitual grooves and patterns of thought and behavior. We are in new territory. This is the creative energy that kindles change!

In TO work, we call this process “demechanization,” breaking habitual ways of sensing, feeling, moving, and acting. Our minds and bodies are released to think and act creatively and spontaneously! This happens in conjunction with what we call “dynamization”; having a higher energy and awareness that inspires you both to act and take action. This process is liberating.

4. Create:

The next stage is to take our increased energy, awareness, and sensitivity, and create representations of what we want to explore. These can be stories, monologues, scenes, songs, dances, improvisations, etc. There are many methods, some of which we have listed below. (See exercises for Image Theatre below.)

One method that we often use is to work with our bodies as if they were intelligent sculptures, representing what we need and want to say, and bringing these things to life. We call this **image theatre** because we’re using our bodies to create pictures and representations. This way, we’re now building a language to express what we want to say. The basic building blocks of this language are our newly transformed bodies. We use words, sounds, images, and all their attendant energy to start a dialogue. Image Theatre leads very naturally into making plays.



Please note: you don't just do these games and representations just for fun – although they are also fun. You do them because you're trying to change things! Fundamentally, you are trying to imagine situations for the better because you know things can change. Change and transformation is constant. I call this “dialectics.” This method is “dialogical”; you dialogue through your bodies and expressions.

Suggestions for Raising the Energy, Focusing, Connecting and Creating:

The following are some practical considerations:

- **Pick one or two actors to lead the exercises.** These persons become the facilitators (although “difficultator” is more accurate because one of their roles is to provoke thought and raise issues that have not yet been considered) or the Joker. It’s usually best to do this in pairs. Alternatively, everyone can take turns leading.
- **Create a sequence of exercises and try them out.** You can also build your own sequence according to the needs of your group and your play.

What to Watch for as You Become Actors

Regardless of whether you follow a predetermined sequence or make it up as you facilitate, the exercises, pay attention to the following:

1. **First, what is the temperature?** Are people becoming more energetic? If not, turn up the heat. If people look like they are nervous (stage fright), it’s because the energy needs to be higher.
2. **Second, are things starting to cook?** Are people becoming more connected to each other? Are they relating in more real and genuine ways with each other? Are they becoming more playful and spontaneous?
3. **Third, are things bubbling up?** Are people getting more imaginative and spontaneous? Are they taking more risks?
4. **Fourth, is awareness, presence, and embodiment increasing?** Do people seem more alive, real, and present, in their own bodies?

You can look at the exercises below and use them to keep adjusting levels. We always want to increase energy, connection, imagination, and, awareness.



This work is all about freedom, awareness, and love! That’s how we change. Try it out and have fun!

Sample Exercises for Energizing, Focusing, and Connecting

The activities listed below are examples of techniques, detailed throughout this book, that can be adapted to any play, including your own.

Sample Exercises to Raise Energy

- Activity 4.1: The Power of Emotions (Chapter 4)
- Activity 4.2: Nothing Human Is Alien to Me (Chapter 4)
- Activity 5.3: Living Sculpture Activities (Chapter 5)
- Activity 6.1: Following the Master (Chapter 6)
- Activity 7.1: Expressive Trees and Flowers (Chapter 7)

Sample Exercises to Increase Focus

- Activity 4.6: Metamorphoses (Chapter 4)
- Activity 5.5: Over the Top (Chapter 5)
- Activity 6.3: Things That Go Bump In the Night (Chapter 6)
- Activity 6.4: The Model Child (Chapter 6)
- Activity 7.5: What Should We Do? (Chapter 7)

Sample Exercises for Image Theatre

- Activity 4.4: Speaking the Inner Voice (Chapter 4)
- Activity 5.4: Before or After (Chapter 5)
- Activity 6.5: My Someday (Chapter 6)
- Activity 6.6: Their Someday (Chapter 6)
- Activity 6.7: Another Vision of the World (Chapter 6)
- Activity 7.3: Living Sculptures (Chapter 7)
- Activity 7.4: Reconstructing the Crime (Chapter 7)



TO presentation by SFSU students Madaleine Katz and Shane McConnel on Protecting Mother Earth and Indigenous Peoples' Rights for the class Endangered Cultures (ANTH 321), Summer 2012. © Mariana Ferreira, with permission.