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# INVISIBLE THEATRE

AUGUSTO BOAL

Boal founded the Theatre of the Oppressed in the mid 1970s. Extract from Jan Cohen Cruz, *Radical Street Performance*. London: Routledge, 1998. Courtesy Taylor & Francis Books UK.

'Invisible theatre' consists of the presentation of a scene in an environment other than the theatre, before people who are not spectators. The place can be a restaurant, a sidewalk, a market, a train, a line of people, etc. The people who witness the scene are those who are there by chance. During the spectacle, these people must not have the slightest idea that it is a 'spectacle', for this would make them 'spectators'.

Invisible theatre calls for the detailed preparation of a skit with a complete text or a simple script; but it is necessary to rehearse the scene sufficiently so that the actors are able to incorporate interventions by the spectators into their acting and their actions. During the rehearsal it is also necessary to include every imaginable intervention from the spectators; these possibilities will form a kind of optional text.

Invisible theatre erupts in a location chosen as a place where the public congregates. All the people who are near become involved in the eruption and the effects of it last long after the skit is ended.

A small example shows how invisible theatre works. In the enormous restaurant of a hotel in Chiclayo (where the literacy agents of ALFIN<sup>1</sup> were staying together with 400 other people) the 'actors' sit at separate tables. The waiters start to serve. The 'protagonist' in a more or less loud voice (to attract the attention of other diners, but not in a too obvious way) informs the waiter that he cannot go on eating the food served in that hotel, because in his opinion it is too bad. The waiter does not like the remark but tells the customer that he can choose something *à la carte*, which he may like better. The actor chooses a dish called *barbecue à la pauper*. The waiter points out that it will cost him 70 soles, to which the actor answers, always in a reasonably loud voice, that that is no problem. Minutes later the waiter brings him the barbecue, the protagonist eats it rapidly and gets ready to get up and leave the restaurant, when the waiter brings the bill. The actor shows a worried expression and tells the people at the next table that his barbecue was much better than the food they are eating, but the pity is that one has to pay for it.

<sup>1</sup> ALFIN stands for *Operacion Alfabetizacion Integral*, or Integral Literacy Operation.

'I'm going to pay for it; don't have any doubt. I ate the *barbecue à la pauper* and I'm going to pay for it. But there is a problem: I'm broke.'

'And how are you going to pay?' asks the indignant waiter. 'You knew the price before ordering the barbecue. And now, how are you going to pay for it?'

The diners nearby are, of course, closely following the dialogue – much more attentively than they would if they were witnessing the scene on a stage. The actor continues:

'Don't worry, because I am going to pay you. But since I'm broke I will pay you with labour-power.'

'With what?' asks the waiter, astonished. 'What kind of power?'

'With labour-power, just as I said. I am broke but I can rent you my labour-power. So I'll work doing something for as long as it's necessary to pay for my *barbecue à la pauper*, which to tell the truth, was really delicious – much better than the food you serve to those poor souls.'

By this time some of the customers intervene and make remarks among themselves at their tables, about the price of food, the quality of the service in the hotel, etc. The waiter calls the headwaiter to decide the matter. The actor explains again to the latter the business of renting his labour-power and adds:

'And besides, there is another problem: I'll rent my labour-power but the truth is that I don't know how to do anything, or very little. You will have to give me a very simple job to do. For example, I can take out the hotel's garbage. What's the salary of the garbage man who works for you?'

The headwaiter does not want to give any information about salaries, but a second actor at another table is already prepared and explains that he and the garbage man have gotten to be friends and that the latter has told him his salary: seven soles per hour. The two actors make some calculations and the 'protagonist' exclaims:

'How is this possible? If I work as a garbage man I'll have to work ten hours to pay for this barbecue that it took me ten minutes to eat? It can't be! Either you increase the salary of the garbage man or reduce the price of the barbecue! ... But I can do something more specialised; for example, I can take care of the hotel gardens, which are so beautiful, so well cared for. One can see that a very talented person is in charge of the gardens. How much does the gardener of this hotel make? I'll work as a gardener! How many hours work in the garden are necessary to pay for the *barbecue à la pauper*?'

A third actor, at another table, explains his friendship with the gardener, who is an immigrant from the same village as he; for this reason he knows that the gardener makes ten soles per hour. Again the 'protagonist' becomes indignant:

'How is this possible? So the man who takes care of these beautiful gardens, who spends his days out there exposed to the wind, the rain, and the sun, has to work seven long hours to be able to eat the barbecue in ten

minutes? How can this be, Mr. Headwaiter? Explain it to me!

The headwaiter is already in despair; he dashes back and forth, giving orders to the waiters in a loud voice to divert the attention of the other customers, alternately laughs and becomes serious, while the restaurant is transformed into a public forum. The 'protagonist' asks the waiter how much he is paid to serve the barbecue and offers to replace him for the necessary number of hours. Another actor, originally from a small village in the interior, gets up and declares that nobody in his village makes 70 soles per day; therefore nobody in his village can eat the barbecue a la pauper. (The sincerity of this actor, who was, besides, telling the truth, moved those who were near his table.)

Finally, to conclude the scene, another actor intervenes with the following proposition:

*Friends, it appears as if we are against the waiter and the headwaiter and this does not make sense. They are our brothers. They work like us, and they are not to blame for the prices charged here. I suggest we take up a collection. We at this table are going to ask you to contribute whatever you can, one sol, two soles, five soles, whatever you can afford. And with that money we are going to pay for the barbecue. And be generous, because what is left over will go as a tip for the waiter, who is our brother and a working man.*

Immediately, those who are with him at the table start collecting money to pay the bill. Some customers willingly give one or two soles. Others furiously comment:

*'He says that the food we're eating is junk, and now he wants us to pay for his barbecue! ... And am I going to eat this junk? Hell no! I wouldn't give him a peanut, so he'll learn a lesson! Let him wash dishes ...'*

The collection reached 100 soles and the discussion went on through the night.

It is always very important that the actors do not reveal themselves to be actors! On this rests the invisible nature of this form of theatre. And it is precisely this invisible quality that will make the spectator act freely and fully, as if he were living a real situation – and, after all, it is a real situation!

It is necessary to emphasise that invisible theatre is not the same thing as a 'happening' or so-called 'guerrilla theatre'. In the latter we are clearly talking about 'theatre', and therefore the wall that separates actors from spectators immediately arises, reducing the spectator to impotence: a spectator is always less than a man! In invisible theatre the theatrical rituals are abolished; only the theatre exists, without its old, worn-out patterns. The theatrical energy is completely liberated, and the impact produced by this free theatre is much more powerful and longer lasting.

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