AUGUSTO BOAL'S THE JOKER SYSTEM

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ABSTRACT

The Joker System began in 1965, when Augusto Boal's Arena Theatre performed Arena Narrates Zumbí. While working on Zumbi, Boal and his group tried new non-traditional way of performing spectacles and created an approach he later called the "Joker System." The Joker System laid the theoretical foundation for the Theatre of the Oppressed, the umbrella term Boal employed for all his subsequent theoretical developments. Even in the Forum Theatre, his most popular theatrical format, the lineaments of the Joker system are apparent. The system incorporated both dramaturgy and staging techniques, bringing together all the experiments and discoveries Boal had previously made. The word "Joker" had, in Boal's mind, the same significance as the "Joker" playing card, a card which has more mobility than any of the other cards in the deck. Like the cards, in his tecnique, the joker plays different roles within varying contexts and combinations, including director, referee, and workshop leader. The system also facilitates the creation of a character, which can play various roles: actor, character, chorus, and protagonist, all in the same performance. This article studies the Joker System and how Boal transformed existing, traditional theatrical codes and the audience's habitual way of viewing a play.

Keywords: Joker System, Theatre of the Oppressed, Augusto Boal.

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AUGUSTO BOAL'İN JOKER SİSTEMİ

ÖZET

Joker Sistemi 1965 yılında, Augusto Boal'in Arena Tiyatrosu'nun Arena Zumbiyi Anlatıyor gösterisini sergilemesiyle başlamıştır. Boal ve grubu Zumbi üzerine çalışırken yeni geleneksel-olmayan yöntemler denemiş ve daha sonra Joker Sistemi olarak adlandıracağı yeni bir yaklaşım yaratmıştır. Joker sistemi Augusto Boal'in daha sonra geliştireceği tüm kuramları da içine alan bir şemsiye başlık olarak adlandırdığı Ezilenlerin Tiyatrosu'nun da kuramsal temellerini atmıştır. Boal'in en popüler tiyatro tekniği olan Forum Tiyatyro'da dahi Joker sisteminin ayrıcı nitelikleri görülmektedir. Sistem, Boal'in daha önce gerçekleştirdiği tüm deney ve buluşları bir araya getirerek hem dramaturji, hem de sahneleme tekniklerini birleştirmiştir. Boal için 'Joker' kelimesi bir oyun kâğıdı desdesinde diğer kartlara göre çok daha fazla hareketliliği olan joker oyun kartı ile aynı öneme sahiptir. Oyun kâğıtlarında olduğu gibi, onun tekniğinde de joker, yönetmen, hakem, atölye lideri gibi çeşitli rolleri farklı bağlamlar ve kombinasyonlar içinde oynar. Sistem aynı zamanda aynı gösteri içinde oyuncu, karakter, koro, başkahraman gibi farklı rolleri oynayabilen bir karakterin oluşturulmasını sağlar. Bu makale Joker Sistemi ve Boal'in mevcut, geleneksel tiyatro kodlarını ve seyircilerin alışılagelmiş biçimde oyun izleme alışkanlığını nasıl dönüştürdüğünü irdelemektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Joker Sistemi, Ezilenlerin Tiyatrosu, Augusto Boal.

INTRODUCTION

Boal made various developments in his dramaturgical thinking from the time he was a young, enthusiastic, and somewhat naïve playwright to his death as polished elder statesman of avant garde theatre. Important to an understanding of his development is the way Boal researched the interrelationship of script, performers and audience.

At the core of his dramaturgical development is Augusto Boal's (1995) belief that "theatre is a vocation for all human beings" (s. 4). Boal remained motivated by this belief, ever ready to continue to change his ideas. The reason was his faith in the ability of people themselves to change, a faith supported by his contention that theatre can be an instrument of change. How can theatre change people? Boal contended that it enabled people to observe their reality, "perceiving what it is, discovering what it is not and imagining what it could become." (Boal,1995, s. 13) Boal's faith was in people's creativity, capacity and capability, regardless of who they are and what they are. Such faith in the capacity of all people to improve their lot, regardless of class, gender and ethnicity, had driven him over the years. He had a faith that all are capable of observing what is, a faith that all are capable of articulating and aspirations, and ultimately to incorporate their vision into his own and created Theatre of the Oppressed. Boal also had faith in himself because he was willing to learn from them, with them, as well as teach them in turn.

How can Theatre of the Oppressed, invented in a Third World context during the 1960s, remain relevant today, practiced even in countries of the developed world? One reason is that Theatre of the Oppressed never claims to be a finished product, nor does it profess to have discovered the only way. It is a new dramaturgical language and like many living languages, Theatre of the Oppressed changes as it encounters new situations that demand it evolve to meet the specific challenges those situations present. It is in an endless search for dialogue that will enable people to have their say. Theatre of the Oppressed can be practiced in any part of the world because it listens to people, allowing them utterance and thus helping to prepare a better future for themselves. Theatre of the Oppressed is not a finished, finely honed product. It is a theatrical methodology its practitioners can adapt in various ways to help people comprehend their problems, whether personal, social, or political. It looks toward a better future because it helps participants to take an active role in creating their prospects and expressing their hopes for brighter expectations.

The Joker System

Augusto Boal developed his initial theatrical philosophy and techniques between the years 1956 and 1971 when he was the director of the Arena Theatre in São Paulo. Unlike many other theatre groups in Brazil who modeled themselves along European lines and according to foreign precedents influences, Boal and the Arena wanted to create theatre that represented local experience and sensibility:

> After World War II, United States businessmen found it cheaper to run their own factories in Brazil. Rather than ship goods from the U.S. They could profit from a low standard wage, and the factories would be closer to both the markets and the raw materials needed: steel, minerals, oil, etc. So it was decided to make São Paulo the largest industrial city in South America. U.S. money started pouring in, U.S. companies were granted enormous loans from Brazilian banks at low interest, and São Paulo soon became a prosperous city (Boal, 1970a, s. 91).

This industrial prosperity created three different classes in Brazil. The first was the rich bourgeois class who welcomed not only European luxuries but also European art and aesthetic standards. At the same time, postwar industrialization in Brazil also created a new working class, along with a segment of the new middle class who did not respond to European –models. Boal and his group wooed these audiences with theatrical models rooted in Brazilian ethnic experience.

> We toured the poorest northern provinces of Brazil, playing in the streets, in front of churches, on trucks, anywhere, for a peasant and worker audience. After each performance we discussed the play with the audience (Boal, 1970, s. 91).

While working with such strategies Boal and his group created an approach he called the "Joker System." The Joker System laid the theoretical foundation for the Theatre of the Oppressed, the umbrella term Boal employed for all his subsequent theoretical developments. Even in the Forum Theatre, his most popular theatrical format, the lineaments of the Joker system are apparent.

The Joker System began in 1965, when the Arena Theatre performed Arena Narrates Zumbí. During the rehearsals of Zumbí, Boal's theories began to take shape. Zumbí was the first in a series of performances called "The Arena Theatre Narrates…," in which Boal and his group discovered and created a new narrative formula, which they later perfected with The Arena Theatre Narrates Tiradentes. Edgar Quiles(1981) states that this new formula Boal initially called a "new non-traditional way of performing spectacles" (s.49). Later on he called it the "Joker system." The system incorporated both dramaturgy and staging techniques, bringing

together all the experiments and discoveries Boal had previously made. The word "Joker" had, in Boal's mind, the same significance as the "Joker" playing card, a card which has more mobility than any of the other cards in the deck and does not necessarily connote the idea of playing jokes. The joker plays different roles within varying contexts and combinations, including director, referee, facilitator, and workshop leader. The system also facilitates the creation of a character, which can play various roles: actor, character, chorus, and protagonist, all in the same performance.

Boal's first work on the Joker system began during the rehearsals of Zumbí, which Boal had based on a novel by Joao Felicio dos Santos titled Ganga-Zumba.

> The novel is a fictionalized account of the history of Palmares, the famous quilombo, or maroon society, founded in the interior of Brazil's Northeast. The plots of both novel and play cover events from about 1632, the arrival of King Zambi in Brazil, to the death of its last ruler, Ganga ('Lord') Zumba or Zumbi, in 1695. The play follows the novel closely in point of fact and fiction, appropriating a certain amount of characterization, events, dialogue, and even linguistic statement, including creolized and African elements (Anderson, 1990, s.134)

Boal's treatment of the Zumbí script has two parts. The first part includes the spoken text; side texts with musical details, sound effects and use of media such as slide projections. The second part includes directions for choreography, blocking, plus descriptions of stage sets and costumes. By means of Zumbí's bifurcated text, Boal tried to alter existing theatrical conventions. "With Zumbí," Boal stated, " the phase of the 'destruction' of theatre—of all its values, rules, precepts, formulas, etc. —reached its culminations" (Boal,1985, s.167). Zumbí in effect disorganized accepted theatrical perceptions and created the chaos out of which Boal's new system arose.

Boal initially practiced actor-character separation in the Joker System, as actors took turns playing various characters in Zumbí. All the actors played all the characters, which created a disconnection between performer and character so that for the audience all performers represented all characters. That was hardly a Boal innovation; it already existed in ancient Greek drama, when Aeschylus introduced a second actor around 490 B.C. About 468 B.C, Sophocles expanded the practice and introduced a third actor. These two or three actors performed all the characters in a given play. Masks helped Greek audiences to differentiate among the characters and helped to prevent confusion. In the Arena Theatre, performers used what Boal called "social masks" instead of actual physical masks. Social masks incorporated daily

rituals, those systematized actions and reactions of a particular character. "Each of us, in real life," Boal stated,

> exhibits a type of pre-established, mechanized behavior. We create habits of thought, of language, of profession. All our relations in daily life are patterned. These patterns are our 'masks,' as are also the 'masks' of the characters. In Zumbí, we were trying to maintain the permanent mask of the character being interpreted, independently of the actors performing each role. Thus the characteristic violence of King Zumbí was maintained regardless of which actor might be performing it in each scene. The 'asperity' of Don Ayres, the 'youth' of Ganga Zona, the 'sensuous'nature of Gongoba, etc., were not linked to the physical type or personal characteristics of any actor. It is true that the quotation marks themselves give an idea of the generical nature of each 'mask.' (Boal, 1985, s.168).

Actor-character separation was Boal's reaction to the conventions of realistic theatre, a theatre that encouraged close audience identification and empathy with a character. The traditional actor expected to portray a character with as much detail as possible, and as Boal's fellow Marxist Bertolt Brecht noted, such identification encouraged empathy with a character, which might ordinarily be absent in real life. N. Anderson (1990) states that in Zumbí, the social mask depended on the skills of the performers, since there were no props as in a Brecht production. However, the success of a social mask was also the result of simplicity of text, a smaller number of characters, and the black- and- white nature of the plot (s.136).

Boal also used Brecht's narrative technique in Zumbí, but it was collective narration. N. Anderson (1990) states that most of the action in Zumbí was indeed narrated and only a minimal part of the plot was actually dramatized on stage (s.136). The play was not performed from any single character's point of view but from a group perspective, operating according to collective criteria.

> In Zumbí each actor was forced to interpret the totality of the play and not merely one of the participants in the conflicts portrayed.
>
> By obliging all the actors to interpret all the characters, the second technical objective of this first experiment was achieved. All the actors were grouped into a single category of narrators; the spectacle ceased to be realized from the point of view of each character and came to be narrated by a team, according to collective criteria: 'We are the Arena Theatre' and 'We, all together, are going to tell a story, what we all think about the subject.' We were thus able to reach a level of 'collective' interpretation (Boal, 1985, s. 170).

This collective interpretation of the play enabled performers to present speeches and songs as both individual actors and as a group of actors functioning as a chorus. N. Anderson (1990) observes that even when not speaking, performers remained on stage. The text continuously shifted between dialogue, lyric monologue, narration, song, and commentary. This continuous shift was also present among individuals, groups or a chorus of actors. Anderson claims that all these shifts were result of the montage quality of the play. "This mingling of past and present and subjectivity and objectivity on the stage shattered the classical unities" (s.137).

The third technique Boal practiced during rehearsals of Zumbí was genre and style eclecticism. Zumbí changed its generic label without preparatory transition from simplistic melodrama to the most absurd drama. Boal said such inconsistency was a result of a healthy aesthetic chaos. "Some scenes, such as that of 'Banzo,' tended to be expressionistic, while others, such as the one of the priest and Lady Dueña, were realistic; the Ave Maria was symbolist and the one of 'the twist' bordered on surrealism, etc" (Boal, 1985, s.170). Boal wanted to stimulate the audience through such stylistic shifts. In traditional theatre practice comic relief often appears as a form of stimulus and Zumbí practiced a kind of stylistic relief. The fourth and last technique to be considered here was the use of music independent of the specific contexts of Zumbí. Such independence also derived from Brecht, who used music for "distancing" effect. Boal, on the other hand used music to prepare audiences to think about an idea that was forthcoming. "Music has the power independently of the concepts, to prepare the audience in an immediate way, imaginatively, for the reception of simplified texts which can only be absorbed through the experience reason-music. [. . .] nobody would believe 'it is a time of war' if it were not for the music of Edu Lobo"(Boal, 1985, ss. 170-71).

The music in Zumbí had two categories, according to Anderson. The first category had a distancing effect by its choice of musical genre and lyrics. These songs satirized factions of the white community. The second group of music was actually non-Brechtian, encouraging empathy among audience members. "These are the songs which are either laudatory, exhortatory, or expressive of pathos and tragedy among palmarinos, or residents of Palmares. The comic songs that refer to the palmarinos do not create distance; they provide comic relief and elicit empathy for the joyous ex-slave community in their heyday" (Anderson, 1990, s.138). Using these four techniques—separation of actor and character, collective subjectivity, eclecticism, and music—Boal violated existing, traditional theatrical codes and the audience's habitual way of viewing a play. A. Boal (1985) states that "Zumbí performed its function as represented the end of one stage of research. The stage of

'destruction' of the theatre was concluded, and the beginning of new forms was proposed" (s.172). After presentation of Zumbí, the Joker system was fully implemented in Arena Narrates Tiradentes, which Boal wrote with Gianfrancesco Guarnieri. Practicing the four techniques he used in Zumbí, Boal managed to score both political and aesthetic points by presenting and analyzing the play simultaneously. Boal described his objectives as creating

> a system (including playwrighting, interpretation, scene design, etc.) enabling us to use every style, genre, technique, or process. Each scene completely autonomous: one realistic, the other expressionistic, the following a documentary reading, and so on. All these styles, however, are held within a single style, the 'tribunal,' by the presence of the Joker as a judge. (Boal, 1970, s. 92)

On the basis of employing separation of actor and character, collective subjectivity, eclecticism, and music, Boal identified two performance structures, text and cast, around which he built the performance. The performance then functioned according to the following "stations*:" (The following explanations are taken from Boal's article The Joker System)*

Dedication. A song or scene in which the cast dedicates the show to a person or event.

Explanations. The Joker gives lectures, which break the dramatic continuity of the show and, articulate a point of view. The Joker is a man of our own time and does not belong to the universe of the play, but to the universe of the audience; the explanations may include anything that has to be explained, including recent events, which can be related to the play. They also change according to the nature of the audience.

Episodes. Each play is usually divided into five episodes, three in the first act and two in the second; the explanations come between episodes.

Scenes. Each scene has its own style; several are linked together into a whole episode, by the commentaries.

Commentaries. These are written mostly in poetry, sung by the Joker or the orchestra. They hold the play together illusionistically; as the scenes' styles may change suddenly, the commentaries make the audience aware of those possible changes, giving information about the rules of the game in the next scene.

Interviews. There are many devices, which show the audience the true mind of the character; for instance, the soliloquy, the aside, etc. This one is taken from nontheatrical rituals like soccer. During the intermission of soccer game the broadcaster usually interviews the players on the field. In our system, whenever it is necessary to show the audience the inside story of the character, the Joker asks him those questions the audience wants answered. During the interviews, the Joker addresses the character, not actor.

Exhortation. After the play ends, the cast sings a song in which they urge the audience to act according to the play's examples (Boal, 1970, ss.93-94).

The second method was the structuring of the cast, which also explains the structure of the performing group. Through this structure, together with the structure of the play, the actor becomes both agent and object, which in return enables the audience to recognize and distinguish between what is caused by personal traits and what is caused by social necessity.

The Protagonist. Sometimes audiences identify the actor and the character, but only for the protagonist; a good example is Tiradentes, the Brazilian national hero of Independence. In these cases, the acting is naturalistic: to eat, the character needs food; to fight, he needs a weapon. He has only the character's level of consciousness, not the actor's. He is a photograph. He never abandons this reality even when the Joker interviews him.

The Joker. The actor as Joker can play any role, including the protagonist. He is intermittently Master of Ceremonies, lecturer, judge, raisonneur, or stagehand; he can interrupt the action, repeat certain actions in order to demonstrate them better, use slides, films, diagrams, or projections of statistics.

The Chorus. The cast may be divided into two choruses: antagonist and deuteragonistic; each chorus may have been a coryphaeus. The actor may change from one chorus to another, in order to play a scene with many characters, but the coryphaeus may not. Most of the time Boal uses one chorus and each actor can play any character.

The Coryphaeus. May substitute for the Joker, for example, when Joker is playing the protagonist.

The Orchestra. Guitar, bass, drums; they sing part of the text, help the Joker to demonstrate, and also sing in the chorus.

Edgar Quiles (1981) states that Augusto Boal gives eight reasons for the creation of the Joker System. These eight reasons are a combination of aesthetics, economics, and politics.

1. To present in the same spectacle the play and its analysis.

2. To propose a permanent system of spectacle, which would be the structure of the text and the group, that centralized all the processes, techniques, genres and styles, and considered each scene as independent from the rest of the elements. In this way the multiform character of the spectacle imposed itself, and the plurality of styles was reduced to one style only through the explanations of the Joker who transformed the spectacle into a forum of ideas and facts.

3. To establish a series of rigid rules which permitted the spectator to know all the scenic possibilities of each spectacle before the play began.

4. To restore the liberty of the subject-character inside the rigid outlines of the social analysis. According to Boal, this was a coordinated liberty, which prevented the subjectivistic chaos, which leads to lyrical styles such as expressionism and surrealism.

5. The mobility for doing tours.

6. The reduction of financial obstacles to performances and productions. So all of them could be possible.

7. With this system, Boal and the Arena Theatre wished to increase the popularization of the theatre.

8. Through the analytical function of the Joker, the ambiguities in the interpretation of the play were eliminated, and the interpretation was always one, which expressed itself in the text's lines (ss. 56-57).

This form of the Joker system existed until 1969, when the dictatorship in Brazil became more repressive, making theatre in the streets impossible. The Joker system did not perish as a result, but adapted and reappeared Boal's Forum Theatre.

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