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# The theatre as an examination of power: Combining political theory and theatre history

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# THE THEATRE AS AN EXAMINATION OF POWER

Combining political theory and theatre history

By

RICHARD A. LEAHY

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Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for  
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## **ABSTRACT:**

Theatre and politics are intrinsically connected. The art of politics is extremely theatrical and the art of theatre has always been infused with political relationships. This congruity stems from the fact that both fields of practice originate from the same fundamental source: power. Both arts are different expressions of the same concept. This can be seen in the shared theatrical/political focus on argument; both theatre and politics have the same goal - convincing people by leading them to certain conclusions. Both politics and theatre necessitate getting others to believe what one is saying. The performer requires his audience to believe in his character and the world he creates; the political actor requires his peers to trust in his decisions and delegate authority to him. In this way politics and theatre are both principally tools of persuasion, a function of the power one person has in relation to others. As I will define, power is inherent in all relationships between people, working in concert to create new things. While this is obvious in terms of government and authority, I will not be using the classical definitions of power pertaining to rule of one person over another, but rather what results when people cooperate. As an expression of power – theatre allows for experimentation in human relationships and an examination of society and the power relationships contained within it – the theatre can be a tool for illuminating what power structures exist now or arguing for which structures should exist.

With this in mind, how could one harness the power of the theatre as a political instrument? Further, what politics are implied by different theories of performance and different theatrical techniques? That is the focus of this thesis. By revisiting theatre history with a view informed in political theory, I attempt to outline the changing power relationships implied by different theatrical movements throughout the development of

Western theatre, from Ancient Egypt until today. By tracing these changes in theatrical practice, I identify the inherent examinations of power in these techniques, analyze them and develop a collection of working terms and conditions to apply to a new form of political theatre. After surveying the power relationships shown by previous theatrical genres, I suggest a movement of my own that embraces the theatre/politics connection and seeks to use theatre politically. The goal: a theatre technique that focuses on examining power with the purpose of educating/training citizens, safe political experimentation and increasing inter-societal dialogue. With these goals in mind, this method of theatre will seek to function as a place for power experimentation which should benefit the political processes of debate, dialogue and persuasion that are necessary for a democracy.

I especially apply Hannah Arendt's definition of power, Plato's city/soul connection and Michel Foucault's concepts of "governmentality," the "technologies of the self" and Stoic "melete," in order to lay the groundwork for examining the power inherent in these theatrical relationships. In the broadest sense I outline a theatre which will operate under a regime of democratic governmentality – examining and experimenting with power with the intent of political action.

In my extensive research into theatrical techniques, I came upon many that would be useful in such a theatre, which I outline in my first chapter. These include Aristotelian catharsis, the Horatian concept of theatre that "delights and instructs," the political calls to action of Bertolt Brecht and Augusto Boal and many others. My principal conclusion is that theatre is useful to examine the power relationships that exist in society between people and decide whether or not they should remain that way. Furthermore, the art of

theatre itself is especially useful for exploring political problems because it creates a series of imagined circumstances, wherein the performers, creators and spectators of the piece can experiment with power arrangements and learn through them. One act of theatre can have a multitude of potential messages and discoveries as to the nature of power and society that are worth pursuing. Additionally, theatre can serve as an act of Stoic “melete” (which Foucault describes as meditation) which is a kind of thought-experiment where one experiments hypothetical situations with the goal of learning something about oneself and the validity of one’s beliefs. Theatre can fulfill this function by allowing participants to live through whatever power struggle can be imagined and learn something about power (and themselves) through the experience. The spectators of theatre also live vicariously through the performers and gain some knowledge as well. The primary conclusion I come to in my exploration of the potential of these theatrical techniques and methods is that a political theatre should fulfill a didactic and enlightening role – identifying political realities and essentially judging them, while simultaneously offering alternatives to current situations and experimenting in new arrangements of power. Rather than serve as mere entertainment, the theatre could be used as a political platform to take some of the uncertainty out of political science (which stems from the lack of a “laboratory” for the science) and bring the democratic citizen into a thoughtful engagement with their political life. As the purpose of art is to share ideas and initiate dialogue – the artist should have something to say to the audience, and I believe theatre is the most effective way to have that discussion. And as an art form solely focused upon the interactions of individuals – the theatre is well-equipped to deal with questions of politics, the most personal of subjects. Over the course of my research, I came to believe

in the power of the theatre to shed light on society's problems and participate in the attempt to solve them.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Theatre and politics are intrinsically connected. The art of politics is extremely theatrical and the art of theatre has always been infused with political relationships. This congruity stems from the fact that both fields of practice originate from the same fundamental source: power. Both arts are different expressions of the same concept. This can be seen in the shared theatrical/political focus on argument; both theatre and politics have the same goal - convincing people by leading them to certain conclusions. Both politics and theatre necessitate getting others to believe what one is saying. The performer requires his audience to believe in his character and the world he creates; the political actor requires his peers to trust in his decisions and delegate authority to him. In this way politics and theatre are both principally tools of persuasion, a function of the power one person has in relation to others. As I will define, power is inherent in all relationships between people, working in concert to create new things. While this is obvious in terms of government and authority, I will not be using the classical definitions of power pertaining to rule of one person over another, but rather what results when people cooperate. And as politics is a function of power, so is the theatre. As an expression of power – theatre allows for experimentation in human relationships and an examination of society and the power relationships contained within it – the theatre can be a tool for illuminating what power structures exist now or arguing for which structures should exist.

With this in mind, how could one harness the power of the theatre as a political instrument? Further, what politics are implied by different theories of performance and different theatrical techniques? That is the focus of this thesis. By revisiting theatre



history with a view informed in political theory, I will attempt to outline the changing power relationships implied by different theatrical movements throughout the development of Western theatre. By tracing these changes in theatrical practice, I hope to identify the inherent examination of power in these techniques, analyze them and develop a collection of working terms and conditions to apply to a new form of political theatre. After surveying the power relationships shown by previous theatrical genres, I will suggest a movement of my own that embraces the theatre/politics connection and seeks to use theatre politically. The goal: a theatre technique that focuses on examining power with the purpose of educating/training citizens, safe political experimentation and increasing inter-societal dialogue. With these goals in mind, this method of theatre will seek to function as a place for power experimentation which should benefit the political processes of debate, dialogue and persuasion that are necessary for a democracy. I will especially be applying Hannah Arendt's definition of power and Michel Foucault's concept of "governmentality" (as I understand them and will define them) in order to lay the groundwork for examining the power inherent in these theatrical relationships. In the broadest sense I will be outlining a theatre which will operate under a regime of democratic governmentality.

For the purposes of clarity within this thesis, the most important definition is the concept of "power." I shall be using my interpretation of the definition of power developed by Hannah Arendt, who links power to the concepts of legitimacy and action. Arendtian power rests neither in the classical control of territory nor even the idea of violence (as in Hobbes or Weber). As she suggests in *The Human Condition*, action is the highest form of human activity, when people gather together to act *in concert*, in

plurality, to create something new that will last, “to act, in its most general sense, means to take initiative, to begin... to set something in motion” (Arendt, *Human Condition*). Politics counts as action for Arendt, and it is the most effective thing people can do together to change their world. In a way it transcends the semi-permanent nature of human existence. In order to participate in action, one needs other people, and needs to convince them to work toward desirable goals. Quite simply, the ability to get others to “act” with you (without forcing them to or coercing them), is power.

Power is a specific state, and Arendt mostly defines power by saying what it is not. For example, violence is the opposite of power, because you are forcing people to do something and taking away their freedom to act unhindered (Arendt, *On Violence*). Coercion is not power, because you are taking away another’s choice to act as they would. In a way, power is similar to the concept of authority, where someone agrees that another should have some sort of authority over them, they grant one respect or legitimacy, similar to the ideas of John Locke (Hutcheon). For Arendt, power is more of a state than an action or an end – people must have power to exert their will on their environment or work towards the end they desire (Arendt, *On Violence*). This is a positive act of creation, rather than a negative conception of power like that found in the philosophy of Thomas Hobbes or Max Weber – where power stems simply physical domination over another and force.

Importantly, Arendtian power is positive at its base, a group changing society through the use of power is more positive than group using means *other* than power to change society (such as violence or revolution). Although at first this seems semantic, it is critical. As Arendt outlines in *On Violence*, power comes from having the “support and

consent” of numbers – citizens agreeing with your point of view (Part III). Power is an “end in itself” and it allows “a group of people to think and act according to means and ends” – in other words power enables action (Arendt, *On Violence*, III). If you have true power in society, you have legitimacy and the support of a large amount of people or the law. It is much easier to use a more direct means of control (not power) such as violence or force. But the chief difference is that power arising from support is *legitimate*, while control arising through violence or coercion is not. This is relevant to my discussion because theatre and politics are for me expressions of power. Theatre is based upon the presentation and representation of ideas being displayed to an audience, therefore a form of dialogue – it is not coercion but persuasion and therefore legitimate as a use of power.

The principal point is that power involves acting in concert with others, persuading them through dialogue, hammering out differences and focuses on creating new things, rather than destroying old things. This conception of power is critical to my definition of both theatre and politics because it relies on persuasion and cooperation rather than coercion or force. It is with this conception of power that I will be examining the different theatrical movements and looking for power relationships within them.

By “theatre” I mean any performance that involves actors or performers who are consciously in the act of exploring some world/situation/problem that is not necessarily their own. In a sense by theatre I mean people interacting outside of their normal everyday situations. Theatre is an expression of power because it is based on the interactions of different characters and their environment, very direct power relationships. Theatre also offers examinations of power relationships that are useful in real life because they can be extrapolated outward, to apply to real power relationships.

Furthermore, unlike other arts the result of an examination of power through theatre relies also on the audience – the input of the spectator changes the nature of the piece and multiplies the capability of a piece of theatre to be a useful political examination.

By “politics” or “the political” I mean participation in a relationship with other people that has something to do with power. While technically this could be any time that two people are interacting or in discussion, my focus is on situations in which there is a more concrete interchange of power between the individuals, such as cooperative decision making or direct political interaction. When I say politics, I am implying that there is some sort of implicit dialogue or cooperation involved – using some sort of democratic standard. For example, by a political actor I would not mean a dictator or warlord who rules his territory by the threat of violence, but rather an elected official or person engaged in discourse. Similarly, by citizen, I would mean someone who is participating in the political process in the ways that are outlined by the rules or laws of their society – not a violent rebel or subjugated serf. For my purposes, politics involves a direct power relationship between individuals or groups that has real consequences for those involved (as opposed to the theatrical truth of freedom from real-life consequences).

I shall also be examining different changes in theatrical practice or theory in a given time period, represented by the work of certain individuals. I shall be referring to these as “theatrical movements” but I do not mean to force homogeneity on a field that is by definition rather individualistic. Rather, I wish to outline an overall development in theatrical practice that is important to the evolving role of theatre in society and its implications to the concept of theatre as power examination.

The last concept I will be using that warrants definition is “governmentality,” with which Michel Foucault refers to power – his definition requires an examination of whom or what is being governed, and the methods by which this governance takes place (Foucault, “Governmentality,” 87). It is the ways in which we govern ourselves and the ways in which we govern others that are most important to understanding governmentality – the interplay of all these techniques and methods inherent in a power system. A “regime” of governmentality, then is the rules by which such a power system operates. I will be applying my own concept as well, that of “theatrical governmentality” to describe the regime of governmentality which can be created out of the techniques and assumptions a theatrical movement makes about the world.<sup>1</sup>

In critiquing earlier conceptions of power relationships (mainly that idea that power originates from territory controlled) Foucault introduces his idea of government:

“One governs things... The things with which in this sense government is to be concerned are in fact men, but men in their relations, their links, their imbrication with those other things which are wealth, resources, means of subsistence, the territory with its specific qualities, climate, irrigation, fertility, etc” (Foucault, “Governmentality,” 93).

That is to say that power comes not from having a title or owning something, but from the interconnected relationships between objects, people and the decision made.

Foucault’s governmentality is a way to describe the power inherent in a particular relationship overall, rather than as an individual property one person has. In this way, governmentality is the overall power of a system (a monarchy) rather than the power one individual who is part of that system possesses (the king). If one has power over

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<sup>1</sup> For example the Romanticists focused on creating their own world that was separate from the real world, extravagant and escapist – their function of theatrical power was to protect and entertain the spectator rather than face tough social issues. This technique of using theatre (therefore power) is an example of a regime of theatrical governmentality.

something in the Foucauldian sense, the decisions and actions of that person interact with it, having effects which ripple throughout the network of connected things. For example, a ruler has power over his people because his judgment becomes a law for the citizens to follow – if they obey, he has exercised his control over them. If they rebel, he is justified in punishing them with the personification of his order, the police – again exercising control over them (Foucault, “Governmentality,” 102). Either way, his power is realized by the consequences his decisions make on those under his control. In this example system with a single ruler on top, the governmentality is the interaction between all the pieces, the ruler, the people, the police, etc – therefore governmentality outlines the power inherent in the whole system. The regime of governmentality would be the techniques and rules of power particular to this system, where the king makes the laws and the subjects follow the laws.

This system of power-interactions that government demands is my working definition of governmentality. I believe this too meshes with Arendtian action and power. Governmentality applies not only to governments, but to all human interaction. Governmentality even refers to the Self, in how one “takes care of oneself,” or enacts self discipline (Foucault, “Technologies of the Self,” 30). Foucault describes this sense of governmentality in “The Technologies of the Self” – “This contact between the technologies of domination of others and those of the self I call governmentality” (Foucault, “Technologies of the Self,” 19). Again governmentality lies in between entities; governmentality is the interaction within the system. How one “dominates” one’s own actions and decide what to do in a particular relationship constitute a form of governmentality. This governing of the self also is thematically important in theatre

practice. In our modern conception of life, governing the Self is critically important and greatly affects the interactions of all people.

For Foucault it is useful to master oneself to interact more effectively in a system. Action in a system (city, household) is definitely going to be more productive if it occurs along a certain pre-defined line, differing sides of the discourse agreeing on terms or debating (Foucault, "Governmentality," 93). This action, similar to Arendtian power, relies on the give-and-take of power. In this way, governmentality as an "art of government" can be applied to the political because of the inherent power changes that it can examine (Foucault, "Governmentality," 87).

Similarly, the same idea of governmentality can easily be applied to art. Like politics, everything done artistically is meant for others to see and respond to. If I were to postulate a definition of art it would be the creation of something new with a purpose of inspiring thought, action or emotion in someone other than the creator. For me, art is not just the act of creation or following certain discipline or form. In some ways this is a very loose definition of art – allowing for many different things to be considered artistic: traditional (music, dance, theatre), or not (graffiti, performance art, invisible theatre). Art is political because of the fact it seeks a listener/viewer – it essentially is an attempt to initiate a dialogue. There is a desired outcome – an emotion, message or thought to be conveyed. The artist is not simply living out some desire of creation on their own – otherwise they would have stayed home and kept it to themselves. It is the action of sharing that is artistic – both the creator sharing their new object or the performer are trying to send a message to their audience. The sharing could be information that the

artist feels needs to be transmitted, an invitation to dialogue or even (most importantly for this thesis) a call for action.

This potential of an artistic call for action is absolutely critical. The arts, especially theatre, have many advantages as tools of persuasion: the captive audience, true subtlety, the ability to bypass communicational barriers such as language or illiteracy, and the capability of producing incredible emotional connection. The potential for persuasion is phenomenal and this should freely be used for societal dialogue and political expression. To restrict art or the artist from acting politically because of a desire to achieve artistic purity is counter-intuitive. Through artistic means, one can convey any sort of message or influence others' decisions; one can plant the seeds of reflection or start healthy debate. These are inherently political actions and can be used to great effect. It is accurate, then, to say that art is an expression of governmentality because it is an outline of a desired regime (or potentially the showcasing of a negative regime). By using the communicative nature of art, the artist is making a power argument about a particular relationship to be considered.

Of all the things considered "art," theatre is especially political. The goal of theatre is to examine human interactions – the most political of subjects. Furthermore, through theatre any possible set of interactions or relationships is available for examination. Therefore any possible political situation can potentially be examined by theatrical means. This speaks to the incredible potential for the theatre as a means of experimentation in power relations as well as power examination. Also – theatre involves a direct spectator – the audience. This is an advantage because the overall message of a piece of theatre depends also on the makeup of citizens in the audience. The only real



difference between theatre and politics as far as power is concerned is that theatre involves imagined circumstances and politics involves real circumstances. All else is the same – people and groups interacting in real time, making decisions, coming to conclusions and living through consequences. And theatre avoids the hazards of real consequence so fundamental to all political action.

Coupled together, the main concepts of “power” and “governmentality” have quite broad and meaningful implications when applied to theatre. As a forum for the study of human interaction, free from tangible consequences, theatre can be a powerful tool for power examination. Power is nothing if not complex, and of course it deserves much contemplation and examination - as well as discourse involving the disparate groups and individuals who make up society. One of the most common problems in groups is the lack of communication or understanding between those who are different in some way. This can be seen everywhere, for example - race relations, class warfare or language barriers. There is never a time when more communication, discourse and discussion are not useful. As a tool of communication, theatre is quite useful, and each theatrical movement has its own draw to a certain world outlook, applying itself to its target audience – making the overall discipline of performance widely appealing in whatever form it takes.

The overall idea of using theatre as a tool for inspiring political dialogue and examining important power relationships is to hope that by placing these difficult and complex debates in the sphere of the theatrical, the unreal – the consequences that usually follow heated debate and accusations of power-inequality (bloodshed, segmentation, economic consequences) could be completely avoided. In this function the theatre could

act as both a forum for new ideas and social progress, as well as a safe alternative to other modes of conflict – one that would have the enormous advantage of being completely safe and productive.

## **ORGANIZATION**

My thesis is divided into three chapters. The first chapter will examine the different theatrical movements throughout history, from Ancient Egypt to the current day. I will illustrate what I see as the overarching theatrical governmentality for each period, what the theatre of that period had to say about power, represented by examples.

The second chapter seeks to further show how theatrical examinations can be used to extrapolate real power relationships. This involves an examination of Plato's concept of the city/soul and an application of Michel Foucault's governmentality. I will then attempt to outline how these concepts can be applied to theatrical performance as well, using previous examples from chapter one and expanding them.

Chapter three is my attempt to outline my own regime of theatrical governmentality for a theatre focusing on reinforcing and enabling democratic dialogue. I will seek to use concepts I have outlined from different theatrical movements and synthesize them into one regime.

## **CHAPTER 1**

### The Evolution of Theatrical Movements as Power Expression and Examination

In this chapter I will be examining different periods in Western theatre, from the ancient Egyptians to modern times. I shall attempt to represent what I see as the distinct theatrical “movements” throughout the history of theatre, and through delineating them show how each represents a different conception of power. As I see theatre itself as a way to examine power relationships and also a form of dialogue, each different genre of theatre consists of a different set of guidelines regarding power. Through examining the ways that theatre has changed throughout history, I want to showcase how this representation of power has changed. Once I have outlined all the different ways that power has been expressed theatrically, I will more easily be able to specifically delve into what I see as the most crucial theatrical genres to consider when classifying theatre as a tool for experimenting with power.<sup>2</sup> In particular I am looking to find different ways that theatre has explored power and what arguments or techniques I find useful to designing a type of theatre that integrates them.

## **EGYPT**

Western theatre as we know it starts in ancient Egypt. Archeological finds in the well-preserved tombs have allowed for a basic understanding of the origins of Egyptian drama, although little of it is extant (Roberts, 17). Drama was used by priests to teach

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<sup>2</sup> For example in Greek tragedy, one can examine *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles, looking for the power arrangement. Oedipus is a powerful figure, yet he is destroyed. By showing the weaknesses and vulnerability of man (compared to the gods or Fate), this play argues for a world where one admits ones own inadequacies and pays respect to the gods.

fables and lessons about religion and apparently as a part of ceremonies (Freedley and Reeves, 3). It appears to have been more a part religious ceremony than its own art form. Nevertheless it is dramatic, with characters introducing themselves, speaking to one another and the presence of stage directions. There are records of “Coronation Festival plays” or “Heb Seds,” performed in honor a new Pharaoh, a medicinal drama and the rest of the so-called “Pyramid texts” discovered on the walls of tombs (Freedley and Reeves, 4/5). All theatrical events in Egypt took place directly in temples, reflecting a tradition that would be continued by the Greeks, that of theatre as a religious event (Freedley and Reeves, 7). The purpose of these performances seems to have been glorification of leaders and religion – teaching religious lessons in a way that was easy to understand and exciting to watch or participate in.

The most important of the recorded drama of Egypt is the *Abydos Passion Play*, of which no primary text exists. The yearly-performed play details the life and death of Osiris, the Egyptian god of the dead (Roberts, 18). Little is known of the *Abydos Passion Play* – it was performed by priests in temples; it relied heavily on the spectacle and was serious in nature (Roberts, 20). This information comes from a “stela” engraved by Ikhnofret, a “high official” who participated in the drama and described it (Nebet). It is safe to assume that the goal was spreading religious knowledge and ritual, not entertainment per se. Theatre was also caught up in the “cult of the dead” aspect of Egyptian religion, now seen as a way to attract and recruit members through the means of public spectacle (Roberts, 20). Also, important were the *Pyramid Texts* of which 55 exist, which seem to also be dramatic events occurring with the shift of political power to a new king. It is postulated that in these dramatic pieces “the character of Osiris was identified

with the dead king (whose part of course, had to be played by a priest); that of Horus with the living king (who may have been played by himself)” (Freedley and Reeves, 3).

These plays then, it would seem, are political as well as religious, because they identify the priesthood with the ruler, asserting their power and legitimacy. So as a function of power, these plays acted as pseudo-propaganda - regaling the public with a great spectacle detailing the life of the god that the priests worshipped, convincing them to join the cult through the promise of immortality – indeed the “most important reason for their widespread popularity was their offer of immortality to everyone regardless of social status” (philaenu). By recruiting members the group gained power in Egyptian society. So for these Egyptians drama was a critical component of religion – part ceremony and ritual, part recruiting technique. This use of drama was to increase the power of a religious sect by gaining supporters through the use of educational spectacle. This behavior is a use of legitimate power because the priests were attempting to gain worshippers through persuasion, not coercion. Their dramatic ritual was an invitation to the people to participate in this religious act, and therefore salvation – much more legitimate than a forced conversion.

## **GREECE**

Ancient Greece is generally considered the starting point for modern theatre as we know it and there are simply more texts available from this period: plays, criticisms and histories; as well as detailed accounts of the lives of playwrights, actors and festivals. Ancient Greek drama is still considered to be some of the finest ever written, and only a small proportion of it has survived this long. From the dithyrambic chorus to tragedy and comedy, the development of theatre in Greece was incredibly influential and remains so

today. The form of Greek theatre that remains the most influential is the tragedy; power structures are especially well examined in tragedy which was more serious and conflict-ridden than comedy.

As in Egypt, theatre in Greece developed out of religious practice. An important component of the celebrations of the god Dionysus (god of nature, revelry, wine) was a communal song and dance – in fact this ritual may have been transported directly from Egypt (Freedley and Reeves, 8). This event eventually developed into its own art form, the dithyrambic chorus. This early form of performance would tell a fable or story of the gods, especially Dionysus - the members of the Chorus singing and speaking the story to the audience, very similar to the outline of the *Abydos Passion Play* (Freedley and Reeves, 11). Eventually, the focus of the dithyrambs included mortal heroes and a leader was designated from the rest of the chorus (Freedley and Reeves, 11). This addition is attributed to Thespis, and the choral leader would ask questions of the chorus and get responses - this is the first dramatic dialogue (Roberts, 23). The playwrights of the time began to experiment with this new form increasingly, unsurprisingly finding it to offer more dramatic possibilities. Eventually the chorus would lose stature as more characters were introduced, the possibility of real-time dialogue and conflict much more invocative than the fifty person chorus. Plays were divided into scenes and acts, tragedy and comedy. Some of the best minds of the time were involved in the writing and acting of plays (Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes), as well as literary theory (Aristotle's *Poetics*) – producing some very fine work.

As was typical of the period, a great many rules regarding how a play was to be properly constructed were designed, including adhering to the Unities of time, place and

action (ex. The action had to occur within 24 hours) and regarding who the play could be about (tragedy concerned nobles and kings, comedy concerned common people). The yearly competition at the City Dionysia festival was the principal outlet for all plays – they would be performed and judged by contemporaries of the playwrights, and the winner would receive money and respect. This atmosphere of competition essentially forced the different playwrights to specifically define their views on the forms that drama took and argue for them.

As previously stated, the goals and precepts of tragedy and comedy were very different and equally defined. In its own way, each can be looked at as a representation of power. Tragedy had to concern the affairs of “grand people” and start happily while ending terribly. The most well-regarded rule set was that developed by Aristotle in his *Poetics*, where he defined tragedy as “an imitation of a noble and complete action, having the proper magnitude... and achieves through the representation of pitiable and fearful incidents, the catharsis of such pitiable and fearful incidents” (Carlson, 17). This catharsis was the overall purpose of theatre, affecting the spectator directly and purging them of negative “passions” like anger or pride in lieu of moderation (Carlson, 18). The protagonist of the play is meant to be pitied and feared; the spectator knows that the hero’s fate is to be destroyed; no matter what they do (tragedy used well-known figures and fables for this reason). We as spectators are left to analyze why they met the end they did and presumably learn a lesson from it.

For example, when watching or reading Sophocles’ *Antigone* we watch Antigone disobey the king Creon by secretly burying her dead brother (Polynices), who is declared an enemy of the state for his part in the civil war that just ended. She believes that he still

deserves proper rites – and she bravely accepts her punishment of death rather than repent. When reminded of the certain consequences of her actions, Antigone says “But I will bury him; and if I must die, / I say that this crime is holy: I shall lie down / With him in death” (Nicoll, 59). Even though Creon is told that the entire city believes that Antigone has done right by his own son Haemon (her fiancé), and even though he is warned by the prophet Tiresias that the gods frown on his decisions, he still orders Antigone’s execution. Creon realizes this is a mistake and attempts to stop it, but it is too late: Antigone, Haemon and Creon’s wife have all committed suicide.

Thus, Creon is destroyed by having everything taken away from him, because he refused to heed the warning. He is a tragic hero, because he is not a bad person overall, he just made a tragic mistake. Although the audience cannot help but blame Creon for the result, he is still sympathetic in that he realizes the error of his ways but cannot stop it. This structure properly invokes Aristotle’s concept of pity and fear – we definitely pity Creon and Antigone, as well as fear the same happening to us. There is also a direct power relationship in between Antigone and Creon, the rebellious citizen and the head of state. She does what is right even though it is against the law, and she gladly accepts her punishment, even accelerating it by committing suicide rather than wait for execution. This is truly an exercise of civil disobedience and is an interesting examination of power in the ancient world.

In the Arendtian sense, Antigone is truly expressing Power by acting. She disobeys the law, choosing to bury her brother herself, regardless of the consequences. When taken before Creon, she still does not repent, even attempting to convince him of her position. She could have fled after burying her brother or attempted to kill Creon, or



any number of other options. But Antigone seeks to create dialogue and is willing to die in order to get her message across – she would rather do what she knows is right than follow an unjust law.

The characters in *Antigone* represent both legitimate use of Power (Antigone) and illegitimate coercion (Creon). By the result, we can see that Creon's use of force was not favored by the gods and he was punished quite severely. In this way Sophocles outlines both the appropriate use of Power and the consequences of defying the power structure (both in Antigone defying Creon and dying, and Creon defying the gods and being punished). While viewing *Antigone* in the lens of Arendtian power, we can clearly interpret an argument for Action in human relations, rather than coercion. Presumably things would have ended differently if Creon had entered into a dialogue with the others before it was too late – but he stuck to his own pride and belief in the immutable law instead. Similarly, Antigone's death cannot seem but wasteful and if she had not been so eager to commit suicide she would have been saved in the end (Nicoll, 62).

Sophocles has properly invoked catharsis and hopefully purged his audience of the desire to defy authority, act impulsively or be prideful. This purgation of extreme emotions leads to moderation and hopefully to more rational action. *Antigone* fulfills the goals of Greek tragedy and sets forth a correct use of Power.

Developing away from the dithyrambic chorus and a communal celebration, theatre began to become more of a stand-alone art form with new goals, and this concentration on the individual character multiplied the opportunities for new power relationships. Theatre, then, can be viewed as a way to instill personal and social control through the examination of individuals and power. This is a warning against extremes

and an argument for listening both to each other and the gods. By the fantastic punishments offered to those who go to extremes – we are left with a strong argument in favor of moderation. Illegitimate attempts at power, such as Creon punishing Antigone, are dealt with in kind.

## **ROME**

Like with many things in Rome, Roman theatre was heavily influenced by the Greeks. Many of the rules and forms of Greek theatre were simply copied and made more Roman. In this sense, the Roman theatre is a similar examination of power as the Greek. The practices of the Romans were influential, and the writings of Horace and Seneca helped “define forms” and also outline what the purpose of theatre was. Horace in his *Ars poetica* argued that the purpose of poetry (including theatre), in addition to the Aristotelian conception of inspiring catharsis, was “to delight and to profit” (Carlson, 25). By “profit,” Horace was referring to poetry’s ability to improve the listener, to instruct them somehow. This development makes sense because it follows an overall Roman tendency to liken arts to rhetoric – the art of persuasion, as seen in the writings of Cicero that involve drama (Carlson, 23). The importance of drama for the Romans was its “double emphasis on pleasure and instruction” (Carlson, 25). This implicit focus on the didactic opportunities afforded to the theatre is a very important advancement. The message of theatre was therefore extremely important, and the goal of the play itself was explicitly to teach the audience some lesson or help them understand something. In this way, poetry and theatre should focus on being practical and improving human communication. Roman theatre was used as a rhetorical strategy for improving arguments.

This is one of the best early examples of theatre as a tool – reaching a captive audience and attempting to persuade them. This important idea remains influential and offers one insight into one of the most unique uses of theatre, as a platform for conveying ideas. In this way, theatre is a dialogue striving to reach the audience and persuade them. In this way the theatre is a direct expression of power. Added to the Greek goal of catharsis, this didacticism seeking the spread of values or information broadened the goals of theatre and expanded its capability for exploring Power.

## **MIDDLE AGES**

During the Middle Ages, the function and place of theatre was heavily called into question. The rise of the Catholic Church was frankly detrimental to the development of theatre, as it was seen as an immoral venture and against Christian values. The early “church Fathers” particularly hated the prospect of theatre. Tertullian warned against the sin of the spectacle and saying theatre inspired a “violent agitation of the soul” and arguing that it represented a very negative loss of self-control (Carlson, 28). St. Augustine also argued against the theatre, mirroring theatre to Roman paganism and decadence and calling the idea of inspiring passions like pity and fear sinful (Carlson, 29). Augustine called this catharsis perverse because it draws the spectator into feeling for the tragic hero, watching him suffer, and being truly unable to help him. This arousal of grief without the possibility of Christian charity was perverse in Augustine’s eyes: “Why is it that man desires to be made sad, beholding doleful and tragical things, which yet himself would by no means suffer” (Carlson, 29). Theatre was banned as sinful and outlawed.

This attitude would change eventually, because those in the Church saw the use of theatre as a format for religious instruction (much as the Romans, Greeks and Egyptians before them). Rather than an instruction in earthly topics, the format of a play could be adopted to teach religious lessons and teach the largely illiterate populace about the liturgy. In fact, the Mass itself was admittedly theatrical – mentioned by Amalarius, Bishop of Metz (Carlson, 36). In the late medieval church, theatre was allowed resurgence, under Church terms, as a form of purely religious instruction. Even harsh critics Tertullian and Augustine had admitted that theatre was popular and did connect to its audience very effectively through passions (which is why they had been afraid of the “immoral” things being shown), so why not use it to spread the word of God (Carlson, 29)? An Arab scholar of the time, Averroës, in his translation and interpretation of Aristotle’s *Poetics*, argued well for this ethical instruction: “since imitators and makers of likenesses wished through their art to impel people toward certain choices and discourage them from others, they had to treat subjects that, being represented, would suggest either virtues or vices” (Carlson, 33).

The Christian practice of using theatre to preach values such as innocence and virtue took the form of “morality plays” or “mysteries.” These plays used abstract concepts as characters rather than individuals, attempting to show their universality and applicability to the average audience member. The most famous and best example of this form is “Everyman” from the 15<sup>th</sup> century (Nicoll, 164). The play itself takes an average person, called “Everyman,” and details his death and entrance to the afterlife. He must come to accounts for his life, and attempt to gain entrance to Heaven. He attempts to ask friends to come with him (also in the form of abstractions) to help convince the Angels

that he deserves his reward, but they all abandon him one by one, from his friends and family (Fellowship, Cousin) to his earthly possessions and attributes (Goods, Knowledge, Beauty). No one can or will follow him and help him when it really counts. The only character/trait that he can bring with him to Heaven is “Good Deeds,” and this is what finally gets him into Heaven.

The message is clear, only by doing good deeds can a Christian reverse sin and be rewarded. This explicit piece of religious dogma is presented in a very effective structure that must have been a welcome change for the populace. This follows the goal of medieval church theatre by teaching a very specific moral lesson to the populace and spreading the views of the church. The play was by all accounts very effective, mostly because “the unknown playwright has made his figures, despite their abstract names, vital human characters” (Nicoll 165).

This play is an expression of power because it puts the average person in Everyman’s place, showing that it is not this life that is important, but the next. Earthly goods, success and family should not be your priority, rather doing Charity and going to Heaven must be. This places the individual in a very subservient position to the Church and is thus a strong message of power. The true power is with God, and we are all inferior, so live by the rules that He (and we the Church) have outlined for you. It is a direct and physical representation of all the teachings of the Church, in an easy and accessible format; it is not surprising that this format was allowed to continue under the influence of the Church. The subordination of individual wants and desires to the hope for a divine reward is a powerful tool and cemented the Church’s influence for centuries. With this reading in mind we can see the similarities to the *Abydos Passion Play* in

getting attracting adherents to the cult of Osiris. These are excellent examples of the didactic and persuasive capability of the theatre, no matter what the message. This is directly a use of power between groups.

## **RENAISSANCE**

The Renaissance was a complete re-working of current ideas in all disciplines and a celebration of Man and Reason. Theatre of the time reflected this secular turn and the power structures reflected in drama changed perceptibly. Indeed the “animating spirit of the time was secular rather than religious” (Roberts 108). The focus of the drama shifted away from religious abstraction to secular themes of individuals and their struggles. This change allowed for a more direct display of power - power struggles between individuals, groups, even internally. The goal of this kind of theatre is much different than in the Middle Ages, showing characters who live and die by their own actions rather than Fate or hamartia. The stories depicted involved more realistic interactions and an attempt at real characterization, in lieu of the medieval focus on concepts. Despite the differences from earlier theatre however, Renaissance theatre also has the capability to “delight and instruct” albeit in a secular sense.

Two great playwrights of the Renaissance in particular stand out, showcasing this individual focus, Niccolo Machiavelli and William Shakespeare. Both playwrights are very concerned with power relationships. They come to very different conclusions about the use of power, and they express their conclusions through the fate of their protagonists.

Machiavelli is best known for his political theories, but his play *Mandragola* is quite important as well. It is a comedy, yet it is highly political and offers biting criticism of the society Machiavelli lived in. The plot is rather straightforward, the young man

about town, Callimaco, wishes to sleep with the beautiful (and married) Lucrezia, and he is willing to do anything to obtain his goal. This is not exactly the grand adventure of a tragic hero, but more of a bourgeois fantasy. But what is important about this piece is that almost all the characters utilize a complete lack of morals and a single-mindedness, to lie and cheat their way to obtaining their desires. The most surprising thing about this play is that even through all the treachery, bribery, lying and even something close to rape - the end result is a happy ending for everyone.

Machiavelli is condoning self-reliance, even if it's accompanied by a complete disregard for morals, showcasing his belief that the end justifies the means. Fraud especially is a weapon of Machiavelli's heroes – they tell bold-faced lies, keep secrets, even bribe the Church for help in their schemes. It is true that “none of the characters' objectives could be accomplished without it [fraud]. Machiavelli makes it clear that fraud is acceptable, so long as it furthers a worthwhile cause” (Emachiavelli.com). Again the focus is on the ends. This message is much different than that of the church fathers like Tertullian – espousing obfuscating uses of persuasion rather than the revealing or enlightening ones. In a way Machiavelli could have been using *Mandragola* to “delight and instruct” although admittedly his topic of instruction is political pragmatism and not Christian morals.

This form of theatre is a very direct commentary on power – take what you want and do it any way you can. Callimaco and the others mimic *The Prince*; they are practical to the last and is able to disregard everyone in order to obtain happiness (emachiavelli.com). This stance boldly presupposes the falsity of religion and its strict morals and laughs at the human conception of law. In this system of power, it is whoever

is the most willing to use others for personal gain that prospers, waiting for reward in the afterlife is not a worthy endeavor. This argument has strong implications for society, one of mistrust and chaos that relies on skill and praxis to protect one's interests rather than truth or justice (Boal, 66/67). These concepts definitely still resonate with modern society and have rarely been as boldly stated.

No doubt one of the most influential playwrights of this and all time is William Shakespeare. When compared to Machiavelli, the messages of Shakespeare are more complex, both because he wrote more plays, but also because of the depth and detail in his work. By focusing on his tragedies, it is easier to identify the reflections of power and trace the development from the classical forms we've examined. Shakespeare's influence on the development of theatre cannot be overlooked, as Vera Mowry Roberts puts it in her book *On Stage*:

“Shakespeare... produced plays as marvelous in their way as those of Sophocles had been: he balanced plot and character; he integrated main and subplots; he used elements of romance; and he reconciled comedy and tragedy by using comedy to heighten the tragic effect. He is our greatest dramatic genius, not only for the characters he created and his magnificent poetry, but also for his consummate skill in dramaturgy, and his most explicit and effective use of the theatre for which he wrote. In his plays the classic tradition and medieval heritage are wonderfully combined and blended.” Roberts, 144.

Shakespeare's plays have a lot to say as far as power is concerned. For example, in *Macbeth*, Shakespeare portrays a familiar story – someone is lusting for power, takes it by force, and eventually is destroyed for his greed and pride. This format is similar to the Greek tragedy, and both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth can be read as tragic heroes who are destroyed for their misdeeds. However, Shakespeare is much more nuanced than the Greek tragedians, his characters are truly multi-dimensional individuals rather than abstractions (Boal, 62). The audience can empathize with Macbeth, but in the end it is his



own greed, his lack of willpower to resist Lady Macbeth and his pride that lead to his destruction – it is *not* a tragic mistake like that of Oedipus. This is a more direct message about the nature of Power than the Greek – rather than heroes being destroyed for simply being doomed or flawed, it is because of the choices they make. Macbeth eschews his rightful place and attempts to force his way to the top, he is destroyed. Richard III does a similar thing, and ends up punished. Both Richard III and Macbeth are destroyed for ignoring morals and doing what is right in favor of getting what they want and don't deserve. Both act using violence and coercion rather than legitimate dialogue or political processes. By punishing these power-hungry characters, Shakespeare is clearly arguing against this Machiavellian behavior – in which such deception and ambition is rewarded.

Another power theme (again mirrored by Machiavelli) is fraud. King Lear is tricked by lies and chooses to banish his one faithful daughter Cordelia, dooming them both. Othello is fooled by Iago and allows his passion to take over, killing Desdemona for mere suspicion and jealousy. Both are cases of mistaken decisions being made when under incredible stress or emotion, and the audience is frustrated by the futility of the result – if only the hero had realized they were being lied to! Our focus then, remains on the danger of acting on passions rather than discussion, the negative consequences of acting too quickly and ignoring the warning bells. This too mimics the classical call for moderation found in Aristotle, where he “condemns both excess and deficiency in the passions (Carlson, 18). Shakespeare condemns illegitimate attempts at power in the form of treachery or violence, showing that its rewards are impermanent and unworthy. He would seem to be arguing therefore for more just and considerate action, using legitimate Power and dialogue.

One can argue that *Romeo and Juliet* involves “star-crossed lovers” and “fate or adverse fortune” rather than personal responsibility (Nicoll 275); but it seems again that it is choices and not Gods that doom the heroes. Romeo and Juliet fall in love, and they attempt to make it work despite the odds being against them. Like the characters in Machiavelli, they seek a personal way out of their troubles, attempting to escape the factors that forbid them from being together. However it is seemingly bad luck or rash action that destroys them: Romeo commits suicide upon finding Juliet feigning death, she commits suicide upon waking. However, neither of them was forced to this action; the most stinging part of the story is that if Romeo had just controlled himself, they would have been reunited. One can see the parallels to the actions of passionate Antigone in the cave, killing herself rather than await death. This is the individual taking power into her own hands completely – living and dying by it. *King Lear* also showcases the struggle of the individual against the elements and evil – “in *King Lear* the whole of nature seems to become impregnated with the vapours of hell” (Nicoll, 274). And the end of this tragedy is almost cataclysmic destruction – Lear finally goes mad upon realizing that the dead girl he holds is his daughter, whom he banished and punished unjustly. These personal decisions have very negative consequences, a reading which can effectively portray Shakespeare as the next step in Greek tragedy.

Both Shakespeare and Machiavelli tell intriguing stories with developed characters and the lengths they go to in order to succeed - individuals who exhibit personal, selfish or opportunistic traits. In previous times this kind of motivation was not represented in theatre, but the secular nature of the Renaissance encouraged a realistic view into society. These writers of the Renaissance were examining the way that people

interact and the intricacies of power between them – with a special focus on the lust for power. Although Machiavelli and Shakespeare come to different conclusions, they deal with the same questions of power. The connections of power are represented in the relationships between man and woman, slave and master, between friends. Principal in the tragedies of Shakespeare and *Mandragola* are the character's willingness to seek their personal goals at the expense of others and essentially use them for their own ends.

Whether it is Iago cuckolding Othello by fraud or Callimaco bribing Friar Timoteo, we are witnessing an interaction of power. These actions do not represent true power under the Arendtian standard – one should be able to convince others without resorting to the use of wealth, lies or violence. With this in mind we can see Shakespeare as arguing for a sort of Arendtian power and Machiavelli against it. Again, “one must look to the result” as Friar Timoteo says in *Mandragola* – in the case whether the deceitful or over-passionate characters are exalted or destroyed (Machiavelli, in Pennington).

### **NEO-CLASSICISM & 17<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY FRANCE**

Epitomized by seventeenth century France (and to a lesser extent Restoration-era England) Neoclassicism was a movement designed to emulate the greatness of the past. Based on the “rules” of Neoclassicism developed in Italy, the form flourished in France for a time. In particular the Greeks, especially Aristotle were idealized, and in theatre this meant adherence to the classical Unities of time and space, strict poetic forms and a concern for decorum on the stage (Carlson, 90). There was great debate for years as to whether this form was superior to the more “native” dramatic forms appearing in Europe – reflecting the important question of whether art should strive to be modern or classically beautiful and whether the two camps were mutually exclusive (Carlson, 93).

This theoretical question would very much affect the goals of different genres of theatre during this time, and influenced the reflections of power contained within them. The great classical tragedians of France at this time, Pierre Corneille and Jean Racine, were joined and finally eclipsed by a playwright of more lasting influence: Molière. The skill of Molière assured that the most important genre of this time period for our purposes is the comedy.

An actor and playwright, Molière is considered one of the best comedians of all time. Less formal than his Neoclassical contemporaries Corneille and Racine, Molière combined many styles into his own unique version of comedy, the tricks and flavor of Italian *commedia dell'arte*, love interests from the pastorals, elements of medieval farce and complicated plots (Roberts, 207). Molière was less concerned with the strict adherence to classical forms, instead being more of a crowd-pleaser. A good summation of his stance was found in a dramatic response to criticism over his comedy “L’ecole des Femmes,” where his characters defend him, saying even if Molière broke the rules, “the play had pleased its audience, and that is the greatest of all rules” (Carlson, 104).

Molière is important to our survey, however, because his comedies were in fact biting satires of French society. Molière’s genius even elevated the comedy to equal footing with the tragedy, something that had never occurred before – this is chiefly because he bent many of the classical rules that had been hindering the genre (Roberts, 209). He included diverse elements and characters, including those of the ruling classes and the Church – which was considered inappropriate classically. His comedies were extremely controversial and were even banned by the Church – a sure sign that he was close to the mark. Molière was careful only to target certain groups for ridicule in any

particular play, staying away from mocking King Louis XIV of course – this led him to become favored in the highly personal court of 17<sup>th</sup> century France and able to write more and more freely. Most importantly, Molière’s goal in writing his satires was to expose the truth of society with the hope of changing it – he wished to “correct men’s vices by exposing them to ridicule” (Carlson, 105). Molière’s goal was “to explode the pretensions of the world as it was with the hope that it might thereby develop into what it should be” (Roberts 207). This is a very modern outlook on the purpose of comedy – a function that had been left to tragedy up until this point. This was effective theatre, technically well executed, with a tangible purpose of social change. By showing the truth of society as it was and the power relationships that truly did exist, Molière could simultaneously criticize and entertain. Molière’s satire is powerful because it aims at the rotten factors in society, not individuals – “for Molière the task was to shed comic laughter on follies he deemed inimical to the social structure” (Nicoll, 322). This allowed him to deflect personal criticism as well as argue for change. This is a strict attempt at initiating societal dialogue and therefore a use of power – Molière was seeking to change his society using his most powerful skill.

One of Molière’s most controversial plays is *Tartuffe*. It is a comedy of religious hypocrisy involving a falsely pious, lustful man who lies and cheats his way through life. Although in the style of a comedy of manners, it can be read as a strong condemnation of religious hypocrisy (and perhaps religion itself). Orgon is a wealthy buffoon, the head of a household; Orgon has befriended a man named Tartuffe, who appears to be extremely religious and pious. Orgon’s family is not convinced by Tartuffe, who is clearly a con-artist and vagrant. All attempts to convince Orgon of the truth fail – remaining

unconvinced even after Tartuffe seduces Orgon's wife Élmire – and Tartuffe is only defeated once King Louis XIV shows up to save the day in a laughingly classical *deus ex machina* (Nicoll, 326). *Tartuffe* shows the power of religion to mask misdeeds and paints a very negative picture of the nobility who were so prominent in France at this time. As could be expected Molière angered a great many people with *Tartuffe*, including the Church, and was only protected by his connections to the King. The play was banned “for five years after its initial performance” (Roberts, 207).

*Tartuffe* is a good example of a satire because it is rooted in real life, and “like all real satirists he [Molière] was devoted to truth” (Roberts, 207). Although the characters are very much caricatures for the sake of comedy, it reflects a real problem in Molière's society. There was a large section of society that used religious devotion falsely and Molière was in fact exposing them. In addition to being a good play and an interesting examination of the power of false religiosity, *Tartuffe* was also inherently a political statement. Molière bravely challenged very entrenched interest groups in his society and lived through it. He was entrenched in politics and “the drama was an adjunct of the court” (Roberts, 209). This is a very political use of performance flourishes to this day – certainly reflected in the modern media. If one can get a large number of people laughing, they are more apt to consider the argument. The genius of Molière is proof that the format in which a message is delivered is quite important to its reception.

Molière's point of laughing at people with power is a very poignant message. Through his dramatic work, Molière points out those who have influence in his society and therefore power – including their faults and abuses. He then portrays these people as exaggerations of their true selves, making them more ridiculous and theatrical and

placing them in comical situations. The effect of this is that even though the audience realizes that they are seeing a play, and probably understand that the people being depicted are not as extreme as the playwright makes them out to be – the message is still sent. When looking at such a ludicrous and awful hypocrite as Tartuffe, one knows that he is a character. But upon leaving the theatre, the message that religious hypocrisy is particularly unsavory remains with the spectator. Upon seeing the buffoon Orgon not realize trickery when it is literally happening right under his nose, one laughs while simultaneously remembering to be on guard and to listen to the advice of friends and family. In short, Molière's comedy too argues for the legitimate use of power and communication, showing the Machiavellian Tartuffe in jail for attempting to live off of his schemes.

## **ROMANTICISM**

Following in the vein of Neoclassicism, Romanticism was a European art movement that focused on escaping reality by relishing in beauty. Romanticism developed as a response to Neoclassicism and the restrictions placed on artists, the strict adherence to form and content that was eventually rejected in favor of more artistic freedom. Romanticism developed in a time of great political turmoil in Europe, many wars were being fought and revolutions overthrowing the typical social order – “almost the whole period was marked by violent political unrest” (Roberts, 347). Art usually reacts to its environment, and theatre especially reflects the time that produces it, being a place where people interact. As a result of the terrible realities occurring at the time, the theatre through Romanticism shifted function, rather than a celebration of past times and old forms, the theatre became a safe haven, a place for new beautiful art to develop that

would insulate the spectator from the outside world. It seemed more productive to use art to explore human creativity and beauty rather than social ills. The theatre of this period was very extravagant, almost excessive. The scenery, acting styles and plots were all convoluted and embroidered – the emphasis of grandeur and illusion.<sup>3</sup>

As a social reaction Romanticism is very interesting, and in theatre it shows an interesting viewpoint – the theatre should hide rather than expose the truth. This goal goes against much of the goals of other movements we have examined; however it is often an accepted use of theatre (and other forms of entertainment) today. It seems that when a pervasive feeling of helplessness in the face of extreme political conditions exists in a society, they would rather their theatre focus on entertainment rather than tough social questions (similarly, when a pervasive feeling of social or political empowerment exists in a society, theatre flourishes). Also it could be that successful times lessen the need for deep contemplation of social ills.

As the focus of theatre of this time was escapism and entertainment, much of the dramatic literature itself is not well remembered or celebrated today in a critical sense. A good example of this fact is the tragedy *Hernani* by Victor Hugo. The play is chiefly remembered today for the social impact it had (literally a riot) than for its content, which is critically considered rather dull. Hugo saw the goals of Romanticism not to indulge in beauty or to recreate reality, but to heighten the beauty of the world as if theatre were a “concentrating mirror, which far from weakening the colored beams, gathers and concentrates them, to make a gleam a light and a light a flame” (Carlson, 206).

Hugo’s *Hernani* is a tragedy, featuring a convoluted plot of love and adventure, centering on the dashing bandit Hernani and his love for noblewoman Doña Sol. In a

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<sup>3</sup> Other theatrical forms flourished under these conditions, including the opera.



“courtly love” drama, she is chased by Hernani and two Dons (Carlos and Ruy Gomez), who fight over her. In the end, Hernani steals Doña Sol away from Don Ruy Gomez on their wedding day and they two escape together. However, due to a convoluted happening earlier in the play, Ruy Gomez sounds his horn upon chasing the two lovers, which requires Hernani to commit suicide rather than soil his honor. Doña Sol also commits suicide to be with her love. Honor remains intact and the story ends. Obviously this plot is rather unrealistic, focused on the purely theatrical (in fact it was better received in operatic form by Verdi, *Ernani*). The point here for Hugo would not seem to be to examine the relationships between nobles and society or question whether love is a dangerous emotion. Rather it seems Hugo wanted to depict an interesting and grand story that would be entertaining to watch – set in a dramatic and glorious past. This type of theatre may not have the lasting impression of Shakespeare or Molière, but it was definitely important as far as the development of theatre was concerned – as a reaction to the strict rules and Unities of Neoclassicism which Hugo rejected and wished to “demolish” (Carlson, 2006).

*Hernani* also created an incredible controversy when it premiered – Hugo’s supporters, the Romantics, literally fought Neoclassicists in the theatre in the “battle of Hernani.” The fight over theatre was very serious in France. The Romantics are considered to have won the fight, and Romanticism truly caught on after that, the focus of theatre narrowing in on eloquence, beauty and free artistic expression. As far as a representation of power, the Romantic theatre showcased the theatre’s great ability to craft new realities. When you went to a play in this time, you were not seeing the same world you did on the street. This is one of the principal powers of the theatrical, and

potentially the most useful. This concept could be used to create any situation or relationship to be explored, even political ones.

In the creating of new imagined circumstances, the spectator is allowed to drop their own personal limitations to understanding a given situation. In real life, a person might not ever know what the problems of the nobility or the very poor are, yet they can through the theatre. While it is easy to call Romanticism escapist, it might have been truly helpful for society to have this theatrical escape from the tumultuous political world. The Romantic ideal is a good representation of the broad array of uses for the theatrical and its implication as a tool rather than a self-contained entity. In this way the act of theatre can actually give someone power, rather than just examining the power inherent in another relationship. This is another attribute of the theatre which should be harnessed to examine power relationships.

## **REALISM**

Just as Romanticism emerged as a reaction to the goals of Neoclassicism, Realism emerged to reject Romanticism. The focus of Realism, as one would expect, is to display life on stage as realistically as possible. Those leaning toward Realism would argue that Romanticism was cowardly in its avoidance of the real problems and issues people faced; therefore to combat this they would display those conflicts in the theatre. Literary giants such as George Bernard Shaw would adopt realism as the true theatrical method of argument, as he said in 1907: “I write plays with the deliberate object of converting the nation to my opinions in these matters” (Carlson, 308). Shaw outlined the suffering of his realistic heroes as “no longer ‘soul-purifying convulsion of pity and horror, but reproaches, challenges, criticism addressed to society and to the spectators as a voting

constituent of society” (Carlson 309). This straightforward political goal of theatre is a tantamount development for our discussion of power – because it accepts that the theatre itself can be a useful examination of what is wrong in society and that drama should be pursued as such.

Realism is both a search for truth and a rejection of theatrical extravagance. Realism also highlighted the individual even more, seeking to find out their true motivations and characters, and was not afraid to portray the lives of the very small. If Greek tragedy is the best example of focuses on the grand, kings and Gods, Realism is a focus on the small. Power relations on a micro scale, entire plays being written about the relationships of a family – this is the change that Realism brought.

The list of great playwrights who fit under the auspices of Realism is long, but perhaps one of the most telling examples (even praised by Shaw) is Henrik Ibsen. Ibsen is often considered the “father of modern drama” for his staggering influence. As with many innovators, his work was controversial and scandalous, not fitting with the prevailing themes of grand characters and perfectly moral, cut-and-dry endings. In the plays of Ibsen, the plot and characterization deepens considerably compared to Romantic drama, the goal is truly to portray people as realistically as possible. Ibsen’s plays are more true to the title of “drama” as well, they are complex in that they are not necessarily “tragedies” per se, often ending in a more confusing grey area than a definitive resolution, for example the endings of *Ghosts* and *A Doll’s House*. Both plays end in a “cliff hanger” fashion, and there are major questions left unanswered. This is a critical point, as the plays are therefore calls for discussion, rather than a presentation of a position. Because the action has not resolved, the audience is left to debate what will (or

should) happen. This is much more interactive and provocative than seeing a well-made play, where you at least have the ending the playwright provided you, whether or not you agree with it.

*A Doll's House* is one of Ibsen's most famous plays, and is a good example of a play revolving around power relationships despite concerning the lives of a family. It principally concerns the relationship between a wife and mother, Nora, and her husband Torvald. It is called *A Doll's House* because of the revelation Nora has at the end of the play, that she has been treated as a doll her whole life, first by her father, than by her husband. She realizes this situation, rejects it, condemns Torvald and society in general, and strikes out on her own, abandoning her previous life. The climax of the play, with Nora leaving, is completely open-ended.

Despite her courage in doing something forbidden in their society and her love for him, Torvald upon learning the truth admonishes Nora for lying and claims that this is dishonoring him, berating her for being an immoral woman. Krogstad (the blackmailer) though, has relented in his treachery and there is no longer a danger to Torvald. Rather than apologizing for his behavior, Torvald instead treats Nora exactly as before, his songbird in need of defense. This return to the status quo is not meant to be, however, as Nora sees Torvald's true colors. Seeing herself as an awful mother and very confused about her identity, Nora realizes that she must find herself and be rid of Torvald. She will only leave coming back a possibility if the "greatest thing of all" was to happen, and this is unspecified (Ibsen, Gutenberg). This climax was quite revolutionary, and strongly contributes to the continuing influence of the play. Ibsen was strongly condemned for

this, and his commentary on the rigidity and flawed morality of his society was quite controversial.

The realistic way that this play is presented and the depth of emotion experienced by its characters (especially Nora) are quite striking. The actions of Torvald are both reprehensible because of his cruelty and disrespect for his wife while also clearly representing the reality of many people's lives. Ibsen effectively argues for courage when dealing with the injustice of one's society – the message being that if you find your situation or society to be repressive, you should reject or fight it rather than returning to the status quo. The very structure of the play reinforces this – the open ending allows for discussion. The play does not end in an easy way for the audience; it is more the opening of a wound than closure. Ibsen's striking of the perfect balance of certainty and uncertainty gives the conclusion of *A Doll's House* its extraordinary power.

This is Realism at its best, showing and dramatizing both the problems of society and its power structures, and then offering a different path. Ibsen is radically condemning the moral codes of his society while also rejecting the expected response (Nora giving up and being subservient). This is a good early example of the ability of theatre to offer solutions to intractable problems. Rather than watching the previously known rise and fall of a hero, we are given an almost photographic representation of real life, with all of its vagaries, uncertainty and fear. Nora is certainly afraid of what her new life will be, and she is not convinced that it will be better, but she knows that it must change. Ibsen is arguing to change and for bravery in seizing what you want. This expression of personal power is more similar to Shakespeare than Machiavelli however, because Nora is certainly not a schemer, and she did not choose fraud out of a desire for power (like

Krogstad) but out of love for her husband. Ibsen shows us that while she was punished for this behavior, it is the fault of society for doing so, and Nora was in the right all along. This is another liberal commentary on power, even in society agrees to a certain set of behaviors, it doesn't mean it is correct. *A Doll's House* is a call to question society and to trust in oneself. This is an argument for a power structure where the individual is valued independent of society's mores, which may be incorrect. Ibsen is saying that one should act against a realized injustice rather than accept it – something that meshes well with true power.

## **20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY I, THEATRE AS ABSTRACTION**

Moving into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, even Realism was seen by some as too restrictive on the artist. The confines of portraying life realistically limited particularly creative artists in the theatre. Many movements raised that rejected Realism's tenets – although arguably not Realism's goals. Surrealism, Absurdism, Dada, Expressionism – all these movements focused on portraying life in a different way than normal.<sup>4</sup> In these types of theatre often the message was more important than the content. However, often the message was extremely difficult to determine based on the techniques of performance (this was often the point). For these controversial artists, 'art' as a concept was stretched and tested – finding out just what people were willing to accept.

Coinciding with the rise of secularism, the growth of science, a lessening of religion and reality-questioning philosophies like existentialism, theatre took a very experimental turn in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Many of these developments represent a growing

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<sup>4</sup> Naturalism also developed at this time, to further portray true life on the stage, including the inner mental or emotional life, especially by the techniques of the great Konstantin Stanislavski. But the goals of Naturalism (truth on the stage, throwing off theatrical indulgences) are essentially the same as Realism and do not warrant further exploration. Realism and Naturalism continue to be practiced in the theatre strongly today.

social phenomenon of not knowing the truth – questioning the nature of reality.

Movements like Surrealism, Dada and the Theatre of the Absurd in the theatre created non-real settings and structures, returning to the idea of playing to abstractions rather than realistic people.

Theatre of the Absurd focused on reflecting the meaninglessness of modern life and man's questions about his reason for being by portraying nonsensical and confusing events on the stage (people turning into rhinoceroses, for an example of Eugene Ionesco). Absurdist literature often presents a feeling of hopelessness and abandonment that many felt in this time, for example losing the ability to communicate (Ionesco) or completely losing purpose in life (Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*) – these were in a way theatrical expressions of the writings of Albert Camus, in his *Myth of Sisyphus* (Crabb). It was the unknowable nature of existence and sense of hopeless confusion that infuses the theatre of the Absurd (Crabb). The audience is left with the desire to know the reasons for life and without a means to do it.<sup>5</sup>

For example, the characters in Ionesco live in a world we cannot understand, speaking to each other in nonsensical, illogical jabber – representing the loss of meaning in everyday language. An excellent example of this is his first play *The Bald Soprano* where there is a two page monologue of completely meaningless relationships that signals that complete departure of the play from reality – the characters cease even to relate to each other. Ionesco offers an interesting power examination - his characters are denied their basic human ability to communicate and are thus completely alone, completely powerless and unable to act in concert with others. His plays are a very raw

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<sup>5</sup> Theatre of the Absurd was also a reaction to its time – where World War II and “the resulting trauma of living under threat of nuclear annihilation put into stark perspective the essential precariousness of human life.” Crabb

and interesting way to explore this terrifying feeling of isolation. Because of the utter lack of character, true dialogue or meaningful relationships, Ionesco referred to his style as “anti-theatre” (Crabb). Perhaps it is better to say Ionesco is anti-traditional in his theatre – because his meaning of powerlessness and fear can be well transmitted by his work.

Another playwright placed in the Theatre of the Absurd is Samuel Beckett, who explored helplessness in an extremely poignant way in *Waiting for Godot*: a play “in which nothing happens” (Crabb). The characters are strange, as is their predicament. Both Estragon and Vladimir are stuck, waiting for a man named Godot along a road. Simply put, he never comes and they continue waiting, trying to occupy their time in any way possible. Somehow (a credit to his genius) Beckett makes this situation interesting and compelling. His main characters are trapped and even contemplate hanging themselves to escape the ennui and confinement of their world. However they lose the conviction even to do this, thus being denied their most basic right of ending life, are truly in the depths of powerlessness.

There are many ways to interpret *Waiting for Godot*, and the playwright himself long refused to elaborate on his text. The meaning certainly changes depending on how you read the play, but it is hard to argue with its power. The characters represent true powerlessness, through both indecision and ignorance. They do not know who Godot is, if they are in the right place, or why they must wait – they simply do not even know the rules of the world they live in. It is even implied that they are hindered in memory as well, perhaps by the supernatural rules of their environment – Vladimir often attempts to remind Estragon of the past and he seemingly cannot truly remember. They are afraid and



do not understand much (much like people in general, one could argue), so they take the “safer” route of just idling. It is implied by the structure of the play that they live in a cyclical, confined world – “The action... describes a circle. Each day is the return to the beginning” (Fowlie). Things in the world do change (such as a single leaf sprouting on the sole tree), but it is clear that we are not viewing any sort of reality we are familiar with. The world of *Godot* is quite strange and foreign, putting the spectator in the same powerless position as the protagonists. It is both a strong examination of personal relations between the characters and a warning against the modern danger of isolation without meaning. If the character Godot is read as God, it is also a very critical account of religion – casting it as a pointless endeavor that accounts to a waste of time. Perhaps Beckett is arguing for protecting your own power in the world, because his characters in their powerlessness are rather bleak and does not seem to be someone to emulate. It seems that the only thing his characters do understand is their inability to find meaning – “... in an instant all will vanish and we'll be alone once more, in the midst of nothingness” (Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, beckett.net).

The forms of 20<sup>th</sup> century theatre exemplified by Ionesco and Beckett serve to be startling examinations of the human situation in relation to the world. They use theatrical conventions to examine the helplessness and uncertainty of their age, creating stark, interesting and often disturbing abstractions of real life. Seeking to connect on an emotional and often wordless level, Absurdist theatre in particular shocked audiences and offered a poignant examination of life. The powerlessness of their characters showcases the need for meaning in life and demonstrates what happens when people do not have that meaning. In this way Absurdist and other experimental theatre movements are

experiments into a world in which people have absolutely no power. This is not a realistic depiction of life, but it almost an extrapolation into how things could develop given current circumstances at time of writing. In this way these plays serve as a warning mirrored in political literature of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – the problems associated with amorality, the dangers of unbridled scientific progress and the inhuman atrocities of war<sup>6</sup>. When faced with a changing and confusing world, theatre again reacted with its own version of the way forward. Again the theatre focused on creating alternate realities in which problems of the day could be examined and solutions invented. Obviously, the conclusions of Absurdism were much different than Romanticism – the theatre served as a way to shock and disturb people, calling attention to the ills of the time and the fear that many people experienced, rather than simply ignoring them and creating a preferable existence.

## **20<sup>th</sup> CENTURY II, THEATRE AS TOOL**

### **EPIC**

### **POST MODERNISM, AVANT-GARDE**

Another prominent development in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was theatre artists seeing the theatre as a place to enact concrete political change. Rather than going the Absurdist route of confusing or shocking the audience, some theatre movements focused on educating the audience of what was wrong in the world or literally attempting to enact change. Theatre of this time was closely tied to political ideologies and much of the effort was to spread political messages. Most of these theatrical/political messages were infused with Left or Marxism. The Epic theatre of Bertolt Brecht is a good example, using abstractions to showcase societal errors and imbalances, thus calling for political change

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<sup>6</sup> Arendt, too, commented heavily on the novel danger of modern life with her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

and restructuring of society. Similarly, the work of activist theatre practitioners and much experimental theatre was concerned with spreading knowledge and “awakening” the people to certain issues. Augusto Boal and his Theatre of the Oppressed<sup>7</sup> sought to change theatrical formats to empower the spectator and create a more communal form of theatre that would concretely and literally examine problems in a community and seek to solve them. Both Brecht and Boal were heavily influenced by Marxism and the messages therein, leading to two distinct kinds of theatre with similar goals – calling for real social action to right the wrongs of society through theatre. Similarly, American experimental theatre starting in the 1960’s exhibited close ties with the political environment. Radical theatre grew in response to the Vietnam War and developed through the work of troupes and ensembles. All in all, the political world was fusing with the theatrical, and more and more theatre was seen as a legitimate tool for political change.

Bertolt Brecht is quite famous for his plays and style of “epic theatre.” Brecht did not seek to encourage catharsis or emotional understanding like many of other playwrights – rather he preferred the audience remain separated from the characters and to understand they were viewing a play – a process which he referred to as alienation (Theatredatabase.com). The goal here is to understand and think carefully about what is happening in the play, not get embroiled in an Aristotelian emotional purge: “He didn't want his audience to feel emotions--he wanted them to think--and towards this end, he determined to destroy the theatrical illusion, and, thus, that dull trance-like state he so despised” (Theatredatabase.com). In discussing the work of Brecht, Augusto Boal would agree with this point, and equated alienation with the fear that the spectator is giving up

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<sup>7</sup> The Theatre of the Oppressed was influenced by Paolo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Milling and Ley, 169,170).

his power upon entering a normal theatre setting. “The man relinquishes his power of decision to the *image*” (Boal 113). This concern would infuse Boal’s work as well – a very concrete examination of how power exists in the form of theatre itself. As plays are examinations of power relationships, but the act of seeing a play can itself concern power. The power of the spectator is of great concern in this theatre movement, and the structure is more designed with the spectator in mind. The collaborative nature of theatre – the interaction of power between the spectator and the performer, is something that was being experimented with regularly.

Brecht had a message with each performance, an overall goal to produce understanding and a desire to change social ills – by seeing what is depicted on stage and responding to it rationally, the spectator could learn and act in the real world. The purpose of the theatre was to educate, all else was secondary. In this way, Brecht’s theatre was similar to that of the middle ages, seeking first and foremost to teach a lesson. Although Brecht and the Church both were using theatre as a means to an end, their goals could not have been more different. Clearly Brecht’s message was more liberal than the Church, seeking to inspire change rather than maintain the status quo. According to Boal “for him [Brecht], a theatrical work cannot end in repose, in equilibrium. It must, on the contrary, show the ways in which society loses equilibrium... and how to hasten the transition” (Boal, 105). For Brecht the main problem was combating social trends and forces, not individuals. People were the result of their environment in his view, not the other way around, as Boal puts it “the main clause is always an interaction of economic forces. The character *is not free* at all” (Boal, 92). So by examining the actions of particular characters, their actions and personal power, Brecht was drawing broad

conclusions about society in general. This is an important distinction which we will expand with Platonic and Foucauldian extrapolations of the individual power to societal power.

While the Epic audience is supposed to remember they are witnessing theatre, they shouldn't take it too seriously – Brecht wanted to communalize the process and make it less elitist. He is one of the first practitioners that advocated for theatre that included all levels of society (unsurprising given his Marxist leanings and communal living). Principally this was an effort to disband pretensions and give the theatre back to the people. He too believed that in order for political theatre to make a difference, it needed the support of a large group: “favorable circumstances for an epic and didactic theatre have only been found in a few places and for a short period of time” (Milling and Ley, 164). Also, Brecht's transparently “staged” feeling is a direct rejection of Realism and attempts in the theatre to reproduce reality. Epic theatre is purposefully a dialogue and intensely political. Brecht himself was a quite political person and his work reflected this – most of his plays were written in opposition to political trends or movements themselves, especially Fascism and war. One of his most famous works, *Mother Courage and Her Children* is a very good example both of his effort of detachment and alienation from the audience, as well as his political goals.

*Mother Courage and Her Children* is a play about war, written as a challenged to Fascism and Nazism – but it is set in the 30 Years War (in order to avoid being caught up with contemporary emotions). Mother Courage is the “protagonist” but she is not someone to emulate; in her portrayal Mother Courage is the opposite of a Greek tragic hero because Brecht did not want the audience to feel a connection to her. Although

dedicated to her children and trying to protect them, Courage is more concerned with making money off of the war (selling supplies). “As the war grows heated, Mother Courage finds that this profession has put her and her children in danger, but the old woman doggedly refuses to give up her wagon” (Theatredatabase). She is rather Machiavellian in that she will do anything to survive, but she is not rewarded for this behavior. In war time it is clearly not useful to have morals or virtues because it is an immoral venture – Courage demonstrates the human ability to survive in these circumstances. The price is high, however, as all three of her children are struck down one by one. She still never learns her lesson, and continues to strive for personal gain, ending up with nothing.

Mother Courage is a rather two-sided character whom it is hard to love or despise. She is used more as a means to examine the foolishness and destructive nature of war itself. *Mother Courage and Her Children* is an examination into the strange environment one is left with in a war and how you must adapt to live through it. Brecht argues for making sacrifices in order to stop war itself, the root of the problem, rather than scraping by opportunistically like Mother Courage. When considered in the context of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust, this is a poignant message – many of the atrocities which occurred did so because of people’s own self-interests and desire to “stay out of it.” Brecht clearly does not agree with this viewpoint and argues for political opposition and personal awakening to combat this thoughtlessness. In short, Brecht argues for the use of power rather than force.

Brecht’s Epic theatre is a direct attempt to examine and use power. By drawing allegorical connections to real political problems and flaws in society, Brecht is calling

for action. Again, his purpose was the opposite of the Aristotelian method – Brecht sought to forget about emotions and appeal to the intellects of the audience and show them what they need to do.

Augusto Boal would come to many of the same conclusions about the purpose of theatre as Brecht – it must serve to enlighten the populace, show the reality of their situation, and convince them to act in their own interests. They differ principally in their execution, as Boal moved into different experimental areas than Brecht. Similar to the Brechtian focus, Boal’s chief interest is destroying what he sees as the arbitrary distinction between audience and performer. He claims in his “poetics” in *Theatre of the Oppressed* that the roots of theatre in the dithyrambic chorus represented man at his most free and powerful (Boal, 119). Working together in concert and expressing the needs of the whole, theatre was a perfect outgrowth of community. According to Boal, this communal perfection was lost upon the installation of Aristotelian theories of theatre, especially catharsis and hamartia - which he calls the “Coercive System of Tragedy” (Boal, xiv).

In Boal’s reading of Aristotle, catharsis and empathy for the tragic hero are purely repressive functions:

“*empathy* is the emotional relationship which is established between the character and spectator and which provokes, fundamentally, a delegation of power on the part of the spectator, who becomes an object in relation to the character: whatever happens to the latter, happens vicariously to the spectator.” (Boal, 102).

Because the tragic hero is doomed through hamartia to be destroyed, we are doomed as well. The distinction is that for Boal hamartia represented not a tragic mistake, but that which makes an individual different from society – the clash of hamartia versus the

“perfect social ethos” of society, the individual versus the mass (Boal, 41). By watching the character (imbued with our power) with this “flaw” get destroyed, we are warned of what happens to those who do not fit society’s norms.

Read in this light (which may or may not be a correct reading of Aristotle), the system does seem coercive, forcing unnatural homogeneity and restricting individuality. From Aristotle’s system, Boal examines Machiavelli and Shakespeare under the title of the “poetics of virtù” and praxis (roughly summarized as skill and hard work), which involve the individual living by his just deserts rather than fate (Boal, 61). Boal confusingly characterizes these traits (and playwrights) as bourgeois. Finally Boal examines Brecht who he is obviously more sympathetic to for shared Marxist ideals.

For whatever flaws may be present in Boal’s theory, his practice is much more important. Indeed his fourth, functional chapter, entitled “Poetics of the Oppressed” remains “one of the most important documents in the theatrical theory of the later twentieth century” (Milling and Ley, 164). Boal focused on many experimental forms of theatre and games/exercises, mostly concerning performer/audience integration (Boal, 126). The main and most famous form developed by Boal is forum theatre, where a play is presented and audience members can stop the action, offer suggestions to solve problems, and take the place of the actors at any time (Boal, 131-142). Obviously this is quite radical in the theatre world. This included “simultaneous dramaturgy” where the real needs of the community would be dramatized by the group itself and acted out. Boal even advocated more radical forms of theatre: legislative theatre (which he tried while in public office) where the legislators pose questions to their constituents through theatrical representation looking for preferred solutions and invisible theatre, where groups (a



Marxist vanguard?) would clandestinely perform a scene in public, pretending that it is real and drawing in new participants, never admitting it is staged (which even lead to problems with authorities). Much of Boal's lasting influence is in his workshop work and "games" for actors, where the format of participation and communal exploration is easier to tap into, avoiding the strict nature of a play. With this in mind Boal's techniques would speak directly to his participants, through their own issues and problems being explored. He believed this would be more effective than taking a third party message and applying it to the real situation – his original work failed because of this assumption, and he "resolved never again to write 'plays that give advice' or to send 'messages'" (Milling and Ley, 167)<sup>8</sup>.

The purpose of all these exercises and experiments in the theatre was to act politically. Rather than being simply an exercise examining power relationships, it is also a power experimentation, with the intent real usage. Boal's theatre is very much a laboratory in this way, attempting to train people in the potential for real political change in their communities by practicing it theatrically first. This represents a very strong possibility for the use of theatre politically, using the freedom of imagined circumstances; any social or political situation can be acted out, examined, commented upon and learned from.<sup>9</sup> By using this format, Boal's students were actively participating in a political action and could definitely apply it to the outside world. Again we see the theatre being used didactically, but teaching people how to think for themselves and not a preconceived message – this multiplies the opportunity for an effective political change.

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<sup>8</sup> This problem was faced by many experimental and didactic theatre groups, especially in the United States, see Jan Cohen-Cruz, "Motion of the Ocean: The Shifting Face of U.S. Theater for Social Change since the 1960s."

<sup>9</sup> As we will see, this fits into the concept of Stoic "melete" identified by Michel Foucault.

Furthermore, the Theatre of the Oppressed teaches people real lessons in changing their social situation and getting more out of their political system – it is essentially a political training-camp. Clearly as the focus is obviously one those without power, this is inherently a political and rather subversive art form. This behavior led to Boal being arrested and eventually exiled from his native Brazil, forced to spread his teachings in the less radical North America. The techniques and theories of Boal retain their influence today, and have been applied in a broad range of ways from therapy (internal struggle for power) to community outreach (dealing with the problems of homelessness by creating an Oppressed company of homeless actors, the Cardboard Citizens in the UK). There is even an international organization, which supports groups practicing the techniques of Theatre of the Oppressed<sup>10</sup>.

Similar to the politically active dramatic community in South America of Boal, Vietnam-era American theatre was increasingly political and experimental as well. With a strong popular movement with something to oppose, radical theatre flourished. Most activity happened in the form of communes and small troupes working collaboratively. Famous examples (many existing today) include the Open Theatre, the Living Theatre, the San Francisco Mime Troupe and the Bread and Puppet Theatre. Like Theatre of the Oppressed, these groups are more important for their performances and theories than for the work they published. These radical ensembles were concerned with “what impact it [their work] had on the culture at large” as well as artistic quality (Sainer, 5). It was this “impact on the culture” that determined whether or not a group was successful in its mission. As Jan Cohen-Cruz puts it:

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.theatreoftheoppressed.org/en/index.php?useFlash=1>

“Efficacy depends on a favorable constellation of unstable elements: people already engaged or engageable with specific issues, aesthetic strategies that are compelling to desired audiences, strong alliances with political or community organizations, sufficient material support, and synchronicity with the energy of the times. If any of these factors weakens or alters, a progressive, political theater project must reinvent itself.” Jan Cohen-Cruz, “Motion of the Ocean...”

The Bread and Puppet Theatre, for example, is a non-profit group started in 1962, in response to US foreign policy and the war in Vietnam (Breadandpuppet.org). They focused on puppets and street theatre (demonstrations). Bread and Puppet started as a theatre in New York, lead by Peter Schumann – which eventually moved to Northern Vermont and began to produce plays for the general public at which bread was supplied. Their work to this day focuses on creating giant puppets and writing plays – often appearing at political protests in strength. Bread and Puppet also teach workshops, focusing on:

“1) how to launch precision attacks on war and capitalist megalomania  
2) how to get the quickest, cheapest response to horrifically expensive dilemmas  
3) how to make cardboard politicians, picture stories (cantastoria), hand puppets, and giants for rallies, parades, etc..  
If you are interested, please feel free to contact us and we will try to come to your group with a subversive lesson or two.” Breadandpuppet.org

Groups like Bread and Puppet developed out of a desire to involve ordinary people and empower them with the ability of theatre – which should be as native to the “everyman” as food (breadandpuppet.org).

Another group from the time, The San Francisco Mime Troupe, (they do not perform mime) is similar in that all their plays are political. Focusing on using the human body and nonverbal ways to express their views, they group always “tended toward radical politics” and considered itself an “art and propaganda team” (Sainer, 29). Their official statement reads:

“We are satirists, seeking to make you laugh at the absurdities of contemporary life and at the same time, see their causes... We perform everywhere from public parks to palaces of culture, aiming to reach the broadest possible audience.... The SFMT delights in savaging the norms of mainstream American theater, with its naturalistic values, its emphasis on personal (or at most family) psychology, its settings confined to living rooms and patios. We admire the depths reached by 20th-century realism, but we also think it sanctions social inaction. Our characters are individuals but they are also members of social classes: conscious or unconscious participants in the unending wars over land and power and wealth which drive human history.” SFMT.org

This populist satirism harkens back to the comedic goals of Molière, in exposing the wrongs of society through laughter. The SFMT seeks to inspire social change in as many people as it can – like Bread and Puppet focusing on spreading politically “subversive” or radical messages to what they consider the socially-inactive public. Both of these companies are great examples of the strong American activist theatre movement which invigorated the scene starting in the 1960’s and the political changes they sought. Like Brecht or Boal, their goals collectively were to stir things up and call the actions of the powerful into question. This is definitely one of the most effective possibilities of the theatre in politics – examining the actions of the powerful and the possible actions of the citizen. Such political theatre groups show that theatre is an effective way to offer to fellow-citizens what a better solution could be – if the strong presence and attendance of companies like B&P and SFMT are any indication. In short, theatre is a very effective way to conduct dialogue and discuss society’s perceived ills. Nowhere does this make more sense than in a democracy, which is supposed to function on discussion and plurality.

The various formats of theatre offer differing degrees of interaction between those deemed participants or performers and those deemed spectators. Even a completely traditional play presented to a non-participating audience can be overtly political or

useful in its reflection of power. Whether in the allegorical sense with Epic theatre or Romanticism, the obtuse reflections of Absurdism, the photographic representation of Realism or Naturalism or the direct discussion in avant-garde theatre – the possibility is there. This involves the spectator to actor relationship. As Arthur Sainer put it: “the spectator always participates, the play is in part dependent on his perception of it,” Sainer further elaborates with a familiar example - ‘each [*King Lear*] *Lear* is a real *Lear*... the reality of *Lear* as experience, in other words as a total Idea, is different for each spectator. There are, in fact, as many *Lears* as spectators watching it” (Sainer, 69). We have examined this idea before in our definition of art – the audience is always a consideration or else the artist would not have bothered to share the work.

Depending on one’s own artistic or stylistic inclinations, the different genres developed by theatrical movements can offer a wide range of options, certain arguments about power would be better suited to certain theatrical forms no doubt; a Leftist position would be better supported by avant-garde theatre, while a conservative argument might be better presented by a classical tragedy. What must be considered is the intent of the performers and what message they want to portray. Again, when creating political theatre there must be some sort of goal in mind.

Unlike other means of expression or other art forms, theatre is unique in its ability to directly identify power relationships and comment on them. Usually when someone views a painting, the message of the artist is more easily lost than when someone watches a play. For example if we take an imaginary situation, say a father’s domineering control over his daughter – it might be more accessibly displayed in the form of a play where one can watch the interactions between father and daughter rather than a more abstract

painting. Obviously this is not always the case and should not be an argument against other arts – it is merely meant to demonstrate the ease with which theatre can be used to examine relationships between individuals. Theatre is also better suited for this purpose of power examination than the other performing arts (television, film) because it happens in person, in real time. The intangible connection between performer and audience member (and performer to performer) reinforces the possibility of both parties taking something away from the performance and potentially learning something about themselves or their life. This is useful because it ensures that during an effective performance everyone involved is getting something out of it or learning from it – it is more of a dialogue than other “pre-packaged” art forms because it happens differently every time it is performed (another parallel to the argument that collaborative theatre has a truer message than pre-packaged theatre for its audience).

This argument, of course, is reminiscent of Plato’s condemnation of the written word when compared to conversation because once you’ve written something down it is permanent and immovable–

“writing is unfortunately like painting; for the creations of the painter have the attitude of life, and yet if you ask them a question they preserve a solemn silence... And when they have been once written down they are tumbled about anywhere among those who may or may not understand them, and know not to whom they should reply, to whom not: and, if they are maltreated or abused, they have no parent to protect them; and they cannot protect or defend themselves.” Plato, *Phaedrus*.

As Plato indicates, one cannot have a real dialogue with a painting or sculpture because the act of creation has ceased, it will never be more than it is. It is up to the spectator to change their interpretation or the artist to create more pieces to represent their changing viewpoint. In contrast, a play can be performed ad infinitum and each time it can be performed differently, highlighting different aspects of the story, set in a different

time period, etc. Also, because it is a live performance with an audience that changes every night, the connection between performer and spectator is different every time the play is performed. Additionally, in the more experimental theatre, the viewer of the art may participate in its creation and know what they meant and felt – or be in direct contact with the audience. This variability represents the true versatility of theatre as an art form and gives an insight into why this art form is useful to examine power.

The broadest theatrical convention, performer presenting material to an audience, is indicative of the possibility for dialogue. This is truly a representation of power, it is a concentrated effort of the artist to communicate their thoughts and ideas about a subject to a listener and convince them of the artist's point of view. This discussion is the most basic of power interactions. Add to that the fictional component of drama and its ability to represent any reality or unreality, any conceivable situation – and it is clear that the theatre can be a place for an infinite different conversations.

As a permanent fixture, a theatre can examine an infinite amount of different situations and power relationships – reacting to the need of its community to discuss whatever might come up. The adaptability of the theatre is one of its selling points and can be utilized to reflect the questions of the people it serves. The theatre is simply useful; an applied art rather than stuck on a pedestal. The critical questions of who has power in society, what they are doing with it and whether or not this is ideal can be answered by theatrical means. And the best thing about this truth is that the answers a community develops will be its own, there can be no stock answer or standardized message if the theatre is done freely and the situations and relationships examined are of true interest to the audience. Simply put, there is no way that this kind of examination and

dialogue, this form of power interaction in society, cannot be useful to any given community. Using the different techniques and conclusions developed out of the prominent theatrical movements throughout history, today's theatre is well equipped to examine questions of power and can be a useful institution for any democratic society.



## CHAPTER 2

### Plato's State/Soul connection and Foucault's Governmentality as Illuminations of Power

To continue our exploration of how the theatre is useful for examining power relationships, I wish to explore Plato's idea of the connection between the city/state<sup>11</sup> and the soul from *The Republic* and also Michel Foucault's concepts of governmentality, "melete". These concepts will help us expand upon several key ideas: theatre being useful to identifying and applying power relationships; plays simplifying complex power questions through unreal circumstances; the importance of the audience in the art of theatre; and theatre as a thought-experiment in power.

Both Plato and Foucault develop arguments which center around the parallels between the personal and political – the ways the self is governed internally mirroring the way a state is governed – the techniques of one spilling to the other. When taken with the previously introduced idea that through the examination of personal relationships theatre can be used to explore questions of power – the potential for finding political usage out of personal examination is clear. This is a critical idea behind my thesis, as I am showing how the theatre can be used as a tool – finding power relationships between individuals (characters) and extrapolating them to explore questions pertaining to society, with the goal of coming to conclusions about power that lead to action and discussion. Also the concepts of Plato and Foucault will help further illustrate the messages to be taken from theatre being expanded because of the input of the audience. Within the overall context of my thesis, this examination of Plato and Foucault will help refine the ways that the

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<sup>11</sup> For ease of terminology I shall refer to this as "the state" from this point on. Although he uses the word "city," a modern conception of Plato implies that this could mean state, country or government, and it is in this context that I am using the term.

personal can be expanded to the political and vice versa – focusing our exploration of theatrical movements as a way to examine real political issues.

In the *Republic*, Plato then draws a parallel between the personal (soul) and the political (state), as well as explicitly arguing for a certain power arrangement. The purpose of Plato's society is to perpetuate the virtue of justice – which Plato shows can be something that an individual or a state possesses (Plato, 368e). Plato comes to the conclusion that there are different kinds of soul just as there are different kinds of state (a democratic soul, a tyrannical state, etc) (Plato, 445d) – a system of classification that is useful for its similarities to the different arguments of power relationships that are presented by different theatrical movements (a state based on the power arrangements of Greek tragedy would be different from one based on Boal). Foucault also allows for different “regimes” or techniques of power to describe governmentality – the methods of self-governance and state governance being stemming from the same power (Lemke, 11). Foucault also introduces the critical concept of “*melete*” or meditation – which is quite useful when considering a theatrical performance as an intellectual and political experiment.

These concepts will help expand upon the idea that theatre as power examination. With this in mind, one can expand the lessons learned about a particular power relationship in a play to a broader message of how people interact in general. This is similar to theatrical movements where the character was viewed as an abstraction (middle ages, Brecht) more than an individual – it is the message or relationship behind the character that the audience is meant to be interested in<sup>12</sup>. This can be applied as a reading

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<sup>12</sup> As opposed to a Realist or Naturalist piece which may just seek to create an interesting representation of a realistic individual.

of any play. For example, when examining the relationship between Lear and Cordelia in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, the observer (or reader) is seeing both a father/daughter relationship and a king/successor relationship. The same actions propel both the familial drama and the political examination forward; the same plot reveals different expressions of power. We see a family tragedy and also political message – Lear's other daughters use fraud to influence him in order to get their virtuous sister banished and inherit his kingdom. This potential for layering of different messages and explorations makes a theatrical performance quite useful in sharing with the audience a statement on power – again “one must look to the result” and see who is rewarded and who is punished with the finale (Machiavelli, *Mandragola*, in Pennington).

Plato and Foucault's systematic classifications are different ways of describing the same things - techniques of power and guidelines of governance. Both *The Republic* and “Governmentality” examine different types of power arrangement, looking for the best or most efficient – for Plato it is the good and virtuous aristocratic city/state with a philosopher at the head (Plato, 473d); for Foucault it is a regime of power that has “population...as the ultimate end of government” (Foucault, 100). Since both thinkers pointedly argue for different sets of practices of power, the leap to different theatrical movements being different sets of power practices follows, as different theatre artists are also arguing for certain power practices or arrangements. Just as Plato outlined the differences between a democracy and an oligarchy (one being rule by love of freedom and the other by love of money), we can examine the differences in Aristotelian drama and Romanticist drama (one means to purge emotions, one means to create a preferable

reality). It is the question of the goal or intent that is critical to each argument. The goal of a theatrical movement mirrors that of the purpose of a state.

Also critical to our examination of these concepts is the connection *between* the self and the state which both authors examine. They both offer regimes by which power is expanded from the self to the state. For Foucault it is governmentality: “the contact between the technologies of domination of others and those of the self;” the contact between classical power from outside the individual and internal power struggle within (Foucault, TS, 19). Plato actually describes the ideal state as functioning as a body – the distinct classes working together promotes virtuous “health and beauty” while “vice will be a disease, deformity and sickness” (Plato 444e). Plato uses this metaphor extensively to illustrate his belief that the state must function a certain way to be healthy and just. Foucault, even though he does not mirror this exactitude for an ideal state would admit that certain regimes of governmentality and practices of governance are more effective than others (principally using economy to rule rather than violence). The focus of both of these commentaries is the functioning of society, both assume a power interaction between the ruler and the governed, and they each outline the ways in which this relationship should occur. By examining these specific techniques, it will be easier to frame theatrical movements as distinct “regimes” of power. The connection between the ruler and the governed can be compared to the connection between the character and their environment in a play.

Plato and Foucault both provide us with their own comments on power, including a description of it should be exercised or arranged. Combined with the persuasion/action-oriented power of Arendt – we will be left with a more in depth version of power to look

for in theatrical representation. Once this groundwork has been laid, I will be able to outline which theatrical regimes could be combined to create a theatre that serves specifically to examine power relations and improve political dialogue.

## **PLATO**

*The Republic* is a critical work of Plato that describes his ideal state, the perfect composition that would create a just and harmonious society. In doing so, Plato goes through many non-ideal versions of the state and non-ideal versions of the soul – (Plato, Book VIII). Plato’s ideal power arrangement is philosophical monarchy/aristocracy which emphasizes justice and harmony – “justice was excellence of the soul and... injustice was vice or defect of the soul” (Plato, 353e). Plato specifically helps our discussion because in his examination of the ideal power arrangement, he draws a parallel between the personal (soul) and the political (states or political regimes).

When reading Plato’s description of his ideal state, the power relationships are very clear. In the end, he comes up with an extremely specialized and segmented society ruled by an aristocracy (Plato, 444d). Plato’s state is separated into the Guardians and the People. The Guardians (Rulers and Soldiers) are on top, lead by wise and just philosopher-king responsible for making decisions, with the extensions of his authority, defenders of the city and laws, the Soldiers. On the bottom are the People, who chiefly produce for the society and exercise moderation – in fact focusing on being lead and doing what their leaders say. In Plato’s mind, this is a harmonious society that is working towards the same goals; it is just and will end suffering (Plato, 473d). He doesn’t see a problem with this specialization and concrete class system – he simply thinks that this is

the best way for all the disparate parts that must form a state to work together (and there is no other reason for a state to exist other than working together).

In fact for Plato, what he deems harmony mirrors a person's health – when all the parts are working correctly, the person is not sick. For Plato, conflict between any levels of society weakens the system and causes literal disease. A state where this balance is out of synch is no longer just; much like a body living with failing organs is no longer healthy. Thus the individual is a smaller microcosm of a state, and vice versa. In fact, the ability to be a certain class seems to be determined by your own mental/spiritual makeup (Plato, Book III). This is where the parallels to the personal come in. Rulers must possess the power of thinking, the quality of wisdom – it is their purpose to make wise decisions and lead the state in the right direction. The Soldiers must have the virtue of courage, acting in the best interests of the government and fighting enemies without regard to personal risk, action that is associated with the thought-process of willing. The People are set to exercise self-control and moderation, they have wants and desires of course, but they should be subordinate to the needs of society as a whole – this is associated with feeling.

Thinking, willing and feeling are all components of an individual's decisions and thoughts as well. By creating his segments of the perfect society, Plato is also arguing for a strict balance between thinking, willing and feeling within a person. He is a proponent of moderation, and by balancing these three activities an individual can lead a stable and thoughtful life. The critical balance must be found in both society and individual health – it is thus the interaction of different disparate elements that creates the perfect being. This moderation is reflected throughout all the levels of his society – in fact it is the bond that

ties the state together. Plato does not deny that people have wants or pretend that personal gain is not a motivation. However he separates these lesser goals from his ideal state – saying that the whole reason that people band together in the first place is for common good and working together, not for personal gain.

Plato's power arrangement is somewhat familiar to the Arendtian model of power we have been using. First of all, the focus of society is a positive one: cooperation and acting in concert. Also this system of government includes a component of persuasion – convincing all members of society that they have an important role to fill and equally benefiting everyone. However for Plato this is the “noble lie” which avoids telling the governed they are governed because they are inferior (Plato, 415d). Arendtian power (and therefore my definition of power) does not include this ranking of citizens some superior to others. Because Plato decided to draw direct connections to types of soul and regimes of government, it follows logically that some people will be better than others like some forms of government are better than others: “the person who resembles aristocracy... is good and just” (Plato, 545a).

Regardless of these problems, this idea that there should be a specific and codified power sharing relationship in order to make society more efficient is a useful one. As we have already seen, theatrical pieces often espouse one type of power over another – Platonically unjust (selfish) actions, such as Macbeth usurping power, are punished – and it is interesting to see how the personal actions of these characters reflect deeper assumptions about the nature of power in society.

To take a previously explored character and play, Callimaco from Machiavelli's *Mandragola* (the young liar who seeks to bed the married Lucrezia), we can see how

personal behavior (and use of power) reflects a political outlook. Callimaco very much reflects Thrasymachus the sophist from *The Republic* or *The Prince*. Callimaco is an educated and intelligent young man, imbued with Platonic qualities of wisdom. He is, however, unaffected by Platonic conceptions of justice – for him, justice and the harmonious well-being of society are pretty useless. He, like Thrasymachus, realizes that injustice is far more rewarding personally than living justly or virtuously. He sees what he wants, he disregards the societal barriers erected to keep it from him, and he does everything in his power to take Lucrezia. In a way, his “justice” is that each man should get what he deserves, based on his personal skill and merit. Callimaco, Ligurio the political leech and Timoteo the corrupt friar are all social climbers who believe in their own power.

For Plato these characters would be somewhere between timocracy and plutocracy (Plato, Book VIII) – they act in a pseudo-meritocratic function (Boal’s virtù), because they have the means to take what they want they do it, regardless of negative effects on others or on society. This also falls into Plato’s warnings of the dangers of democracy – if the People get fed up with the way the government looks out for itself, they will seek a “demagogue” who represents their interests at the expense of society. Their love of freedom overwhelms all, and the “tyranny of the majority” is instituted. In this case people like Callimaco have no one to answer to, and the leaders of society are replaced by those who will allow this to continue, eventually spiraling towards tyranny when that elected demagogue becomes corrupted by power.

*Mandragola* can be examined as an interesting viewpoint on Machiavelli’s society, an argument for personal power and initiative at the expense of others, or a



warning against personal greed leading to a lawless and unjust society. It is a good example of the potential of a piece of theatre carrying multiple meanings and serving to teach its audience lessons about power and a good example of applying the Platonic practice of drawing parallels between a type of soul and regime of government.

Additionally the potential for theatre being a useful examination of power is that the lesson gained by the audience quite depends on their own outlook (this concept itself is very empowering personally as well). To demonstrate the ability of theatre to serve as a useful interpretation of power relationships, let us create a hypothetical performance situation. Let us say that *Mandragola* is performed the same way three times to three very different audiences. The performance is done in the style of Realism, so that the focus is on a realistic interaction between characters and setting, and each actor seeks to further the goals of his character in each particular scene.

When viewing the scene where Callimaco and Ligurio bribe Friar Timoteo – attempting to use his greed to get him to lie to Lucrezia, abusing his religious authority by convincing her that sleeping with Callimaco is not a sin because it is “to help her husband,” each of our three different audiences will react differently. The scene is acted the same way three times, but the results of this power examination between three imaginary people in an imaginary circumstance might produce three different lessons altogether. If the audience is full of Machiavellian-leaning political scientists, they might see the scene as a comical rendition of the common reality of justice or religion being subordinate to the almighty dollar and have their own beliefs about the realities of power confirmed. If the same scene was performed the same way to an audience full of Catholic priests, they might take great offense and see that play as a personal attack on their way

of life – the claim that the clergy are hypocritical might instill in them a desire to defend their church. The same scene performed the same way for a group of the general American public might be seen just as humorous entertainment, with no greater message implied and attempts to read into the story useless applications of morals to a piece of theatre. The point here is that the result of an examination of power through theatre relies also on the audience. In a similar way that Plato likens the political soul to the political state, we might draw a parallel between the interpretation of power present in a theatrical performance and the mindset of the audience. Theatre as an experiment with power is so much more interesting because of this individual versus group dynamic. This extrapolation of Plato helps to illuminate why the factor of live performance is so critical to theatre being a useful tool. By expanding from the most basic power relation (two characters conversing) outward, much like Plato expands from the components of the soul to the components of the state, we can see the true potentiality of theatre as political tool and the lessons of power to be gained.

Similar to the lessons learned by applying Plato's state/soul connection to our exploration of power in theatre, the principles of Michel Foucault should be useful as well. The ability to apply lessons learned from examinations of individual traits and behaviors in a political sense is continued, expanded and fortified by Foucault with governmentality and the technologies of the self.

## **FOUCAULT**

### **GOVERNMENTALITY**

Michel Foucault refers to power in a different way than Plato's, but there are similarities. Foucault is also looking for a way to differentiate his conceptions of power

from the classical model. Unsatisfied with previous definitions, he attempts to examine government and power in a very broad and encompassing fashion. In his lectures and works<sup>13</sup> Foucault explores the idea of “the art of government” which entails: “How to govern oneself, how to be governed, how to govern others, by whom the people will accept being governed, how to become the best possible governor...” (Foucault, Governmentality, 87). All these concepts were included in this umbrella term of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and Foucault seeks to re-establish this idea with governmentality – the ways in which we govern ourselves and the ways in which we govern others. Foucault describes governmentality as the “ways,” the rules of behavior that shape the conduct and actions of certain groups to certain ends. It is his own function of power – and broadly he is studying the way that people govern and are governed – how power is used in a relationship to produce concrete results. By using this complex definition, Foucault is attempting to create generalized system examining governance and rules of conduct – focusing on the relationships between entities (the interaction of the technologies of power and the self) rather than pretending power is a quantifiable object or a virtue that one possesses in a classical sense (Foucault, 18). The overall structure of power, the relationship between those with the means of power and those governed – especially the rules by which they interact – this is governmentality. In fact the most modern form of power, the state, is just another function of governmentality, through “the practices of government” (Lemke, 11).

When used in a context of real interaction, governmentality takes on a more specific tone. Foucault’s government is power interactions – rather than the end of government being to maintain itself or collect power for the sovereign, the end of

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<sup>13</sup> I will principally be examining his lecture “Governmentality” and his essay “Technologies of the Self.”

government is the “population” (Foucault, *Governmentality*, 100). This is similar to Plato’s dismissal of tyranny as unjust because it focuses on gathering power for one person or group – rather than using power as a means to an end. For Foucault, modern government seeks to affect its population and change their lives (hopefully for the better although he does not make many value claims like this), using power as only a tool.

The state itself directly uses its power on the population, making decisions and creating policies that directly influence the lives of its citizens. This is different from a classical idea of Power (and more similar to the Arendtian version that I have been using up until this point or my definition of ‘politics’). In critiquing earlier conceptions of power relationships (mainly that idea that power originates from territory controlled) Foucault introduces his definition of government:

“One governs things... The things with which in this sense government is to be concerned are in fact men, but men in their relations, their links, their imbrication with those other things which are wealth, resources, means of subsistence, the territory with its specific qualities, climate, irrigation, fertility, etc” (Foucault, *Governmentality*, 93).

When coupled with the previous idea that power is people cooperating and Acting in concert, governmentality helps to expand our definition. I’ve already defined power as people acting together towards an end, making decisions and using persuasion – working collaboratively with a focus on creation. With governmentality, power also covers the interaction of governments, leaders and the governed - by forms and techniques of social control. The lives of the governed are changed by the actions of the government.<sup>14</sup> This broad conception of power is helpful because with it we can trace power from the

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<sup>14</sup> By including governmentality I am not allowing for actions that would not be legitimate under the Arendtian definition of power be legitimate. For example, a set of repressive or coercive practices with their “end the population” are not suddenly legitimate because I’m including governmentality. Therefore a regime of governmentality can still be an illegitimate use of power in my conception.

interactions of people (or characters on the stage) to the realities of governments and police enforcing laws on the lives of citizens. We therefore can see power in all of its different incarnations and how broad a definition we are working with. With this in mind, Plato's insights on the politics of the soul and Foucault's identification of different regimes of governmentality and types of political soul are useful because they pare down a broad concept into manageable applications. In a similar vein, plays are useful as political examinations and experimentations because through the use of an artificial circumstance they simplify complicated political realities in a format that is easier to gain knowledge from. In this way, plays are in fact reflections of regimes of governmentality, in that they are (as previously stated) arguments for specific power arrangements.

The goal of a particular play, the message about power that it teaches, can be reflected as different regimes of governmentality by looking to codify the practices therein. "Regimes" of governmentality simply refers to sets of techniques which "determine the conduct of individuals" and "permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls" (Foucault, *Technologies*, 18). Again we can see the parallels to Plato and the state/soul.

To take another previous example, Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, we have identified the relations of power between Nora and Torvald, Nora and Krogstad, Krogstad and Torvald, etc. We have seen how Nora's leaving was a radical step forward in the characters' life as well as a shocking critique of society. But the message of *A Doll's House* can and has been expanded and taken as the first feminist play. This interpretation of the plot, that Nora would no longer take being treated as a non-person and sought to find her identity

no matter how disruptive this behavior was to her family or society, is a popular one. This interpretation lends itself to the idea of a regime of governmentality quite well; the audience is able to see both Nora's strong reaction to her condescending husband, her reaction of her social situation, and her internal struggle between a strong will and desire to save her family – all personal or individual characteristics. But the audience is also seeing a woman's struggle in Ibsen's society, how damaging societal prejudices can be to people's lives, and also how difficult the situations like blackmail in a society so concerned with propriety.

When attempting to identify a regime of governmentality in Ibsen's play, it is most useful to examine the motivations of Nora, as she is the principal character and the most detailed. She has spent all of her life doing what she was told and living happily as a "songbird." Nora apparently does not spend a lot of time on self reflection, just leading her life. Her attempt to save Torvald from shame by borrowing money is the principal change in her life, she was driven by desperation to do something out of the ordinary in her society (this would be a good example of Boal's concept of individual versus the "perfect social ethos"). This fits into Foucault's examination of the connection between self-knowledge and self-care in *Technologies of the Self*. Nora may not have much self-knowledge (through neglect or lack of opportunity), but she is willing to do what she thinks is right regardless of environmental pressures, Nora is seeking to "to be concerned with" herself (Foucault, *Technologies*, 19). She realizes that she should borrow the money from Krogstad rather than let her family be torn apart by shame. This is an act of courage and an exercise of power for which the audience must respect her for. The repercussions of this action, even though we only hear about it happening through

dialogue, are what propel the entire piece. Everything is torn upside down when Krogstad, upon threat of being fired by her husband, blackmails Nora into attempting to influence Torvald. Krogstad is doing a very pragmatic and destructive thing, coercing Nora and clearly not acting legitimately, his is not a use of true power but mere coercion. Nora is truly torn, it is difficult because all of her options (telling Torvald about the blackmail and facing his anger, letting Krogstad tell Torvald, or compromising her morals by lying to Torvald again to save the treacherous Krogstad), are equally poor. She is caught between self-introspection and action. She chooses to exercise her power and readies for the consequences (one can be reminded of Antigone). All of this debate and confusion is for naught, as Torvald finds Krogstad's letter and explodes upon his wife, precipitating the previously discussed finale.

There is a lot going on here and the regime of governmentality is most clearly expressed as the ways in which power is exchanged within the system as a whole. It is perhaps useful to break down the interactions of *A Doll's House* with Foucault's other important concept, the "technologies of practical reason" such as production, sign systems, power and self (Foucault 18). We should be particularly interested in the technologies of the self and the technologies of power – because it is the interaction of these two spheres that Foucault deems governmentality. The technologies of power are defined as: determining "the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination, and objectivizing of subject" (Foucault 18). This idea of domination is quite important, as we can view it as outside forces (principally society) using power to dominate an individual. The word "domination" is important for our study, because it does not imply dialogue or free flow of ideas but force or coercion – the opposite of true

Arendtian power. When examining the events and characters in *A Doll's House* it is the interaction between the technologies of power represented by society, the coercion of Krogstad and the domination of Nora by the male figures in her life – versus the revelation of self-knowledge that Nora experiences at the end of the play.

Nora is definitely experiencing a violent period of self-knowledge – becoming suddenly aware of her real situation. Nora's experience can be viewed under the lens of Foucauldian technologies of the self – especially the connection between self-knowledge and self-care. Once she has seen her marriage for the one-sided, disrespectful thing that it is, she cannot help but look after herself at the expense of her family. Nora's actions definitely fit under Foucault's definition, which “permit individuals to effect by their own means... a certain number of operations... so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness” (Foucault 18). Nora is literally “looking after” herself through her own self-knowledge, something with which Foucault would approve. And so far as *A Doll's House* is a story of a dynamic enlightenment (with all the pain and danger that true enlightenment can bring), Nora's empowerment comes only through her new found self-knowledge. In this example we can see yet another way of expressing power – through knowledge of the self and situation.

Finally Foucault gives us a crucial tool in *Technologies of the Self*, from his examination of Seneca and the Stoics. In his interest with self-knowledge and self-care, Foucault comes across the concept of askesis, defined as “the progressive consideration of self, or mastery over oneself, obtained not through renunciation of reality but through the acquisition and assimilation of truth” (Foucault 35). The Stoics were in a way expanding the ability of the technologies of the self to actually propel one forward; the



more inner truth the better the soul. The principal component of askesis is a sort of “thought-experiment” like those of Einstein, but of a philosophical type. The two types of experiment or exercise are *melete* and *gymnasia*. Both of these (especially *melete*) are quite important when thinking about the possibilities of using the power examination aspect of theatrical performance to lead to real life results. When framing a play in terms of these Stoic techniques, the possibilities for increased knowledge of self and increased power are quite compelling.

*Melete* is translated by Foucault as meditation, “imagining the articulation of possible events to test how you would react” (Foucault, *Technologies*, 36). This was principally a rhetorical strategy, used to test principles and arguments by applying them to various situations in order to train oneself for debate. This philosophical meditation is no doubt useful in preparing arguments and seeing potential applications of theory, but also testing oneself and preparing for the real event (the debate). It is interesting to think of the end of this exercise, the internal dialogue one is having in this imagined circumstance is helping to prepare one *in actuality* for a real circumstance. When a theatrical performance is couched in these terms, the applications are striking – if an actor treats his performance as a meditation or preparation of sorts, then by acting as another person he is training himself in the results of certain action. This brings our focus to the actual performer and not the intentions of the playwright – showing how theatre is actually a useful power examination for the individual performing as well as the audience. For example, an actor is playing the character of Othello – for the time being he is Othello - he speaks, acts and hopefully thinks as his character. When the play is occurring, the actor is not himself but this character in an imagined circumstance. That

way, the events that happen to Othello are also happening to this actor – he is experiencing a form of imagined life through the lens of the character. He acts as Othello and sees the consequences of those actions, his wife killed by his own hand. This is a powerful experience, and when thought of as an exercise in *melete*, a unique meditation. This is a very effective tool for *melete*, because not only are you “imagining the articulation of possible events” you are living through them. The audience of *Othello* will certainly learn a lot about the nature of jealousy, but so will the actors. It is this double-sided opportunity for personal growth through the examination of power and consequence that is so uniquely useful in the theatre.

The other Stoic technique Foucault examines is *gymnasia*, which he defines thus: “while meditation is an imaginary experience that trains thought, *gymnasia* is training in a real situation, even if it’s been artificially induced” (Foucault, *Technologies*, 37). Again the applications to theatre are clear. Foucault gives the extreme example of abstinence, which is definitely a real situation – the objective was to test oneself and purify oneself through hardship. We should be interested principally in the term “artificially induced,” as clearly all of theatre is artificially induced. However, if one is fully given over to the artistic act of creation and literally thinks and acts like the character, theatre is in a sense a real situation. *Gymnasia* in the theatre then is acting in a real situation and seeing the results unfold before you. Both *melete* and *gymnasia* increase our capability to imagine theatre as a useful exercise in unreality, the imagined circumstance actually conveying real examination and knowledge to the participants. If we can accept that people can learn through acting and learn through this “artificially induced” reality, then the possibilities of theatre grow exponentially. By showing that the theatre can be used to

examine real world power relationships, teaching us something about the way we act in the world, combined with the fact that this knowledge is useful for outside life; the idea of theatre as a training-ground or tool for political education is fraught with positive potential.

There is a very interesting connection to be found here – melete and Theatre of the Oppressed. The idea of theatre as training-ground for political action developed by Boal can be compared directly with the principle of melete. His Theatre of the Oppressed is a system to get “regular” people involved in using the theatre as a way to explore their place in society, but the focus is on practical action. Like Brecht, he believes that the purpose of seeing a piece of theatre is to instill a desire to change what one perceives to be wrong in the world, not to placate this need. Boal’s system of getting the spectators to become actors and take control of theatre “back to the people” is important because he also believed that the experiences the “spect-actors” go through while acting is real training as well. For Boal the theatre could serve as a “rehearsal of revolution” – he believed that people gathering together, abolishing the “ruling class divisions between hero/chorus and actor/spectator,” and working through their social ills would inspire a real transformation of government and political life (Boal 141). Boal wished for the people to “reassume their protagonist function in the theater and in society” (Boal, TO, 119).

Boal demonstrates his point with an example of his Forum Theatre technique. Workers are gathering together to make a piece of theatre<sup>15</sup> that explores the reality of

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<sup>15</sup> It is critical in the Theatre of the Oppressed that the people create their own theatre, rather than being shown the fancy theatre of an outside group. Boal wants to use theatre to explore the issues of the community itself, not attempting to apply the community’s issues to a piece not designed for it. Need theatre with symbols that are not “meaningless for that audience” (Boal 124).

their working conditions (in the style of Realism). A 10 minute play is put on, telling the story of workers in the factory, who want higher wages for their hard work. They attempt a solution and are denied. This is where the “forum” aspect kicks in – the spect-actors are asked if they agree with what the characters did. Every time someone thinks they have a better idea, they can stop the dramatic action, step in and replace the character, and attempt to make that action happen in the imagined circumstance. They are restricted to a personal reality (one cannot simply just solve all of the problems unrealistically) and must attempt to persuade the others that their way is best. The group goes through the piece until all suggestions have been aired, tried out and examined for effectiveness. This does in fact resemble melete or gymnasia. In his example, Boal shows the effectiveness of his technique for inspiring concrete and positive action. One of the first men to “jump in” to the scene suggested that to stop the exploitation, he should throw a bomb at the machine in the factory, destroying them. We can see that this is not the most helpful action, but nevertheless it is often tried by those who are desperate. The man has this suggestion in the scene and attempts to act on it – however he soon realizes it is not optimal because he loses the support of his coworkers (who will be out of work), and quite frankly he doesn’t know how to make, buy or throw a bomb in real life. The group comes to the conclusion that this is not the best solution and tries again. Eventually they come up with the idea to start a union and organize, which is something feasible they could really do (they actually all do work in a factory).

The purpose here is to examine one’s real life situation for the power relationship, decide whether or not that is acceptable and attempt to find ways to realistically improve it. The end result of this kind of self-examination theatre is not to return to the status quo

(as Boal would argue “coercive” tragedy is) but to agitate the desire for change and prepare for it. This incarnation of the theatre is a literal training ground for social or political change, a direct exercise in power. Boal thought the common people should “resume their protagonist function in the theatre and in society” and that theatre was the way to do it (Boal 122). In using the theatre as a sort of thought experiment or melete, Boal argues that the person is getting real political training

“the spect-actor practices a real act even though he does it in a fictional manner. While he rehearses throwing a bomb on stage, he is concretely rehearsing a way a bomb is thrown; acting out his attempt to organize a strike, he is concretely organizing a strike” (Boal 141).

Through our examination of the history of theatre and application of certain political theories, we have seen the possibilities of theatrical examination of power relationship. The use of theatre for this purpose seems to increase as one delves deeper. It is possible to read a play as an argument for power structures and examination of actions and their consequence. It is possible to apply personal relationships between characters to broader political and philosophical ideologies. It is possible to use the act of making or viewing theatre to explore oneself and train oneself for future action. Using the theatre as a political tool could be very effective and useful – as an exploration of power relationships, as a dialogue between debating groups and even examining potential actions in any given circumstance. The theatre involves directly different groups of citizens engaged in a personalized dialogue – something unique in the world of art and inherently political. A combination of these theatrical techniques and political applications could be quite worthwhile as a tool for education, debate and political experimentation – all of which we should strive for in a democratic society. In this way,

using theatre politically is a reflection of a democratic regime of governmentality. By espousing the values of dialogue, exploration and deliberation, the theatre reinforces the power relationships inherent a democratic system. Therefore it could be honed into valued tool for democratic action within a society that wishes for increased participation and political action amongst its population. In the final section I will synthesize what I see as some theatrical “best practices” into an outline for theatre with an emphasis on political action reinforced by an exploration of democratic forms governmentality.

### **CHAPTER 3**

#### My Regime of Theatrical Governmentality

In this chapter I will seek to describe a theatrical system which integrates previously discussed theories and techniques with specific political goals. I will be applying and expanding concepts previously examined in Chapter 1, drawn from different theatrical movements. This theatre will focus on examining power relationships in society and drawing political conclusions about them – i.e. determining if political action is needed. Through the tenets of examination and dialogue, I believe these theatrical techniques will reinforce a democratic regime of governmentality – one focused on dialogue and persuasion. The goal of this theatre will be one of political empowerment. This empowerment would be pursued through theatrical programs aimed at: increased education and thoughtfulness on the part of the citizenry, inspiration for overt political action, calls for accountability in government and increased political participation and a special focus on political experimentation through theatrical means. With these techniques in hand, the citizen could use the theatre as a political training-ground and clearing house for ideas – reinforcing overall democracy.

The principal theatrical techniques that I will adapt and use as guidelines are: the Greek tradition of invoking catharsis to produce effect; the Horatian and Middle Ages purpose of theatre to “delight and instruct;” the detailed individuals of the Renaissance; the satire of the seventeenth century; the Romantic potential of theatre to create its own reality; a Realist depiction of life (coupled with the internal truth of Naturalism); the atmosphere of progressive political change cultivated by Brecht and the American ensemble movement; and finally Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed and its use as melete-

inspired political experimentation. Rather than simply a rehash of the progression of these ideas, I wish to proceed with the goal of this theatre, using the concepts as they fit. This will be an attempt to apply these techniques rather than further describe their intricacies.

With these concepts selected, it is clear that the main goal of this theatre is didactic - to teach and support the people politically. This does not assume that the people cannot learn individually or that there is something inherently better about the artists than the audience. Rather in this capacity the theatre is working as an illustration and place for experimentation. Art should serve to illuminate and aid in the transfer of ideas between artist and audience not “teach” per se. Whether this means starting with a pre-conceived message to transmit or else to showcase a particular problem or situation is up to the individual artists and their community. But the focus on dialogue and illumination avoids the problem of spreading “the Message” or becoming missionaries.<sup>16</sup>

There is of course the problem of balance between having a coherent statement or message of the work and attempting to indoctrinate the audience. This theatre will not be an attempt to recreate Soviet “agit-prop” where theatre is a tool of indoctrination, or an attempt to initiate revolution. Rather this theatre is operating from the people outward, sending message they want to send and examining the issues that matter to them. It is a call for dialogue rather than a position. With this distinction in mind a piece of theatre with this political intention should allow for responses and disagreements.<sup>17</sup> That being

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<sup>16</sup> This is a problem many of the avant-garde in the 1960’s came into contact with (Cohen-Cruz, “Motion of the Ocean”). The idea of the Marxist vanguard spreading revolution, true knowledge and initiative is not the intention here. In this regard I am taking a step back from Boal in arguing for theatre inspiring revolution.

<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, an artistic depiction does not have to be explicit but can be illustrative. For example Molière’s *Tartuffe* is an argument against hypocrisy even though the main character is a hypocrite.



said, artists should not ever shirk away from making a strong statement, especially if they think people will disagree with it – rather they should welcome the argument that their work will cause because that is the root of the political. Again we are reminded of Shaw: “I write plays with the deliberate object of converting the nation to my opinions in these matters” (Carlson, 308). Again our focus is on power, and power is earned through persuasion.

The most important thing for the artists to keep in mind, whether they have completely created the piece or are performing the work of another, is their purpose in performing it. Theatrical performers especially must have their ends in mind or else there truly is no point save entertainment. Because the theatrical art is one of representation, the ends of the performance need to be clear in the artists’ heads so they can be transmitted intentionally to the audience with the purpose in mind (an actor is giving the audience a message, whether he means to or not). Even if the presentation is obtuse or intentionally murky, there should intent at the heart of it. We see this thin line being walked in the Theatre of the Absurd and performance art. This concern for clarity is especially necessary for our political theatre here, when dealing in power and political problems, because of the efficacy of a theatrical performance and its “captive audience” – having the luxury of people gathering to hear one’s views, one should be certain that those views are being translated as intended.

The theatre has the advantage of being able to combine serious social commentary and political conundrums with actual entertainment – a great format for evaluating problems. If something is engaging and entertaining, it would make sense that people are more apt to pay attention to it. In this way the theatre truly does offer an interesting

platform for political messages and discussion. With the skills of the craft in hand, a gifted team of performers could engage the audience well enough to initiate dialogue with their fellow citizens and gain their Arendtian support. Theatrical performers, therefore, should have something to say that they think others need to hear (their “opinion on the matter” in the vein of Shaw). Otherwise, why bother performing?

Theatre is people artistically enacting their Power and seeking the support of their peers for their own views. This can be seen in the spectacle of Egyptian religion-theatre and the festivals of Dionysus in Ancient Greece – where theatre was a part of the expression and expansion of religious teachings. Narratives and fables have always been used as a way to teach religious messages and spread “truth.” This is also where the Roman ideal espoused by Horace of “delight and instruction” truly comes into play. This theme has been adopted by most critics of the theatre, from Horace to today. Even if one has problems with other aspects of the theatre, like the Christian church did, it remains hard to deny the usefulness and enchantment that accompany theatrical performance. Philosophers like Plato and religious scholars like Tertullian and Augustine had great contempt for the theatre and actors – but even they admitted the power of the art form in arousing passions and its use in teaching (Carlson, 29). These critics feared the theatre – believing the common people impressionable and naïve, and seeing proponents of the theatrical as liars. This fear led them to condemn the use of theatre in political issues for its use of “falsehood” and representation rather than the perceived truth of politicians. Poets and actors famously are not allowed in Plato’s ideal city. Indeed, when speaking of a common citizen speaking well of artists, Plato depicts him as:

“a simple creature who is likely to have been deceived by some wizard or actor whom he met, and whom he thought all-knowing, because he himself was unable to

analyse [sic] the nature of knowledge and ignorance and imitation.” Plato, *Republic*, Book X.

This is a fallacy however, because it assumes that theatre is based on lies, it assumes citizens to not understand the difference between theatre and reality, and it also indicates that politicians are more truthful (which we know is not the case).

On the contrary, an effective theatrical performance should be based on some truth that needs to be examined. The best theatre reaches its audience so effectively because it examines an issue or relationship that resonates even though the audience understands what they are seeing is unreal. This representative function (Aristotelian mimesis) is only effective when activating some sort of empathetic response, which requires some reality – one would guess that most audience members do not have an emotional response to the absurdist characters in Ionesco who are not connected to the audience or each other (they are based on unreality). For this reason, we need the Aristotelian concept of catharsis – the living vicariously through the characters on stage – it is the connection that is important.<sup>18</sup>

In this way, performers should do exactly what these conservative scholars feared – use representation and art to advance specific issues and discussions that resonate with the audience (in this case the citizens). Performers *should* be engaged in an attempt to convince their audience – but not in the fraudulent or illusion-based way that Plato and the others are afraid of. Perhaps this could be seen simply as a conservative/liberal debate, but a conservative theatre could exist as well, using theatre to espouse the values of the status quo or warn against the problems of change. Again, theatre is an instrument of power, not an end – what the goals of its practitioners are has nothing to do with the

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<sup>18</sup> I do not however, need the “purgation” of the passions that Aristotle and other s were so concerned with, just the emotional, performer/spectator connection.

instrument itself. In this case the power argued for is in the hands of the people, and the theatre's role in educating and empowering regular citizens could be seen as a threat to the powerful. However, if the elite of society are legitimately powerful (i.e. they have the support of the people), then there should not be anything to fear from the populace examining this power relationship.

Theatre is especially useful for studying politics because as far as relationships go political ones are extremely complicated and difficult to understand. Plays are useful as political examinations and experimentations because through the use of an artificial circumstance they simplify complicated political realities in a format that is easier to gain knowledge from. There is no doubt that the interactions of a play are simpler than in real life – but that is a positive rather than a negative, given how difficult real life is to understand. In this way the theatrical representation of events offers a view into true understanding in an accelerated fashion. And as we have seen, one can easily extrapolate the interactions of theatrical characters to broader themes, in fact whole theatrical theories have been based on this concept. The audience can learn or at least consider any possible message the players wish to portray. It is this flexibility that speaks the most to the potential of theatre as an enduring tool for examination; a performance can be adapted to fit any interpretation or message. The potential to “delight and instruct,” then is limited only to the skill and ambition of the performers and the willingness of the audience to engage in dialogue. The conventions of the detailed individual/character from Renaissance playwrights (and afterward) would be useful for our power examinations then, because it is easier to draw parallels to real people if your characters are realistic. The tenets of Realism would also help with this drawing of parallels to reality – almost as

if one is using Realism to remove an additional step in applying the theatrical truths discovered to outside life.

But the benefits of theatre for political thinking do not reside only in the message to the audience but in the act of theatre itself. Participating in theatre can be just as helpful to understanding power and learning to act legitimately. When used as a thought experiment (in the vein of melete or gymnasia) the actor himself can experience their own formative experience or discovery. When used as a political experiment, as seen in Boal, as person can try out their own political options as much as they want. And by using more modern acting techniques such as the Stanislavski method, a person acting in a play can literally experience what using power in a particular situation is like, the feelings it produces and the potential consequences. This practical knowledge is quite interesting because it teaches people in a way that conceptual ways such as reading or being taught traditionally do not. It is a question of engagement with the material that changes the effectiveness of the message. Especially in less formal modes of theatre such as improvisation, a performer can select whatever actions he chooses and weigh their consequences. This fact is also crucial to examining the potential to “delight and instruct” because the performers learn as well – the give and take with the audience undoubtedly teaches an actor about what he is doing. Then it is clear that there is a double-usefulness inherent in the modern theatre that is being recognized, that of education and empowerment – for both the audience and the participants.

The use of a particular act of theatre, for example a play, then it quite more useful than it seems at first. When a play is performed which is focused on examining power relationships – we can see that there is a potential for the artist/creators to learn

something through the creation (in this case writing of a play) process, the actor can learn something through acting out these relationships on stage and the audience member can learn something by witnessing the relationship occur in real time in this imagined circumstance. The usefulness of one theatrical representation then, is many-fold. And we must remember Arthur Sainer point about *Lear* – each audience member sees a different *Lear* during a performance, depending on their personal selves – therefore *every audience member* is learning something simultaneously (Sainer, 69). Just a single act of theatre can have so many positive effects.

Today especially this language of education and empowerment is gaining support. Many governments and nonprofit agencies have their own art and culture programs, pouring money into any program that seems to be effective educationally. The distinction from a governmental standpoint is that learning and practicing theatre as a child will help them perform better in the education system, not necessarily that the children are being taught to act politically. Arts agencies in the United States, for example, were given \$359.6 million in fiscal year 2008 to initiate theatre and art programs to people across the nation<sup>19</sup>. This is a focus on art as a function of education – helping children (and adults) to learn better and function in society. And through many studies it is clear that this is the case<sup>20</sup>, and much experimental theatre has turned to these educational avenues. There are even theatre programs that exist in order to help other groups learn and become integrated with society, such as the London-based “Cardboard Citizens” which is a Theatre of the

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<sup>19</sup> See National Assembly of State Arts Agencies. <http://www.nasaa-arts.org>

<sup>20</sup> See Americans for the Arts “Animating Democracy.”

Oppressed troupe made up specifically of the homeless, helping them rejoin society<sup>21</sup>. These examples represent the continuing trend of theatre being used as a tool for social progress. At its core, this trend is another example of the same argument in favor of theatre that has always prevailed throughout – that of its efficacy as a tool for persuasion and education. Whether you are spreading a religious lesson, educating a group, exposing an issue or initiating political dialogue – the theatre is an effective platform. But with the acceptance that theatre is a good persuasive tool in general follows that the theatre would be competent at teaching any lesson one wanted it to teach and could convey effectively. In other words, theatre is a very effective way to exercise power. Theatre can be used to persuade people to act in concert with you, to enact change.

Another way to say this is that if there is a great deal of Arendtian “support” for one issue that needs to be resolved, the debate about it will occur in many places, including in the theatre. This is appropriate and could be quite healthy for exposing and solving societal problems through dialogue. The theatre can be exercised by people in order to gain support from their peers on a political issue. This seems clear when one considers that political theatre does not flourish in politically apathetic times, but does in politically active times<sup>22</sup>. When the majority of the populace can agree with one another and use their power effectively, we can see the results in all arenas. Perhaps by harnessing the theatre’s potential as a tool for examination and education, a cogent political program could be enacted that served to increase the power the people have in society, by opening

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<sup>21</sup> See Cardboard Citizens: “Our work personally inspires and motivates the homeless people we work with; it builds skills and confidence, and supports individuals to raise and face the issues necessary for them to make positive changes in their lives.”

<sup>22</sup> For example one can look at the difference in popular acclaim for groups like Bread and Puppet Theatre and the San Francisco Mime Troupe. Both enjoyed lots of popularity during the politically active 1960’s and 70’s, and less so today – their work remains similarly structured and with similar goals as when it was popular.

up more channels of societal dialogue – regardless of overall political apathy or engagement. In other words, we have seen times of strong political theatre in the past that have died out when political support faded – perhaps the theatre itself could enact the time of political engagement and Arendtian power of support to improve society.

This avenue of societal progress is important, because it is a positive force of change as opposed to a negative one. Importantly, this is a use of the legitimate power to change society, as opposed to a group using means *other* than power to change society (such as violence or fraud). So much of politics is dominated by coercion and fraud that more positive political change, through the use of theatrical examination would be an improvement.

So it follows that if a theatrical movement inspired political change, it would only occur by means of an effective argument that appeals to the people, who decide to instill legitimacy and support to the cause espoused by the artists. This is certainly a legitimate use of power and good for a democratic society. This also incidentally dispels the fears of Plato and Tertullian, because it is not a lie or an illusion that persuades the people to act, but rather a coherent argument and desire for support. As long as we accept that people in the audience can see that a night of theatre is not reality (which critics like Plato did not), then we know that they are reacting to the messages implied or represented rather than the events unfolding; therefore if a piece of theatre inspires political action or empowerment, it is because the message was received and supported by the audience, not that they were tricked by actors in masks. As long as this truth remains the case, the theatre can be used politically with legitimacy.



We have seen throughout history the power of theatre to reflect and represent society – showing current power arrangements and critiquing them. If the theatre is truly to be useful politically it should utilize all the tools it has in its vast arsenal and focus them on political change. With possibilities such as the cathartic empathy of Aristotle, the didactic principles of Horace and Shaw, the engaging and biting satire of Molière, the beauty and depth of Shakespeare, the surprising earnestness of Ibsen and the creativity of the Romantics or the Absurdist – it is hard to see the theatre not being used well. By combining all of these techniques, then placing them in a context of live performance (with its capability for enlightening author, actor and audience) – the theatre as a platform for the communication of ideas is incredible. With all of these techniques and regimes of power in mind – one can add the final stroke of Augusto Boal’s theatre as training-ground and the idea of Foucauldian “melete” and see the true potential of the theatre as political tool.

This potential for the theatre is perhaps the greatest: to function as a political experiment of power free from consequences. A person can truly experiment in their social role and through imagined circumstance attempt to affect their desired social change. With all the technical abilities of past theatrical movements in hand – this experimentation could garner very interesting results politically – the imagined circumstances can be very real for those performing and witnessing the performance. A great deal can be learned in this safe and unreal environment - examining complex and real political power relationships, and experimenting with new and potentially better power arrangements. Furthermore, as we have seen with Boal, this act could be training

for producing this preferable change in real life – true empowerment (Boal’s rehearsal of revolution, TO, 141).

This technique is much preferable to real experiments with power and revolution - because most of the time they fall into the desperation of using violence or revolution as a “substitute for power” (Arendt, *On Violence*, IV). Theatre is truly a positive alternative because of this fact of imagined circumstances – because as Arendt said:

“Action is irreversible, and a return to the status quo in case of defeat is always unlikely. The practice of violence, like all action, changes the world, but the most probable change is a more violent world” (Arendt, *On Violence*, V).

This is important because the practice of theatre as political action could change the world in a legitimate way. A political change brought about theatrically is infinitely less likely to result in illegitimate results - than a political change brought about through violence or revolution. Both theatre and violence can be attempts at radical change, both can be based on legitimate grievances; but of the two options theatre is superior because one can still exercise legitimate power without falling into the “temptation of violence” and can be free of the failure, destruction and revenge that occurs from forcible action.

With theatre as a power instrument, you can attempt any action you want if you think it will produce the desired result, and when the exercise is over you’ve lost nothing. However, when the exercise is over, you have gained something through the knowledge and exploration of your own power situation in society, as Foucault said when discussing *melete*: “one judges the reasoning that one should use in an imaginary exercise... in order to test an action or event” (Foucault, *Technologies*, 36). The original attempt to create a system of “political science” was to address these unknown variables – and a theatrical examination would be a good addition to the political scientist’s toolbox. Anything that

can be done to alleviate the usual consequences of political action is worth pursuing. It follows that more deliberation or experimentation could only be helpful in avoiding bad decisions. With theatre as a sort of laboratory for political science, there is the possibility of reducing the guess-work inherent in such a complicated system of interaction.

## **EPILOGUE**

With the theatre acting politically, we have the opportunity to train and instruct citizens (performers and audience goers), spread messages and initiate dialogue, examine political possibilities and come up with solutions in a safe environment. We have a tool which can be used for political empowerment and inclusion, opening up the opportunity for political changes that are legitimate, supported by the people and nonviolent. All in all, the theatre is an excellent instrument of power that would reinforce a democratic society and lessen the threats to it. For a democratic regime of governmentality where power is honored, argument and persuasion are the principal means of decision making, violence is lessened and participation is encouraged – theatre would be quite useful.

The combination of imagined circumstances and real relationships offers an infinite amount of experiments that inform the real person participating. The concept of theatre as educational tool has great potential, and should be channeled towards increasing political dialogue and communication. All of these techniques can focus on increasing the opportunity for citizens to participate in their government and exercise power in a positive way.

Using the compelling nature of performance and the possibilities for examining power, theatre could be an integral part of an overall democratic regime of governmentality. If all of the communicative powers of a theatre were focused on increasing the cooperation of a society by increasing dialogue and political experimentation could affect concrete social change. It would enable people to “act in concert” and truly empower them to “act according to their ends” (Arendt, *On Violence*,

III). Theatre would reinforce the effective, legitimate use of power, a democratic governmentality and increase the justice and efficiency of society.

Through a synthesis of theatrical conventions throughout history, I have outlined which concepts can inform a politically inclusive theatre as an instrument of power. Were a democratic society to harness this potential, the possibility for increased participation, educated and politically active citizenry and overall political cohesion could be realized.

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