

## **Without symbols there would be no civilisation**

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I very much like the title of this conference – ‘Where are we going?’ But at the same time I think it is a dangerous question to ask. Surely we should be thinking not so much of where we are going, but of where we *want* to go. That is the important thing – to know, and to show, where our desires will lead us. And this, to me, is the main role of the theatre.

I became involved in theatre in the year of Bertolt Brecht’s death, 1956. It was only a coincidence – but it was a symbolic coincidence, because I had learned a great many things from him. In those days we did what we called ‘political theatre’. And we did it in Brazil – a country very distant from your own, in terms of culture as well as space.

In the fifties and sixties, to be involved in theatre in Brazil was a violent business. We suffered the overt violence of police and paramilitary organisations and there was poverty all around. We believed that as artists we had the duty to guide our audiences. It was presumptuous but we believed that as artists we knew more than our audiences, and it was our task to teach them. Let me give you two examples of what it meant to work in the midst of violence and poverty.

The first example is about poverty. I have a friend who performed for miners in Bolivia, where conditions were just as bad as in Brazil or Paraguay. One day he told me that some of the places he performed in for the miners did not even have electric light. And so I asked him if that meant he had to perform in daylight. But he answered that the miners were in the mines during the day, and his shows were in the evening. And then I asked him again, ‘But how do you light your shows?’ and he said ‘Well, I perform for miners – they wear those lamps on their heads, so I ask them to come and turn towards the stage’. And he explained ‘It is a wonderful way of finding out if a scene is good theatre, because if it is not, the miners turn away and the lights dim, so the actors rush on to the next scene to attract more light and more attention.’

I should also like to tell you just one story to illustrate what it was like to make political theatre at that time. One day we were putting on a play called ‘São Paulo’s Fair of Opinion’, which was an excellent show written by many people, and suddenly we heard shouts from the audience and we put on the lights to see, thinking it was a mouse, and discovered it was a hand grenade that had been thrown against the stage. Happily it was made in Brazil – it did not explode. But it might have exploded. Some people used Czech grenades, which were much more effective.

People were arrested, and in these extremely difficult conditions we had a ‘message’ to convey. Believing that artists were a superior kind of people we thought it our duty to tell our audiences how to fight, how to free themselves from oppression. We were very well-intentioned, and we wanted to teach everyone. For instance, we thought we should teach the workers how to shake off their oppression, but we were middle-class. In Brazil there is a lot of racial prejudice. So we thought we should put on an anti-racist play, and show the blacks how to fight against their oppression – but we were white. And of course we knew that women were oppressed all over the world and so we decided to write feminist plays to help women free themselves from their oppression and I myself wrote some very fine feminist plays to tell women how to shake off oppression. Oppression by whom? By me of course! We were really very well-intentioned, I swear! But what we were doing was wrong.

I only understood how wrong I was when I was teaching peasants how to fight for their freedom. While we were doing a play about workers we lived together with workers, to see how they thought, how they spoke, how they ate – everything. We wanted to become like them, so it was as if we took a microscope to every detail of their behaviour and learnt how to behave like them. With the peasants we did the same – not with a microscope, because they lived very far away, but with a telescope. So from this great distance we saw the peasants and saw how they dressed, how they talked, and then we did popular peasant plays and went there to be peasants, to present to them their own problems and to show them what they should do to shake off their oppression.

And one day I was suddenly really shocked for the first time by something I was doing. I had an encounter that changed my life, my way of looking at theatre. We were doing a peasant musical about rebellion, which ended with a beautiful song in which we were all dressed up as peasants. We advanced towards the audience holding fine stage rifles in our hands and we ended by singing that we had to spill our blood to save our land. After the show the peasants came up to us, weeping – they were really moved, and this made us very happy. We felt that our artistic

message had come across because they agreed with us. And then one of the peasants, a very big man, came over to us, also weeping, and said how strange it was that we young people – we were very young at the time – from the big city of São Paulo thought just like them. ‘We are always saying the same thing – we have to fight, to spill our blood to free our land’, he said. This made us very happy. But then he suggested that since we all thought in exactly the same way, we should all go off and have lunch together and then take our beautiful rifles and go and fight someone who had invaded their land. I was shocked. I said ‘Look here, I am sorry but there seems to be a misunderstanding’. He was puzzled, and I explained that our rifles did not shoot. He looked at me and said ‘you make rifles that do not shoot? A rifle is to shoot and to fight and to try and free our land and you make rifles that do not shoot?’ And I said – yes, that is the misunderstanding, because what we do is art, it is aesthetic. When we sing and gesture with our hands that we shall spill our blood to free our lands we have these rifles to make it more credible, aesthetically. They are fine-looking rifles but they do not shoot. And he said ‘OK, maybe aesthetically you are right. So the rifles are false, but you are not false, you are true’. And I said ‘yes we are true, you can count on us’. And then he said ‘Don’t worry, come with us anyway – we have enough rifles for everybody’. And then I said ‘I’m afraid there is another small misunderstanding here – we are true, and the rifles are false. We are true but we are truly artists and not truly peasants’. Then there was a long silence. He looked at us, and finally he said, ‘Oh, now I understand very well. You are true artists, and when you say “let’s spill our blood to save our land”, you true artists are speaking about our blood, not about your own’. And then I felt ashamed.

I had believed in what I was doing, thought it was good to spread the message and teach people how to think. But after this encounter I realised that the man I had spoken to was right – I was inciting people to do what I could not do, just as I had been inciting blacks to do what I could not do, not being black myself, and inciting women to do what in some cases they could not do, because what they suffered was not always what I thought they were suffering.

From that time on I said I would never again do this kind of theatre unless I was willing to be in the front line myself. You have the right to incite people to do what you are ready to do yourself, but not to tell them to go and do it and then say ‘but now I have a plane to catch – goodbye’. You cannot do that. It is immoral, it is unfair. I knew a theatre group that used to tear up their passports on stage every evening and say ‘we should be free – we should not have passports’. Of course, the American consulate would not give them new passports every morning for them to tear up, so they had false passports on stage, inciting people to burn their own real passports. This is not moral, this kind of political theatre is not acceptable. So I thought to myself – ‘What should I do? I do not want to talk about myself – I am middle-class, I have metaphysical and psychological problems. I have no right to talk about myself’. I did have the right, of course, but I had not learned that yet. And then I decided to do a different kind of theatre, one that asked for solutions instead of supplying them.

I conceived something called simultaneous playwriting. It worked like this. I would perform a play up to the turning-point, up to the moment that the protagonist has to decide what to do. I would then stop the scene and say ‘Look – he does not know what to do, what do you suggest?’ Then the audience would say ‘I think he should do this’ or ‘I think he should do that’. And then although we did retain the power of the stage, the extreme power of the stage – saying, that is ours because we are artists, and you are not – we created a small opening, a democratic opening, by asking the audience to give its opinion. And whatever came from the audience we would improvise without entering into any discussion as to whether we agreed or not; we would just try it out.

In 1971 I was arrested and at length had to go into exile. At one point I was working in Peru on a sort of literacy programme that included all sorts of elements, including theatre, and I was in charge of the theatre part. Every day we improvised a play in the afternoon, and then in the evening we would perform it in front of an audience.

One day a woman came up to me and said ‘Look – I very much like this democratic way of asking us what the character should do, but it is a pity you only talk about political problems – I have a problem that is not political, so this kind of theatre is not what I need. And I said ‘Madam, if you have a problem, it is a political problem’. And she said no, her problem was not at all political, and I said it must be political in some way or another. And she insisted it was not and I kept saying that it was, and we even started shouting at each other. And then I asked her why she said her problem was not political, and she said it was because her problem was between her and her husband. And I said ‘You see how political it is! Who tells you that man is your husband? You have to go to some place and sign in front of a judge or somebody, and state ‘this man is mine, and I am his woman’ and then if you want to separate – not that I am suggesting that you should – we can act it out in the theatre. And so I said her problem was political, that she should come and tell us her story the next day and we would act it out and ask the audience for solutions -

we wanted the people to express themselves democratically. She was very happy and said 'OK. If my husband and I have a political problem, we'll use your theatre'.

She returned the next day. Now, usually I was the director, and the person would tell me the story and I would more or less arrange things and make the play. But this woman knew exactly what she wanted. I said 'Here is the actor who is going to play your husband' but she said 'No, I would never have married that man. I want that one over there'. 'But he is going to be the neighbour.' 'No, that's not right.' She basically wanted to take over as director. And I was angry with her, but democracy is like that, so I said 'Go ahead, do it the way you want'. And she told a terrifying story.

She said her husband did not like to work at all and sometimes asked her for money. He would say, 'Give me some money because I am building a house for you and I have to buy the bricks'. So she would give him some money and he would go away, and ten days later he would return with the receipt for the bricks. She was illiterate, so she would keep the piece of paper without knowing if it was a real receipt or not. And then he would say he needed money for the windows, or for the doors, and each time he would stay away for a week and then he would return with a receipt. But when she asked to see the house he was building for her, he said no, no, it was going to be a surprise. But one day they had a row and she thought maybe he was lying to her. So she asked a friend to read the receipts, and found out that they were not receipts at all. They were love letters that her husband's mistress wrote to him when they were apart. Whenever he went to her she was happy, and when he returned to his wife she wrote him poems and love letters. And knowing his wife could not read or write, he gave them to her and pretended they were receipts.

So the woman told me that story and asked what she should do. And I said, 'Madam, I do not know, but we are going to do that play and the audience will give you the right solution'. She devised the play as she wanted it, and the evening came, and then I told the audience – 'Look, we have been talking about big political issues, agricultural reform, international debts (by the way, I should like to note that Brazil pays one billion, two hundred million dollars a month in interest on its foreign debts - this is modern slavery!) and then I told the audience that we were not going to talk about modern slavery today but about this woman's life. And I put the woman sitting there, facing the audience and I said, 'She has a problem, and you have to solve it, because her husband is coming home tomorrow'. Everyone was very excited because talking politics is all very well but sometimes it gets a little heavy and hard to understand. This time everyone would understand, because it was a problem about love between men and women, and somehow we all believe that is something we understand.

And then the play started exactly as she had told us. She fights with the husband, the husband goes away, and then she discovers the papers are love letters and not receipts. At this point I went onto the stage and said 'Stop! The husband is coming back tomorrow. What should she do?' And the audience got very excited and started discussing it with one another, and the suggestions came. The first one was that she should cry, cry, cry very much. And then she should forgive him. So we tried it out. She cried and cried and then she said 'I forgive you'. At which point he said 'OK, so bring me my dinner' and she did. I turned to the audience and said, 'Is that what you advise her to do tomorrow?' And of course all the women in the audience said 'No!'.

The next suggestion was that she should lock him out of the house. And so we improvised a second time, but the actor playing the husband said 'OK, if you lock me out I am going to live with my mistress and you will be alone, here in Peru, where if a woman has been married and is now alone, every man thinks he can go and sleep with her. That will be dangerous for you'. And I asked the audience – 'Is that true?' and they said yes, it was true. So we needed another solution. Then someone suggested she should go back to her mother's house to show her husband how important it was to have a woman in the house, but this did not work either. Nothing worked. And I was looking at the woman and she was getting desperate. And I was getting even more desperate myself.

And then I saw a woman in the third row – a very big, strong-looking woman, who was making faces. She did not speak but she seemed furious. And I was afraid of her because I felt it would be my responsibility if she did not like the show. I said, 'Madam, I have the impression that you have an idea'. And she said, 'Yes, I have an idea'. So I asked her to tell us the idea so that we could try it out. And she said, 'Yes. My idea is that she should have a very clear conversation with him and then forgive him'.

I was disappointed because I had expected something much more violent, but OK, that was what she wanted. And so the actors improvised and the woman playing the wife said 'Look here, it is very clear that you were deceiving

me, it is very clear this, and clearly that and clearly more here, and clearly more there' and finally she said 'It is very clear I am going to forgive you'. And then the husband said 'OK, if it is clear that you forgive me, it is even more clear that you should go to the kitchen and bring me my dinner because I am very hungry'. And she went to the kitchen.

At this moment I looked at the woman. She was furious, and at this moment I swear she almost started levitating. I saw fire – my son says I am exaggerating – but I saw fire coming from her mouth. And she looked at me and said 'That is not what I said'. And I said 'Madam, everyone heard you say that she should have a very clear conversation'. And she said 'No, I said that she had to have a *very clear* conversation. *Very clear?*' And she said, 'You are a man and men are like that. You do not understand what a woman is saying. And I said on that point she was right, that I believed women were very difficult to understand. But what about the actress – she should understand, since she was a woman. And she said – 'No, she does not understand because you are the boss'. I argued with that and we got into a row. So eventually I said we would give her idea a second try. I told the actors they should have the clearest conversation of their lives.

And so they started again. Clearly, clearly, clearly – I had never before heard the word so many times before – the actress fired it out like a machine gun. And finally she was exhausted and said it is clear that I have to forgive you and the man said it is clear that you have to go and get my dinner.

And then I looked at the woman. She was so furious that she was standing up to leave. I said, 'Madam please do not go away. Please stay'. But she refused, and we started debating again. She was enraged and she kept saying that I did not understand, I was false, I was betraying her. So finally I invited her on stage to show us the kind of clear conversation she wanted. And she agreed – she was pleased, and she came very slowly, because she was very big. And the actor who was playing the husband was a wonderful, sincere actor, but he was very thin, very small. And he looked at me and said 'Augusto, what shall I do?' and I said he should improvise.

Then the woman came. She walked onto the stage and fetched a broomstick from backstage. She took the husband by the ear and said 'Now! Let's have a very clear conversation!' and started hitting him and hitting him and I never saw an actor being so sincere when he said 'Forgive me! I promise I will never do it again!' And we tried to help him. I myself jumped on her but she fended me off. Others tried to help but she kept on hitting him. And he said 'Forgive me, forgive me!' and she finally sat him down and went to the centre of the stage, stood with her hands on her hips and said 'OK, now that we have had a very clear conversation, you go to the kitchen and bring me my dinner'. And I swear, that actor has never again in his life betrayed any woman.

When I saw this, I said to myself that her actions symbolised a different kind of theatre. And symbols are very important. Without symbols there would be no civilisation. Symbolically it had the same importance as when Thespis left the chorus and said 'I am not going to sing that song – I am going to sing my own'. When he created a protagonist and founded the theatre in the sixth century BC he was being rebellious, in saying, 'I do not accept this image of reality. I must say my own words.' That Peruvian woman was not Thespis, but what she did when she invaded the theatre was to show us that whatever kind of artists we may be, even though we may produce beautiful art, extraordinary art, we will never translate correctly what the citizen wants.

And from that time on I decided to do something different. I did what we now call 'forum theatre', which is practised extensively all over the world today. The eighth and most recent festival of forum theatre was held in Toronto, and we had twenty groups from countries including France, Brazil, England, the United States and India. Of course, forum theatre is more complex than the one aspect I have told you about. My view was that it is fine to practise holding a mirror up to nature, as Shakespeare says, but theatre can also be a magic mirror which you can enter; if you do not like your image you can transform it. And to transform the image is to transform yourself. This is what I believed in.

At one point we were without any funding from the government in Brazil, where our theatre of oppression was based, and we decided we would have to close our centre. But we did not want a sad funeral – we wanted to close it in a very beautiful way. So we offered to take part in the electoral campaign of the workers' party. In Brazil an election is a very joyful moment of national life – an erotic festival. Everyone is happy. Everyone goes out into the streets and dances and sings. And we offered to help the workers' party with our theatre. And they imposed the condition that one of us should stand for election as a city legislator. We said 'OK, why not? One of us can do that. We are not politicians but we won't win anyway'. Then I suddenly realised that everyone was looking at me. And I

protested that I was always travelling, so I was not a suitable candidate. But they reasoned that we would not win anyway, we were just helping the workers' party. In the end I accepted, on the condition that I would not win.

But the campaign was so theatrical, with music and dance, that everyone heard of it, and I was elected. The process there is not like France, it is like the United States. In addition to the mayor, there is a chamber responsible for making laws. And so as one of the forty-two legislators for the city, I was elected to the chamber that makes the law for the city. And for fourteen years we did what we called 'legislative theatre'. I had twenty-five assistants, fifteen of whom were theatre people, mainly from the theatre of the oppressed. We travelled around and tried to help any groups of oppressed people we could find, from Rio's Moslems to trade unionists, from third age groups to homosexuals or black students from the university. We would help them make forum theatre about their own problems. We did not say 'We are the artists, we are going to write for you' but asked them what they wanted to write about. We would help them write about the problems they wanted discussed, and they would perform – first for their own communities, and then for other communities, in a sort of inter-community dialogue. Then they would make street festivals in which the general population could interact like the woman in Peru – not by hitting anyone, but by going onto the stage proposing solutions and ideas. Then my assistants would note down these suggestions and draft legislative projects, and since I was in the chamber I would present these projects. They would be dealt with according to the usual procedures and finally they would be debated in the normal way. In this way we ended up proposing forty-two legislative projects in the space of fourteen years, and we promulgated thirteen laws in the city of Rio de Janeiro. Thirteen laws are now in place as a result of the desires of the population. The desire became law. The law always represents someone's desire, but usually it is not ours but someone else's. In this case we asked the audience democratically what they desired, and on thirteen occasions, this desire became law.

Of course, people say, 'Yes, that can happen in Brazil, a country of carnival and football mania, but here in Europe it would not work'. Twenty or more years ago, when I went to live in France – I lived there until 1986 – people said the same thing. The theatre of the oppressed is a fine thing for Latin America, they said, but not for Europe. Yet now the theatre of the oppressed is found all over Europe. And the same thing will happen with legislative theatre. I have already had a small experiment in Munich.

I should like to finish by inviting you to an exciting event that is going to take place in London. On 27 November 1998, we are performing on the premises of the Greater London Council, where the laws of London were once made. It was closed during Margaret Thatcher's term as prime minister and sold to a Japanese company. Most of the building was turned into a hotel but the room where the laws were made is still there. We have rented that room for 27 November, and we are going to perform a session of legislative theatre symbolically reopening the Greater London Council. We are going to form groups to deal with housing, transport and health. Each group will present a play in a session in which the audience will be invited to participate. We have writers and lawyers who are going to take down the suggestions that are made and who will draft the laws proposed by the people on the spot. Some members of parliament have promised to attend, and we shall give them these laws that we make. We know it is symbolic, it will last only for twenty-four hours, but again – without symbols, civilisation could not exist.

Ms Trautmann has spoken to us about having not one identity but a plurality of identities. This has always been my view too. I believe that we have an identity which is ourselves, but that our identity is also contained in the identities of others. I can tell you that I am a man because women exist, I can tell you that I am white because black people exist, I can tell you that I am a father because my sons call me 'daddy'. So my identity is not contained in me alone. It is a relationship with other identities. And where are we going? We are going to some place that I do not want to be, we are going to something they call 'globalisation' which they say is something new. It is as new as Hitler's Third Reich, it is as new as the Pax Romana, it is as new as imperialism, or colonialism. It is the same thing that has always happened. A Germanic power tried to impose upon other countries their own language, their own way of thinking, their own food, their own culture, annihilating other cultures. I think it is a lie when they say that globalisation is inevitable. But even if it is inevitable, does that mean we should give in? The most inevitable thing is death, but I am not going to shoot myself. I am going to fight against death as I have always fought for life. Thank you.