Theatres as sanctuaries for cultural rights and democratic health

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Abstract

How do theatres and theatre-makers position themselves regarding the governance of culture in their city? The link between theatre-practitioners and policymakers is not new. During the 1990s, Brazilian theatre-maker Augusto Boal[1] was elected to the City Council of Rio de Janeiro and used his experience to develop, create and approve laws that came from theatrical groups and processes spread across the city, in what he later entitled Legislative Theatre. Decades later, can theatre still be seen as a sanctuary for cultural rights and democratic health? How can theatres in particular cities -like Barcelona, London and São Paulo- articulate practices, narratives and dramaturgies that reinforce cultural diversity, cultural participation, and cultural democracy? The aim of this paper is to share some of the questions, concepts and arguments that underpin my ongoing PhD research.

***Key words**: theatres; cities; democratic health; cultural rights; Legislative Theatre;*

> Theatre has had an historic role in society as providing a relatively safe way of talking back to power. Across many cultures and traditions over time, we can trace patterns and instances of groups of people using the stage as a space and place to share their stories and their lives. This aesthetic and emotional outlet allows for potential **catharsis**, a safe way for citizens to express their concerns, criticisms and frustration to each other and to society at large." (Prendergast & Saxton, 2016: 7)

In the classical Western tradition, *theatron* (a place of seeing) has its origins as a social ritual, in the ancient Greek city-states or *polis* from where the word politics derives, as it was a collective spectacle that addressed the public matters that concerned society, such as war, famines or plagues (Duvignaud, 1966; Schechner, 2003). Two millennia later, some aspects of this early vocation of public service remain in the mission of many theatres in the present day,

[1] Augusto Boal was a Brazilian theatre-maker who developed the Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) and its arsenal of games and techniques aimed at transforming society through staging a 'rehearsal for revolution' (Boal, 2002). Boal conceived of TO as a 'tree', originally including forum theatre, invisible theatre, newspaper theatre and image theatre. He believed that spectators were too passive and should become active 'spect-actors'. Later, he explored the therapeutic possibilities of theatre with his Rainbow of Desire techniques, addressing internalised oppressions (Boal, 2015).

although the challenges faced by our cities have become far more complex and intertwined, from the climate crisis to the rise of political extremist ideologies across the world. Theatre, drama and performance are deeply rooted in this public function and can be understood as a public arena for democratic events and discussions, including those around public health, mental health and wellbeing, urban health and sustainability, environmental justice and human rights – just to mention a few.

> Performance is understood as the 'embodied processes that produce and consume culture, performance makes things and does things', it 'engages human attention through patterned activities'. It is seen as 'including much more than theatre, but [runs] along an entire spectrum, which ranges from everyday life to rituals and art'. Performance can be placed on a continuum between the polarities of play and ritual, with some performances involving mostly emotional release and… social fun, while others are more on social or religious efficacy'. Performance can be seen as a kind of cognitive play, the foundation of which is 'the ability to stimulate alternative, imaginative future worlds'. (Baxter & Low, 2017: 208)

In the 21st century, most of the world's population live in cities, and most of the political institutions and economic resources are in them as well, making them attractive poles for artistic creation. Global cities are also heterogeneous entities, defined by diversity and multiplicity, as well as inequalities and historical divides: there are many cities within a city and unfortunately not all citizens enjoy the same city. For critical geographer David Harvey (2019) and philosopher Henri Lefebvre (2009), that is what makes them the ideal loci for political experiments of radical change. Cities are disputed spaces, where market forces operate against vulnerable communities and the local government often fails to mediate or intervene, making it imperative for citizens to organise grassroots movements to reclaim the 'right to the city'. Going even further, the right to a city should be understood and exercised as a 'right to a healthy city' for all its citizens.

Arts and culture can play an important role in the redistribution of power, knowledge and creating new opportunities. In recent years, some authors (Landry, 2002; Florida, 2008) have praised the 'rise of the creative class' and expanded the idea that creative industries and city planning should be at the forefront of urban regeneration. However, it's also widely documented that the creative cities paradigm can promote gentrification and enhance pre-existing inequalities instead of tackling them. It's important to keep a critical stance on strategies and discourses that are founded on good principles of the arts and culture soft power (or 'cool capitalism' in McGuigan, 2004), but mask the hard power of capitalistic forces and mechanisms that exclude and perpetuate oppression (Sennet, 2018).

There is a considerable body of knowledge in performance studies (Read, 1993; McKinnie, 2007; Whybrow, 2010; Hopkins, Orr & Solga, 2011) analysing the connections between theatre and cities through history and in the present day, from plays about particular cities to site-specific performance experiments that challenge the boundaries of the discipline and how it

can relate and reshape urban surroundings, and propose the city itself as a playfield for artistic intervention and political change.

Both the right to freely participate in cultural life and enjoy the arts (art. 27) and the right to a standard of living adequate for health and well-being (art. 25) are present in the UN Universal Declarations of Rights. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and further international documents place a special focus on tackling structural health inequalities, protecting cultural diversity, and promoting social justice with culture being considered a public good in the reshaping of policies for creativity. To achieve the 2030 SDGs, cities effectively play a big role in it as they are the places where power and resources are concentrated and interlinked - which is why there is no city without citizens with the right to it.

> Parliament is the symbolic and actual forum in which formal decisions affecting citizens of democracies are made. Culture is the symbolic and actual forum in which citizens negotiate all that matters to them, including all that cannot or need not be put into law. Culture is the parliament of our dreams. Being able to represent ourselves within that cultural forum is how we can defend our values, identity, experience—and rights. So here is a tentative definition: Cultural democracy is the right and capability to participate fully, freely and equally in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and create, publish and distribute artistic work. (Matarasso, 2019: 77)

This idea of arts and creativity as vehicles for change and empowerment is also defended by Brazilian philosopher Marilena Chauí (2006) who speaks of 'cultural citizenship'. Helen Nicholson (2014) talks about ‘drama as citizenship’, while Jen Harvie argues for a ‘performative right to the city’ and Boal (2008) not only insisted that everyone and anyone is/can be an actor *strictu sensu* (performing on stage) but also in *latu sensu* (someone who acts as a social and political with agency in their own life). With his ‘Legislative Theatre’, he aimed to take his theatre to another level, using at as method for participatory politics, defining policy priorities and creating laws. In doing so, he challenged the bureaucratic rites of the city council, exposing its inherent theatricality and its often disconnectedness with the streets. By re-enacting the debates in the municipal chamber outside of it with regular citizens he aimed to expand the notion of representative democracy and several projects were created and approved during his mandate.

> Our mandate’s project is to bring theatre back into the centre of political action – the centre of decisions – by making theatre as political action rather than merely making political theatre. In the latter case, theatre makes comments on politics; in the former, the theatre is, in itself, one of the ways in which political activity can be conducted. (Boal, 1998: 20)

Furthermore, Boal’s political performances failed to get him re-elected for another term, yet they defied conventions and boundaries between theatre-making and policy-making, pushing both theatre practitioners and city stakeholders to rethink boldly their roles in society.

Therefore, this thesis enquires how can local theatres be sanctuaries of democratic health in a polis? The study comprises a detailed in-depth qualitative analysis of three theatres selected case studies, one in each city: *Arcola Theatre* (London), *Teatre Lliure* (Barcelona) and *Teatro Oficina* (São Paulo). The research field work will entail a comparative analysis of the conditions of production and reception (Knowles, 2004) including critical geographies of space and architecture and dramaturgies of health/mental health. The research methodology combines secondary data compilation, scoping literature reviews, semi-structured interviews with local policy-makers, experts and theatre artists, *in situ* observations, note taking and visual documentation, archival research and other relevant resources available.

The aim is to provide evidence and knowledge on how democratic values and creative health ideas can be articulated in practice, and thus potentially strengthening cultural rights in a global city. How can theatre-makers and policy-makers build more bridges and forge further alliances between each other? How can they create and nurture collaborative spaces with local communities? What is the role that theatre organisations play in their urban and cultural ecosystems (De Bernard et al, 2021) and how can they creatively engage with broader discourses of public value, mental health, and urban sustainability? How do they contribute to the design and debate of innovative cultural and health policies?

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