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Musical Theatre

Boal – Theatre of the Oppressed

Creative Arts

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**Section 1: Abstract**

My project is a collaborative effort with one of my peers, Julia Netzer. She is a Drama Major in CCM, and we met the summer of 2012 at the Carnegie Mellon Pre-College Program. There, we participated in an ensemble-building group entitled Boal; our purpose was to create impactful and resonant vignettes or scenes that inspired the audience to research and pursue social issues, with a focus on those who are oppressed. When Julia and I discovered we would be attending school together, we decided that introducing Boal’s work to the CCM student populace could be beneficial, meaningful and enjoyable. Our vision is to assemble a company of dedicated students who meet on a regular basis to participate in ensemble-building exercises and develop socially inspiring vignettes. While the latter half is focused on the product, the meetings and the majority of the company’s time together would be focused on the process of building trust within the ensemble, exploring each other’s creativity and sensitivity, and gaining a better perspective of the role of the oppressed and oppressor in society.

I find that the “Theatre of the Oppressed” work fulfills me because I have the chance to empower society through a medium in which I have intense passion. Through Boal, I have the opportunity to use the language of theatre – movement, expression, and voice – to inspire patrons to make social change. Also, leading a company of others to collaborate and create art that can move an audience is important and exciting for me. Throughout my education, I have been interested in the different cultures and societies of the world, and my participation in Boal allows me to further delve into the dichotomy of those orders. Since our work in Boal is focused on the oppressor and the oppressed, I can concentrate on creating art that brings awareness to the disparity between those roles, and ultimately inspires people to eliminate inequality.

Coordinating and scheduling more than one meeting a week seems like an unrealistic goal, given the hectic nature of students’ schedules in CCM. Julia and I have decided that one meeting a week that lasts approximately three hours is sufficient time to meet, hold warm-up exercises, rehearse and improve vignettes, and assemble the group for closing comments. Furthermore, Julia and I will meet at least twice a week to discuss goals, plans of action, logistics and other necessary items, which I would foresee lasting about an hour. Also, I will write a reflection after each group meeting discussing notable improvements within the ensemble and the development of pieces. All in all, I can estimate a total of six hours of preparation, work and reflection in a week, and for the fourteen weeks next semester, amounts to approximately eighty-four hours for the duration of the project timeline.

**Section 2: Connection to Learning Outcomes within an Honors Thematic Area:**

* Possesses ability to embrace contradictions and integrate alternative, divergent, or contradictory perspectives.

One of the main themes behind creating a Boal company is exploring the relationship between the oppressed and the oppressor in society. This objective entails understanding opinions and behavior that contradict an individual’s beliefs. However, by engaging in exercises that challenge the individual to understand an opposing view, the company can gain an appreciation for the diversity of perceptions within society. We can only be empowered to inspire change in society once we understand the perspectives that bother us. Furthermore, in order to create an effective company, the members have to be able to trust each other. To trust each other, the company’s members must empathize with each other and agree on the message they want to send to the audience. When individuals within the company empathize with each other, they strive to recognize everyone’s similarities and differences. The company can only portray a variety of important social issues if its individuals are diverse and embrace each other’s diversity.

* Connects, synthesizes and transforms ideas.

The process of theatre is centered on the synthesis of ideas into a kinetic form. When deciding to create a vignette with a group of the company, the group must first brainstorm the issues in society it wants to comment on. The group must develop metaphors, symbols and messages its societal issues that the audience can easily identify with. Then, the group must synthesize its ideas into a tangible medium, encompassing the five senses. Last summer, I worked with a student, Pablo Hernandez, from Cuernavaca, Mexico who wanted to comment on how the demand for illegal drugs in the United States is contributing to the growing number of innocent Mexican deaths in the Cartel Wars occurring south of the border. He and I collaborated and developed a number of ideas on how to bring awareness to this issue. Ultimately, our goal was to influence the audience to stop increasing the demand in the United States. A number of people in the Boal company expressed their interest to us in helping develop our vision. We had to think of ways to incorporate props in a symbolic way and use specific movement from the actors to convey our message. Our vision was constructively criticized by other members of the Boal company, and we were forced to think of more creative and simple ways to share our message. In this sense, individuals of CCM’s Boal company would help each other brainstorm issues important to them, and eventually convert these ideas into a palpable and expressive form of art.

**Section 3: Connection to Goals and Academic Theories**

This project stimulates my love for performing, allows me to practice collaborating with individuals, and provides a medium through which I express my concern in societal matters. By participating in a company of Boal, my passion for theatre is channeled through a very specific purpose. The specific purpose of Boal, to inspire social change, is the ideal motivation for theatre. I am able to use my knowledge in musical theatre to create social commentary that can be viewed by an audience. My goal of using theatre to create a significant impact on society can come to fruition through Boal. My ability to connect with others will also be heightened by Boal. The ensemble-building exercises are designed to allow the company to trust each other. Not only will I build trust with future colleagues by participating in Boal, but I will also cultivate a skill of appreciating and understanding individuals’ diversity. This skill will help me as I strive to develop professional relationships with a myriad of people. Ultimately, Boal is the ideal medium in which I can collaborate with others to help make a change in society. I enjoy serving the community, but my commitment to theatre makes it difficult to provide public service through conventional means. Boal allows me to serve the community through the art of theatre. Both of my passions are combined into one vehicle, and this vehicle allows my ability as a performer to develop.

A Boal company must be founded upon the principles by which the Theatre of the Oppressed is centered on. A principle that is especially resonant with me is:

The Theatre of the Oppressed tries to activate people in a humanistic endeavor expressed by its very name: theatre of, by, and for the oppressed. A system that enables people to act in the fiction of theatre to become protagonists, i.e. acting subjects, of their own lives (Declaration of Principles).

This quote is found within the Declaration of Principles on the Theatre of the Oppressed website. This website describes what the International Theatre of the Oppressed Organization strives to accomplish, the principles and objectives it upholds, and significant history and news of its endeavors around the world. In order to recreate a Boal company here, I needed to research the guidelines and values The Theatre of the Oppressed is founded on. The Organization’s website provides an important background for me to start this project.

In the book *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Augusto Boal presents the question, “Is the fundamental relationship between an actor and an audience an equal and active one, or is it a situation that encourages passivity and division?” Thoughts like these can help bring new insight into how CCM’s Boal company will present its vignettes and message to the audience. This question challenges me to actively include the audience in our themes, and thus promote action in issues of societal importance. Furthermore, by sharing these questions with the company members, I attempt to inspire them to be more active with their beliefs. When every one feels comfortable acting upon their beliefs, a forum is created in which the oppressed are recognized and idyllically released from their unjust circumstances.

**Initiative, Independence, and/or Creativity:**

Last summer, I observed the focus and diversity Boal stirs within a group of people. I recognized the possibility of that occurring again here in CCM. Of course, the experience would not be exactly the same: the company is in a different physical location and composed of a different set of individuals. However, with my previous experience, the process here can be very successful. With me as a mentor, I can help guide and encourage students to explore parts of themselves they did not know existed. I can help the company members foster ideas and develop their passions into something tangible. I can inspire confidence and creativity. As a collaborator with the members, I could learn as much from their work as they could from my previous experience. I believe this symbiotic relationship is essential in any collaborative form; this connection humbles me and allows me to trust others with the welfare of the company. Additionally, I hope to foster a stronger relationship between the students of Musical Theatre, Drama, and Theatre Design and Production. Because Boal encourages the acceptance of diversity and differing in opinion, a company on campus could help create a stronger and more empathetic relationship between these majors. Although I see this initiative already occurring in CCM, I feel it is not considered a priority by the faculty, and I hope to enlighten both faculty and students to its importance in a healthy, cohesive and professional relationship in the theater.

**Reflection:**

Reflection is an essential piece of the puzzle to improving the work Boal does. After each company meeting, I plan to write down my thoughts in a journal of what went well and what needs improvement. I would note particular moments of the meeting that emphasized the principles of Theatre of the Oppressed, and the process by which those moments occurred. At the beginning of each meeting, I would share a summary of my reflection with the company, and at the end of the meeting I would take feedback from members. This feedback is important in recognizing individual and collective progress. Reflection questions would include:

* Is the company better connected than it was from our first meeting? Why or why not?
* How are the roles of the oppressed and the oppressor perceived and portrayed in exercises and vignettes?
* How can the company members gain a better perspective on the role of oppressor and oppressed in society?
* How is social activism emphasized through the vignettes?
* Do the vignettes reflect an adequate amount of preparation? (brainstorming, synthesis of details, engagement of the audience)

**Dissemination:**

Last summer, we presented the culmination of our company’s work to an audience in a traditional theater setting. This presentation included a demonstration of the warm up exercises, and a selected number of vignettes. Additionally, photos taken at our meetings and presented. This form of presentation would be the ideal dissemination medium. The audience can be anyone, because anyone should be able to be inspired and pursue a course of social action. The messages we are trying to send should be universal and accessible across many cultures and ideologies.

**Project Advisor:**

I have consulted with Vince DeGeorge of the Musical Theatre Faculty and Brant Russell of the Drama Faculty to provide support and mentorship to Julia Netzer and myself in developing the Boal company. Additionally, I have been in contact with Matt Hill, a musical theatre senior, who has experience with starting theatre projects with groups of people. He has suggested advice that has been very helpful in scheduling and coordinating the start of Boal.

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**Budget:**

No budget applicable.