

COMS 401: Performance and Social Change

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course focuses on using performance as an agent of discovery and change in personal and social life. In everyday life, we construct and express our various identities as unique individuals and as members of a community or social system (in our appearance, our demeanor, our actions, our affiliations...). We mark events with festivals, ceremonies and rituals; in short we "perform" as individuals and communities every day.

As we do so, we affirm and/or challenge the values and beliefs that define us as a community, and the norms by which we agree to live. In effect, we construct our social system as we negotiate our places within it. Often, we do this without any awareness of the ideologies and power dynamics at work in the situation. We say, "well, it's out of my hands. That's just the way things are." This class is intended to make us aware of the ubiquity of these subtle dynamics, to recognize them in specific settings and contexts, and consciously strive to change them.

In this course we will examine and employ performance as a method for transforming relations (systemic and personal) that are based in unequal relationships of power. We will examine the dynamics of oppression which pervade our lives and constrain our actions - as individuals and communities. To do so, we will study the performance theory and strategies for social change outlined by Augusto Boal.

We define performance as a framed, reflexive communication endeavor. **Reflexivity, in Boal's words, is "the capacity of human beings to observe themselves in action."**

We will develop performances to uncover and examine complexities of everyday situations, to reflect on and analyze the dynamics of oppression at work in these situations, and to enact various strategies for dealing with these complexities. We will learn firsthand the political, pragmatic and logistical challenges of using performance for social change.

We will create performances that enable us to:

1. analyze communication situations & contexts that are enigmatic, troublesome or problematic
2. understand and appreciate the dynamics of the problem for the different characters involved – to see the problem through points of view other than our own.
3. explore and test alternative viewpoints and actions by enacting various solutions to the problem

In the process, students will

1. develop a method for perceiving and understanding power dynamics in any situation
2. develop an appreciation of diverse points of view in communication processes, and
3. develop a dialogic, problem solving approach to social and personal issues of power and privilege

Our in-class work will emphasize putting theory "on its feet" in performance practice. The class is highly interactive and collaborative; attendance and active participation is required. Dress comfortably for any kind of movement (if necessary, bring a change of clothes).

TEXTS

required:

- [TO] Augusto Boal, Theatre of the Oppressed. Theatre Communications Group, 1985.
 [G] Augusto Boal, Games for Actors and Non-Actors, 2nd ed. 2002. Routledge, 1992.
 [PB] Schutzman and Cohen-Cruz, editors, Playing Boal: Theatre, Therapy, Activism. Routledge, 1994

recommended; not required - a great system for working up performances through improvisation:

- [W] Jeff Wirth, Interactive Acting. Fall Creek Press, 1994.

REQUIREMENTS (assignment guidelines are at the end of the syllabus)

| | | |
|--------------------------------|------------------------------|------|
| 1st Performance (Solo) | Story of Oppression | C/NC |
| 2nd Performance (Solo) | Image Theatre on Identity | 10% |
| Critical Reflection paper | | 5 |
| 3rd Performance (Duo or group) | Image Theatre Transformation | 20 |
| Critical Reflection paper | | 10 |
| 4th Performance (Group) | Forum Theatre | 25 |
| Critical Reflection paper | | 10 |

**note: If warranted, individual grades for group performances will be adjusted on the basis of confidential peer evaluations

| | |
|--|------|
| Newsgroup Postings - minimum of 3 postings | 10% |
| Extent and quality of your contribution to the ongoing work of the class | 10 |
| | 100% |

<Graduate students: additional research & class presentation required; see me for details>

GRADING SYSTEM

Individual assignments are graded on a standard 10% scale. Number grades only are recorded for assignments. These add up to a percentage. The final course grade will be plus/minus, determined by course totals as follows:

| | | |
|--------------|------------|-----------------|
| 100 - 94 = A | 87-89 = B+ | 77-79 = C+ |
| 93 - 90 = A- | 84-86 = B | 74-76 = C |
| 80-83 = B- | | 70-73 = C- etc. |

COURSE POLICIES

1. This is a 400-level class and your commitment, thinking and writing should be at a senior /graduate level. You are expected to engage seriously with the theories, ideas and problems we'll be working with. I expect an advanced level of commitment and diligence in preparing for class, a mature engagement in discussions, workshops and performances during class, and a willingness to collaboratively reflect on how this work can function outside this classroom. This class does not train you as a performer; it is intended to train you as a sensitive and critical thinker, and an articulate and effective advocate for social justice.
2. This is a participatory class and attendance is mandatory. Excessive (2 or more) absences or consistent tardiness or leaving class early will negatively affect your final grade - beyond the 10% for contributions to class.

3. There are no makeups of missed assignments, whether performances or written assignments. Exceptions will be granted in only the most unanticipated or extreme situations (e.g., medical or other emergency). I will ask for documentation - don't take it personally.
4. Please make every effort to be ready to work (clothes changed, dinner eaten) at the beginning of class. If you are late on performance days, please WAIT in the hallway until you hear applause. Please do not interrupt a performance in progress.
5. I recommend that you team up with a rehearsal partner for your preparation outside of class. You can be invaluable to each other by providing audience feedback to each other as you develop your performances.
6. I am happy to meet with you during office hours or by appointment. Don't hesitate to ask for additional help. And please ask for help **as soon as** you need it.
7. Engage openly and respectfully in class discussions. We will examine ideas which may challenge your ways of being and knowing – I ask that each of us critically examine all beliefs. Feel free to challenge ideas openly, but focus on collaborating with rather than competing with your opponent. We'll work to challenge ourselves, not each other.
8. Remember the following:
 1. All ideas are open for questioning, but the person who asserts, must support her/his argument.
 2. The philosophy for this class is that we are here to learn about ideas, how to argue in favor of ideas, to test our own beliefs and values, and to raise our consciousness. Please do not take critical dialogue personally. We all (including - perhaps especially me) need enlightenment.
 3. Take responsibility for your own learning. Ask questions, seek help, come to class prepared and with ideas to try, do your part to create a committed and open-minded community for us all.
 4. HAVE FUN! The work is challenging, but **working** doesn't have to be. We can be serious but still laugh a lot (when the magic works, that's how it goes).

COURSE SCHEDULE

- 2/4: PERFORMANCE AS A FRAMED, REFLEXIVE COMMUNICATION EVENT
Course intro & overview; intro's to each other
- 2/11: PERFORMANCE AS A WAY OF KNOWING: reflexivity & conscientization
Theatre of the Oppressed [TO]: Foreward & Introduction
Playing Boal [PB]: Introduction, & Boal in Brazil, France, the USA, pp. 1-32; Political Master Swimmer, 134; Brechtian Shamanism, 137-55
Games [G]: Translator's Intros, pp.xxii-xxix; Prefaces; pp.1-17; and 298- 301
<*1st Performance* -Moment of Oppression Stories>
- 2/18: PERFORMANCE AS IMAGE & DISPLAY
[G] – Ch's 1 & 2, 18-46; Ch 3 to p.74 ;
[PB] – Reinventing the Wheel, 53-63 and Masks of Solidarity,157-70

- 2/25: IMAGE THEATRE PREPARATION
****bring in a group photo (of family, friends, or colleagues) for us to work with - one that expresses character, relationship, power structures**
[G] -- 114 - 127; 127-148; 171 -215
[PB] – Boal, Brecht & the Body, 124-33;
- 3/3: < Performance - Image Theatre on Identity >
- 3/10: PERFORMANCE AS TELEMICROSCOPIC: DYNAMIZING THE IMAGE
[G] -- pp. 77 - 89; 92-114; 148-170 and 217-226
[PB] – “Out of the Silence,” 35-52 and Boal & Moreno, 87-109
IT Papers due; 1st newsgroup posting due
- 3/17: < Performance - Image Theatre Transformation; with discussion questions >
- 3/24: < Performances continued> ** NOTE: standards go up for the 2nd day of performances ** **IITT Papers due**
- 3/31: Chesar Chavez Day — campus closed; no class
- 4/7: SPRING BREAK ---- **2nd newsgroup posting due before 4/14**
- 4/14: PERFORMANCE AND EFFICACY
[TO]: Aristotle's Coersive System of Tragedy, 1-50; Poetics of the Oppressed, 116-56
[G] -- pp. 217-49
[PB] – “Mainstream or Margin,” 110-23; "She Made Her Brother Smile," 81-83
- 4/21: PERFORMANCE AS SOCIAL LABORATORY
[TO] – Hegel & Brecht, 80-115
[PB] –Brechtian Shamanism, 137-55; “Structures of Power,” 171-84
[G] -- pp. 224-47
- 4/28: FORUM THEATRE PREPARATION
[PB] – “Feminist Acts,” 185-97; “Canadian Roundtable,” 198-26 and “Theatricalizing Politics,” 227-35
[TO] – Need for the Joker, Goals of the Joker, Structures of the Joker, 167-90
- 5/5: < Forum Theatre performances & discussion questions; peer evals due >
- 5/12: < performances continued > Papers due for 1st round of FT perf's
- 5/19: <performances continued > **Papers due for all FT perf's**
3rd newsgroup posting due
- 5/26: final exam to be determined

ASSIGNMENT GUIDELINES

Newsgroup Postings- minimum of three (10%): Here, you'll respond to performances; also use this to

respond to readings, workshops, etc., or to continue discussions begun in class. This is your communal space, to keep in touch outside of class. We will use WebCT for our course newsgroup and chat rooms.

The url for our WebCT page is:

https://webteach.csun.edu:31987/SCRIPT/COMS401_11243-Logan-Sp04/scripts/serve_home

Tedious, isn't it?? **Send me an email and I'll paste it into my reply for you.** Then, just bookmark it when you get there.

You are automatically registered on WebCT when you register for this course. To log in to WebCT, use your campus user ID and password (the one you use for SOLAR). We may also use Chatrooms on our WebCT site. I encourage you to use these on your own as well for online group meetings.

Writing: Mechanical & Stylistic Competence: All newsgroup postings, papers and presentations should be typed and in appropriate format [double-spaced, with headers, numbered pages and standard fonts & margins]. You may use either the Modern Languages Association [MLA] or the American Psychological Association [APA] style manual. Consult UC Berkeley's Resource Page for Citing Electronic Sources - an index of links to academic style manuals including MLA and APA. In-class Free Writes will not be graded on mechanics.

Students are responsible for proper spelling, grammar, usage and syntax in all written assignments. If you need help in these areas, I urge you to use the services of the Writing Lab of the Learning Resource Center located in the Student Services Building, room 408. Workshops and individual tutoring are available free to all CSUN students. There is even an online writing lab.

Academic Honesty is expected and required. If you are caught in any form of plagiarism or cheating, you will fail this course and will be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the Student Conduct Code. If you are uncertain about what constitutes academic dishonesty, consult the university catalog and/or the schedule of classes for definitions, examples and penalties. Click here for the section from the university catalog.

Always Ask for help when you need it. I am happy to meet with you during office hours or by appointment. Don't hesitate to ask for additional help. And don't wait until you're behind - ask for help as soon as you need it.

PERFORMANCE GUIDELINES

IN GENERAL:

NO SKITS! The performances you create must **go beyond** Saturday-Night-Live-type skits, which are typically quick, breezy and superficial (and funny, often). Your characters should be 3-dimensional, and their situations and encounters should be realistic and significant.

Your performances may be serious or funny - or best of all - a mix of both. But they must be believable and have substance. What's important is that you

- 1) develop the scene, situation or action in specific and concrete detail,
- 2) examine the action in all its complexity, and
- 3) engage the audience on the problem you pose and the issue that drives it
- 4) teach us something, make us see things differently

The objective of your performances is to enact scenarios that present problems to be solved - not entertainments to be consumed and enjoyed. The goal of performance is not the performance;

it's what the performance teaches us. And this, as you'll see, can bring *tremendous joy* to an audience.

Your performances may take any form and use any materials, within the parameters of Boal's methodology for each assignment. Feel free to use props, set pieces, music or sound, etc., but use these to support the action of the scene; don't count on them to carry it. You may use any technology, as long as you've worked with it in rehearsals and can handle it in performance.

You may choose one issue or oppression (e.g. racism, sexism, etc.) to focus on throughout the semester, exploring it from different angles and in different ways in each performance. Or you may choose a different oppression for each assignment. In any case, work with issues that you care about, situations that carry a "charge" for you. The more you care about the issue, the easier it will be to develop a compelling performance.

1st PERFORMANCE -- OPENING STORY of Oppression (solo; 3-5 minutes)

Tell us the story of an incident or moment in which you directly experienced oppression - of yourself or of another. In telling the story, include what it revealed to you about yourself or about the social setting or the social system

2nd PERFORMANCE -- IMAGE THEATRE on IDENTITY (solo; 3-5 minutes):

Use Boal's techniques to sculpt an image theatre centering on who you are, were or would like to be (your choice). Your performance should express significant aspects of your identity, and should show us in freeze-frame your social/cultural system and your place in it (-- and how you got there, why you stay or not).

In the image you create, situate yourself in a system of relationships (e.g., family, communal, cultural, global). Advice: the more particular the relationships, the more specific the action of the scene will be. The more specific the action, the more detail you have to work with.

You will use class colleagues to create your Image Theatre, but you must be the protagonist, the last one to take your place at the center of the scene or the action.

3rd PERFORMANCE - IMAGE THEATRE TRANSFORMATION (duo or group; 5-7 minutes):

Use Boal's Image Theatre techniques to develop a performance that explores opposing forces in a situation, event, relationship, or an enduring condition. Advice: the more active and complex the scene, the more detail you can develop. For instance, an enduring condition (e.g., poverty) must be activated in the particulars of a scene (e.g., soliciting money from strangers, deciding to steal). A condition is a beginning, but it is static, unchanging over time; **activate** it in the particulars of situation developing in the moment. Other examples - loneliness (a condition) activated in meeting a stranger (a situation); racism, sexism, or homophobia (a condition) activated in an accident scene, a picket line (a situation).

The performance should:

- > reveal embedded institutions, values, norms, beliefs etc. that fuel the conflict
- > take apart or slow down the action to examine why and how opposing forces collide
- > effect a transformation in which the conflict is resolved - positively or negatively - in a realistic way (no magic!)

Prepare 2 -4 (typed) discussion questions to ask the class after the performance. Hand these in the night you perform.

4th PERFORMANCE - FORUM THEATRE - group performance

scripted scene, 5-7 minutes; total performance time 20-30 minutes.

More specific details for this assignment will develop as we work through the course material.

Use Boal's methods to develop a forum theatre about a particular issue or oppression in contemporary daily life.

- > create a kernal scene (what Boal calls the “anti-model”) that will be relevant and compelling to the class
- > develop particular ways to activate this audience (whom you know by now) into spect-actors
- > be believable and clear in enacting power relationships, acts of collusion, cops in the head, and other unexamined assumptions of your characters

Tackle something you care about, a problem that you don't necessarily have an answer for.

The "anti-model," your scripted scene, should be between 5 & 7 minutes long. Total performance time, including the second run with spect-actors, will then be 20-30 minutes.

As a group, you will develop, script, and rehearse the scene. You will prepare 3 - 4 questions (typed & distributed to the class) to discuss with the class after you perform. Hand in a typed script of the anti-model on the night you perform.

Each group member will hand in a typed CONFIDENTIAL evaluation of the commitment and productivity of your group's members, including yourself. Assign a grade to each member of your group, including yourself, and justify it. Peer evals are due the last day of FT performances.

CRITICAL REFLECTION PAPERS for each graded performance:

The class period following each performance, submit a 3-5 page paper (typed) on your own performance.

For these papers you're expected to **use (and cite) Boal's concepts and theories and apply them to the performance you developed.** Here, you'll reflect on your intentions, your process and the outcome.

Explain your objectives for the performance -- what you wanted to show or teach us - and provide a rationale for specific choices you made as you worked up the performance. Analyze the effectiveness of the choices you made, perhaps discussing what you would do differently. Lastly, what did the audience response teach you?

NEWSGROUP RESPONSES:

For the newsgroup postings, you'll respond to others' performances. For these, don't try to cover all performances, and avoid generic or blanket statements: “you were all great; interesting and engaging” doesn't really tell us much beyond your being supportive.

You want to reflect on one or two performances from the round, being as specific, descriptive and analytic as possible. **You want to help each other by providing honest, informed, constructive feedback.** Analyze what made it so compelling for you and/or the class; or what got in the way of the performer's good intentions, for instance. Be as specific as possible in analyzing the effect of specific choices the creator(s) made in developing the performance- e.g., the characterizations, the power dynamics displayed, how the performance was structured and progressed, etc. - and why these worked (or didn't). What did you learn about the issue through this performance? Lastly, what did the audience response teach you?