BOXWHATBOX: Finland Casebook

Canadian Fusion Actor Training in a European Context

**** POWER POINT Slide 1**

As a theatre practitioner and a citizen of a marginal North American country, I have always been fascinated by the idea of boxes. I shall narrow this somewhat voluminous term somewhat in terms of my interest. First, there is the question of using boxes on stage as the primary component of stage setting and properties in scenography. They fascinate me as modular set components which can be used in a multiplicity of ways to achieve flexible staging practise. In actor training, it is far more valuable to have on hand a series of boxes of various shapes and dimensions than the trappings of what I call unreal naturalism – tables, chairs, beds, kitchen sinks – which have traditionally been a hallmark of the American actor training approach. If actors are athletes of the imagination, as well as being, in Artaud's memorable phrase, "athletes of the heart", then the manipulation of material objects in training is essential. Boxes are particularly utilitarian. They can contain; they support; they obstruct; they resound. Actors function with a realistic set. One *plays* with boxes. Humans are generally geometric in their orientation: we have a difficult time turning a circle into a square, but the least of us can turn a box into a table, or a hubcap into a warrior's shield.

The philosophies of Aristotle and Augusto Boal have seldom been conjoined, and have more often been juxtaposed, as Boal himself does in the early chapters of his book *The Theatre of the Oppressed.* In one way, however, they can be found to share common ground. Aristotle is generally interpreted as having placed spectacle as the least important of the theatrical modes. Boal, too, after early experiments in realism, has eschewed contrived setting in his theatre work. From this meeting ground they appear to diverge once again. Boal places the primacy of theatrical performance

squarely on the shoulders of the actor. Aristotle placed the nexus of theatricality within the narrative. Basing his analysis around the *Oedipus Rex*, he concluded that character comes from plot. In Boal, plot comes from character. Yet in the end these divergent paths re-connect a bit farther up the road of performance. In the various forms of the theatre of the oppressed, the story of the disenfranchised is taken and told by the actors, and the outcome is altered, becomes alterable. Corporeal set properties are antithetical to such an approach; their permanence sends a strong semiotic signal that change is ephemeral and that the status quo remains fixed. The status quo that Boal insists is reified by Aristotle's concept of *katharsis* is, I would argue, always undermined by the actor's imaginative rebellion against realistic illusion.

Viola Spolin, a great American theatre teacher and pedagogical innovator of the mid-20th century, created a series of improvisational exercises for actors which centred around what she called the "5Ws" – who, what, where, when, and why. In dealing with the somewhat linear mind of the untrained or inexperienced American actor, Spolin, years before Boal, sought a kind of enfranchisement for the performer. Where Boal concentrated on the *spect-actor*, the non-theatre citizen whose story is transformed by trained actors on the stage with their willing participation, Spolin's milieu was the theatre studio. Her exercises in *Where*, w*hen, what*, *why* and *who* are in many respects a practical American distillation of Stanislavski and in particular his focus on achieving what he called *the creative state of mind*, the optimum sensibility for an actor's ability to create a world on the stage. Although some of her exercises require students to draw a map of a set design before the exercise begins, none of the exercises requires real set properties – and the students have to leave the map behind once they begin to improvise. Spolin helped initiate a sea change in North American actor-training, away from the literal and toward the magical, away from what *is* and

towards what Stanislavski called the *Magic If*.

So far I have been discussing boxes in the physical context of their use on stage as imaginative triggers. I have mentioned the work of Boal and Spolin because their work not only focuses on, and celebrates, this primacy of imagination, but because these two theatre thinkers have so strongly influenced my own approach to working in, and training others for, the theatre.

Certainly there are others one must mention when thinking of the box on stage, first amongst them Grotowski, whose Poor Theatre in the 1960s was in some respects a model for the work of Boal in Brazil. My own interest in a Poor Theatre that is not for the poor alone has been influenced by these three and by the work of Bertolt Brecht. With the mention of these four theatre artists I come to the second, and more significant, form of boxes in my theatrical thinking. One cannot mention names such as these without attaching a sense of politicisation to the theatre. Theatre, in my view, is always a political act, either as an act of citizenship in the Greek tradition, a dialectical dialogue in the manner of Hegel and Schiller, a subjective gaze in the work of polemical theatre such as agit-prop or agenda theatres, or a reifying social force as described by Bergson in the form of conventional comedy and drama. By extension, theatre training, and within that context actor training, is a political act. One trains subjects or one trains citizens.

There is an idiom in English which was current in the early 1990s, and was henceforth appropriated by corporate English and thus lost its currency. That idiom is *thinking outside the box*. The phrase was used to describe unconventional thinking within conventional infrastructures or environments, creative solutions to systemic problems.

U2 singer Bono, introducing his band's revival of the Beatles *Helter Skelter*, which had been soiled by association with the madness of Charles Manson, said in introducing the band's revised version of the tune, "We're taking it back". His meaning, I think, was that the song needed to be liberated from a box, a diminishing of its resonance through an involuntary captivity. So in following this political act on the part of Bono, I have begun to liberate the phrase "thinking outside the box" from its corporate captors.

The meaning of thinking outside the box can be extrapolated easily into a theatrical context, which, for me, is merely a microcosm of social context generally. Too often we are trained to think in straight lines, because straight lines are quite simple to enforce, require little imagination to envision, and acquire a sense of stolid permanence. Permanence implies non-resistance or at least the futility of resistance, and consequently the subordination of the subject, in this case the actor. The straight lines the actor faces are those found in the published text of a manuscript or play. The spectator, too, is often subject to these conventional restrictions: North American audiences listen more acutely than they watch, and draw their understanding of a play's events primarily from the words spoken by the actors. Silence, which is more than the absence of words; or the expression of the actors' bodies; all of the gestic codes we learn as children are forgotten in the rush back to the safe linearity of the straight line. The spectator leans back and waits for what is intended for her. The actor stands still and speaks.

My workshop process is therefore called *BoxWhatBox* It's all one word, because when it's one word it simultaneously connotes the meaning of the original interrogative phrase and the fact that the syntax of language is itself is a box. It's in capital letters because it's a political act, though perhaps of a very small kind. Actors

do not liberate nations, and actor trainers can only hope to liberate actors. Still, even a polite political act should not apologise for its existence, I think. A tiny gesture is a gesture nonetheless.

****POWER POINT Slide 2**

My work with *BoxWhatBox* began with a small, hollow rubber ball emblazoned with the cheerful corporate visage of Mickey Mouse. Well, I say corporate, but I took Mickey back, too. In 1989 I was training actors at Concordia University in Montréal and my lifelong fascination with balls of all kinds led me to think that a ball might make an effective warm-up tool in a studio class. I started by taking the actors into a large circle and asking them to keep the ball in the air, using only one hand at a time, never touching the ball twice consecutively. This simple version of the game proved so frustratingly, compelling difficult to play that it became the centrepiece of my training approach. Actors revealed themselves utterly in the way they played Ball Basic; the way they allowed others to dominate, or played the hero, or indulged their egos in self-criticism when they let the ball drop. They revealed themselves when they could not make a clear choice or demonstrate a clear intention as to where the ball should be directed; when they committed only part of their bodies to making contact with the ball; when they grew distracted and failed to be to be ready and in the present moment; when they failed to make any adjustment after an unsuccessful touch.

All of these elements are physical correlatives to the process of acting. Actors must take responsibility onstage, and yet cede responsibility to the ensemble. They cannot always play the hero, nor can they simply ignore those others whom they deem inadequate. They must always be aligned to the moment, ready with what I call positive anticipation for anything that might happen. This concentration cannot suffer

from distraction or a lack of physical commitment to a line or an action. Each moment represents a choice on the part of the actor/character, and an intention that must be pursued. Each strategy or tactic employed to achieve that intention represents an adjustment that has been made in response to failure, the failure of the previous tactic.

In the Ball Basic game, the objective is, simply, to keep the ball in the air. The air and the flying ball represent the play, and the playing of the play. The movement of ball from one actor to another is dialogue, physical or verbal. An actor who does not care how the ball they touch is delivered to another is a poor communicator, a careless, selfish actor, the kind who makes, in the terms of the profession, choices which are too general. The choices are unclear, the intention unfocussed. The execution of the intention through tactics lacks commitment, and the actor is therefore detrimental to the ensemble.

An actor who fails to keep the ball in the air when it is delivered *to* them is also a poor communicator. If they fail to receive the ball, in dialogical terms they may be trying hard, but they are poor listeners. They must adjust, or the ball will drop. If the ball drops, it must be picked up without any extra demonstration, such as abject apologies, self-criticism, or glaring malevolently at the actor beside you. All this is *commentary*, and represents, even in the most sincere and well-intentioned actor, the misuse of the ego. All actors must employ their egos, but only in a positive way, one which serves the role, the scene, and the play.

Balls are dropped all the time in the theatre. We even have a phrase in English for a conversation that hits an awkward lacuna: *dropping the ball*. The important thing, the act which represents the transcendence of the theatre over any individual, is the

immediate picking up of the ball and getting on with the game.

The principles of the ball game in this basic variation are never explained at the outset, because then they become rules. Instead, a couple of very basic instructions are given and then the principles reveal themselves as the playing continues, and especially whenever it stops. Occasionally the animateur makes an intervention to isolate a teaching point, but otherwise there is no speaking. Meaning and self-learning are developed without text and without a reliance on verbal expression. The operating concepts are Power, Joy, and Control. While the inability to talk through the exercise is initially frustrating for the actors, after a short time it is also liberating.

On a practical physical level, the ball also reveals the physical capabilities of the actors. The game cannot be played effectively without working from a position of *neutral alignment*, that aligned posture which exists mid-way between the actor and character. It is a relaxed state of awareness and readiness. The actors are in fact creating the environment for Stanislavski's *Creative State of Mind.* They are entering a mental and physical space where they can be actors.

(SLIDE Finland 2 #0012) – Walking Ball

Over the years, I have developed many variations of the ball game, each designed to break physical and mental habits and to reveal patterns in thinking and preparing which must be addressed by the actor.

****POWER POINT Slide 4 - Demechanisation**

In so doing I am following the philosophy of Boal, whose exercises in *demechanisation* are meant to alter the actor's physical gaze from that of an upright

biped who views everything at eye level to a being capable of seeing high and low, side to side, up and down, inside and out. Boal's exercises serve as a template for exercises I have developed to take the actors out of the habit of approaching every character intellectually, armed with a series of physical assumptions. A child, for instance, sees a world of bigger people and bigger things. An actor may play a child, or more often play someone with a child's mindset. They must acquire this view of the world if they are to succeed. An upright adult biped sees the world only in an adult way, and even adults have far more perspectives than this single view. What does it feel like, what is the significance when one drops on one's knees to beg to God for mercy or help? This significance has been lost to many actors because in our daily lives we quite naturally try to spend all our time on top of things, looking down. We spend so little time on our knees, looking up. When we wake in the morning we are prone. To glimpse the meaningful world we must look sideways; it is on one side and the other. What did the American killer Charles Whitman see when he glanced down from a tower in Texas and saw the human ants he would later shoot?
An actor needs to feel that, and in order to feel that, s/he must be able to see that.

(SLIDES Finland 1 #213, 215, 260) – Demechanisation Exercises

Actors in the demechanisation phase of a workshop may move about like crabs, sideways on all fours. They may walk like elephants, right foot and left hand touching the floor at the same time, or like camels, right hand and right foot touching simultaneously, followed by left and left. They may hop like kangaroos, with their hands on their ankles, or like frogs, crouching, then flying, perhaps over each other, as children do. They may hop, or skip along, they may walk like businessmen or soldiers, on the clap of hands they may drop one hand to the ground and do a spin like an airplane turning in mid-air. The work of Rudolf Laban comes into play, and here I

mean play literally, in my work in demechanisation. Actors may be asked to move in a way that expresses their feeling of the words *smooth* or *sharp*, *quick* or *slow*, *heavy* or *light*, or any combination of these. The BWB workshop places a strong emphasis on games, some of which have demechanisation as their objective, and all of which have a regaining of the idea of *play* as a central aim.

The exercises may appear like games from a childhood one did not experience but one heard about; strange but familiar. What is familiar is the release inherent in regaining a sense of play, and the easy transition from individual responsibility to team or ensemble responsibility.

(SLIDES Finland 1 # 17, 18, 136)

Games in pairs, such as Irish Duels and Hypnosis may highlight competition, a necessary component of acting which is often played down in political theatre. Team games such as the Wooden Sword

(SLIDE Finland 1 #20)

are also competitive, involving coordinated movement that is picked up on the fly by each team.

Demechanisation work is physically demanding. It cannot be done for long, or correctly, without the actor's employment of proper breathing and neutral alignment. All of the elements of BoxWhatBox are meant to work synergistically with each other, recurring within each other as echoes of an integrated approach.

****POWER POINT Slide 4**

(SLIDE Finland 1 # 41)

Games such as Wooden Sword and Stick Knots are also exercises in rhythm, and rhythm forms one of the three key components of BoxWhatBox, the others being demechanisation and exercises/games in image creation. The rhythm games involve both vocal and percussive rhythm.

(SLIDE Finland 1 # 23)

One need not be musical to play, just as an actor need not be an athlete to play with the ball. What is required is desire, the ability to refine concentration, to work in tandem with your rhythm group while remaining receptive to the rhythms of other groups.

Vocal rounds such as children's songs may be used, fragments of classical tunes can be employed; often I like to begin with the actors' names. This is another piece of language we take for granted, and in such assumptions we lose the unconscious intention we attach to the saying of our name. Actors are asked to try to communicate something essential of themselves to another in the saying of their name. It's important that they speak to each other, making eye contact. Not only is this a metaphor for the dialogue of theatre, but it represents what I call *true contact*, the investment of the self in a moment intended to be shared with another. Theatre is bereft of meaning without true contact, and contact begins with an investment in the self. A recent workshop in Brno utilising the names and favourite images of the actors' hometowns produced a similar sense of investment.

****POWER POINT Slide – Image Creation/Textual Non-Linearity**

Finally, there are exercises and games centred around image and non-linear text creation. When I am asked to produce a performance out of the workshop, as I was in Jyväskylä, Finland, I create text by establishing a theme and then constructing

exercises in which the actors take on characters and improvise setting and action. Reliance on verbal expression is still not encouraged. Often this phase of the workshop will begin with exercises in which the characters must speak in gibberish. Spolin's exercises are useful templates in this instance. A typical gradient involves a single actor trying to sell a "magic product" to a studio audience, being forced to demonstrate its properties and virtues and make the sales pitch without the aid of real words. Two actors may then meet in an agreed-upon scenario and try to exchange their stories. Afterwards the observing actors and the participants attempt to translate what they saw. A third scenario graduates the work to groups. Each group creates a magic product television advertisement. Within five minutes they must determine the product, its qualities, the target audience, create the narrative for the ad, cast it, rehearse it, and then play it before the observing actors, in gibberish.

(SLIDES Finland 1 # 202)

More recently, as I work so often in cultures where I do not speak the native language, I have added exercises to this anti-text or image creation phase. Human sculpture originates, as far as I know, with Grotowski. In BoxWhatBox workshop actors are asked to create a "museum" base around them, and to fill the museum with sculptures of paintings, or tableaux, which they develop with minute attention to physical detail. A narrator may then take observing spectators on a "tour" of the museum, drawing their attention to the physical nuances of expressed emotion in each work of art.

Occasionally the museum creators will be tested through the device of their narrator having "a sudden heart attack"; pressed into service will be a member of another group or a spectator who, of course, knows nothing about the objectives or the theme

of each piece and thus must simply interpret what s/he sees. This ensures that the actors are not falling back into politeness or an unwillingness to critically evaluate their own work.

In Finland, working over six half days with a cast of eleven women and one man, I felt the need to create games in image creation which responded more specifically to women's imagery or experience.

(SLIDE Finland 1 #87)

The Perfect Family Doll House involves two players who create, using other actors, their ideal family in the form of a doll house. The doll house is a frozen tableau, manipulated by the players as they "play" with the dolls. Each doll, or member of the family, has a secret, however. (Mystery and secret is a hallmark of the psychological realism teaching of the American Michael Shurtleff.) When they are cued, each doll "breaks free" and starts behaving the way that they truly feel towards other members of the household.

(SLIDE Finland 1 #100)

They must then be subdued and put back in their place by one or both of the players. More and more dolls break free until chaos reigns. The political import of the exercise remains firmly fixed as subtext in this exercise.

Another exercise developed in Finland was *Dress-Up*.

(SLIDE Finland 1 #104).

Mounds of clothes or accessories are placed randomly around the stage. Two actors

are asked to take on a scenario – a setting, most particularly – and to visit each piece, putting it on and assuming a role of someone they know or imagine. This game accentuates awareness of roles as a particular kind of box; it also tests the actors' flexibility in adjusting to a non-scripted situation.

(SLIDE Finland 1 #223)

Finally, in Finland we developed *The Performance.* In this exercise four or five actors are asked to think of a secret which only they know about themselves. Then they are asked to construct a scenario which demonstrates how they act in daily life around people who do not know the secret. The actors are placed on boxes facing the audience, as if before a make-up mirror, getting ready for a "show". One stands and, for instance, tells the audience they have a secret no one else knows; for instance, that she loves her brother dearly. She introduces the characters in her scenario – mother, father, dog, brother - played by the other actors onstage. The scene takes place, a typical day at home, sister and brother fighting like cats and dogs over nothing consequential, parents impotent or indifferent. The scene is often ended by two sticks clapped by a narrator at the side of the stage. The actor steps forward and implicates the audience: *please don't tell my secret.*

Actors in the BoxWhatBox workshop develop a strong sense of both individual and ensemble responsibility. Through demechanisation exercises and the use of the ball they begin to physically incorporate crucial principles in creative expression and reception. Through rhythm they learn to refine their awareness not only of concentration but of the inherent musicality of human expression in both vocal and physical expression. The games and exercises in image creation and non-linear text creation remove the crutch of the script and the spoken word so that each my be later

employed effectively, with full consciousness.

In every element of BoxWhatBox the focus remains on the development of the actor's ability to school themselves in expressing themselves and understanding others. Teachers, as well as English as a Second/Foreign Language students, have proven equally open to the approach of the workshop – it is, in my conception at least, an enfranchising tool, and enfranchisement is a franchise which extends beyond the academy and the walls of the theatre, and into the boxes of daily life in our society. The fact that it has so far worked effectively in Hungary, Romania, Finland, Czech Republic, and Canada assures me that there are indeed languages we all speak.

Michael Devine

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