

# **Interactive Versions of Hierarchy**

Marcia Hyatt and Margy Nelson

In traditional stage performance, there is what is felt to be an impenetrable screen between audience and stage: actors on the stage, audience in their seats. Audience members may be stimulated to a full range of emotions, but one thing they never or very rarely think to do is leave their seats and penetrate that screen. Interactive theater, on the other hand, encourages audience members to do precisely that: leave their seats, penetrate the screen, join the action on stage, and attempt to alter the course of events.

We have used interactive versions of Hierarchy in several leadership development programs. Our approach has been to blend Barry Oshry's system theory with Augusto Boal's Theatre techniques<sup>1</sup>. The program goal has been to support managers in being more system-savvy *in action*, to move beyond their usual limitations, and to experience possibilities where they had thought none existed.

Using actors who were literate in both Boal's and Oshry's work, we modified the play, shortening it and shaping scenes that showed Carter being more clearly "oppressed" – in Boalian terms making "errors" that continued to keep him in low power conditions. We created three new scenes, each presenting Carter in a different systemic relationship, one as Top, another as Bottom, and another as Middle. We also made the play physical so that actors and audience members entering the scene would be up and moving and not simply

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<sup>1</sup> See Boal, Augusto, Games for Actors and Non-Actors. Routledge, 2005.

talking. We used various symbols such as different elevations – Top high, others low – to embody status.

**Setting the Stage.** We begin with an introduction to Oshry's systems framework. In some cases, our program has followed an Organization Workshop in which that framework played a central part; at other times, we've simply presented an overview of the theory.

We also engage participants in a few physical warm-up activities, getting them out of their chairs and into their bodies and movement, setting the tone that this program is about taking ideas into action.

### **The Play**

...The actors perform a scene in which Carter has clearly made some self-disempowering "errors". When the scene is completed, audience members are asked if they agree with Carter's solution. They are likely to say no.

...They are then told that the play will be performed again, and this time members are encouraged to stop the play (call Stop!) and replace Carter at points where they think he is making errors that contribute to his disempowerment.

... There are several iterations of this process in which the actors continue the oppression and audience members stop the action, enter the scene, and attempt to create more favorable outcomes for Carter. (See "Write Your Own Play" for more on this process.)

## **Ingredients that make this activity work.**

**1. A “Joker.”** A Joker is someone who is knowledgeable about Boalian techniques. The joker manages the overall rhythm, pace, and energy of the experience. One key Joker function is to ensure that audience members try out their solutions through action rather than talking about what they *would* do. The Joker also pushes back on “magic” (unrealistic) solutions.

**2. Actors.** It’s important to have actors who are literate in both improvisation techniques and in the worlds of Tops, Middles and Bottoms. Improvisation is an art in itself, with its own guidelines for success, such as always going with whatever reality the spect-actor<sup>2</sup> bring on stage, knowing when to shut up so that the spect-actor can speak, drawing him/her out as any good conversationalist would.

We have experimented with having audience members replace the actors. Very rarely does this work and we don’t encourage it. The skill of the actor is to keep a balance between maintaining the oppression and allowing change. Audience members who replace actors are generally experienced as less believable – either too easily influenced or unreasonably resistant. Also, actors, given their improvisational skills, are primed to make this fun!

**3. Symbolism.** Symbols can create indelible images. In our warm-ups we use movement, poses, and mimes to develop images for

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<sup>2</sup> Boal’s term for the audience member who is both spectator and actor.

the Human Systems concepts. For example, to create the image of Top Overload, we might have Top stand in the center while others, from all sides, relentlessly pile on item after item as Top struggles over where to begin even as he/she is being gradually crushed under the load. To visualize Customer Neglect, we might have Customer stand and wave money at the organization while Top, Middle, and Bottom have their backs turned. For Middle Crunch, we could have Bottom and Top each grab one of Middle's arms, and whenever Middle attempts to give something to one party, Middle is tugged away by the other party. For Tops sucking up responsibility, we would have Top pulling things out of others' hands while Middle and Bottom lie on floor comfortably relaxed. For Door A, people are sucked right off the stage; for Bottoms holding others responsible, Bottom and Middle stand in an aggressive poses pointing determinedly up at Top. Symbols are also used in the plays: different elevations demonstrating status differences – Tops way up high, others down below; or Middle answering phone call after phone call as the phone itself gradually grows larger and heavier..

**4. An audience willing to play.** The effectiveness of this method depends on the willingness of audience members to come up out of their chairs and step into the action. Not everyone is immediately prepared to so; fear of being embarrassed or looking stupid come into play.

Cohort groups in leadership development programs – where members have developed some comfort with one another - have worked well. When presenting in situations where people may be more on guard with one another, we have learned to create support structures that reduce personal risk - for example, having a table

group decide where and how to intervene and then having one member come up and try what is now the group's solution.

Warming up (loosening up) the audience with certain ice-breaking activities helps enormously. Boal offers a variety of games involving interaction and movement.<sup>3</sup> Even here, depending on your audience, one needs to be selective in choosing games that are out of the box, yet not too far out of the box.

**5. How momentum builds.** Part of the resistance to playing stems from the mindset audience members bring to theater: the impenetrable screen between audience and stage. The first audience member who shouts Stop! and steps to the stage, cuts through that screen. The power of that move is that the screen is now cut through for *everyone*. No longer is there a boundary between audience and stage, between audience and actor (thus the brilliance of Boal's term spect-actor, indicating one's legitimacy in either place).

Once that screen is broken, audience members have something else they can do when the play has provoked their emotions: they can *act* and the action begins to take on its own momentum, more and more folks are eager to get to the stage and test out their solutions.

There is a paradox to this type of theater: People may be nervous about stepping to the stage, yet once there, their actions and attempted solutions tend to be more courageous than their actions and solutions in their other lives. This fact is one if not *the* core strength of interactive theatre. This is the practice field on which people test

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<sup>3</sup> See Boal, Augusto, Games for Actors and Non-Actors.

themselves against barriers (the better the actors, the tougher the tests); they step into low power conditions and bring out their more powerful selves.

This underlies our aspirations for this work: that people leave more empowered to deal with the organizational, societal, and family oppression in their lives.

**Marcia Hyatt.** Marcia is both an accomplished organizational development consultant and trainer (winner of the Minnesota Organization Development Practitioner of the Year Award) and an accomplished actor whose stage credits include Florence in *The Odd Couple*, Prudence in *Beyond Therapy*, Agnes in *A Delicate Balance*. Marcia is co-founder of Waterline Consulting focusing on new forms of organizational learning including kinesthetic brainstorming, story telling, and interactive theater projects. Marcia conducts and trains others to conduct **The Organization Workshop** and she has served as anthropologist for **Power Lab**. Marcia was instrumental in bringing **What a Way to Make a Living** to the stage and she stars regularly as Angel Laurie.

**Margy Nelson.** Margy was an original core member of Augusto Boal's Center for Theater of the Oppressed in France in the mid-1970s. She worked with Boal as a workshop teacher, editor of the Center's quarterly review, and performer. She worked extensively to clarify and systematize Boal's techniques and taught and performed with him throughout Europe, North America and Brazil. For the past eight years, Margy has been presenting a broad range of theater programs in the USA and Mexico. She works with Marcia Hyatt, Douglas Scholtz-Carlson, and the Seeing System Players on a variety of kinesthetic brainstorming and theater projects.