In Search of the Radical in Performance

Theatre of the Oppressed with Incarcerated Youth

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The Radical in Performance

In Baz Kershaw’s *The Radical in Performance* (1999), he develops his thesis that the radical in performance can scarcely exist in mainstream theatre today, which is so highly commodified and market-driven, but that if the radical can exist in performance, it is in alternative sites, such as street theatre, protest events, heritage sites, cultural festivals, reminiscence theatre, and in prison contexts. It was my search for “the radical in performance” that took me from working with so-called at-risk youth in schools—also highly market-driven in today’s society—to working with incarcerated youth. My hope was that the radical in performance might provide opportunities for these youth and me to rethink or think differently about ourselves, our life experiences, the structures and institutions that construct us all, and construct them as “criminals”—with the aim of positive change in the lives of individuals toward greater social transformation.

As Kershaw describes, “The freedom that ‘radical performance’ invokes is not just freedom from oppression, repression, exploitation—the resistant sense of the radical, but also freedom to reach beyond existing systems of formalized power, freedom to create currently unimaginable forms of association and action—the transgressive and transcendent sense of the radical” (1999, 18). It is this sense of the radical in performance that I sought in working with youth in the context of incarceration through participatory drama.
inspired by Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed (TO; 1979)—a kind of performance that I hoped ultimately had the potential to open up possibilities that might radically alter social relations including public attitudes toward youth crime, toward greater justice for the youth and for us all.

Performing TO-based Research

The TO-based work with youth in a provincial youth jail (Young Offender Centre, as it was called) in Alberta, Canada, that I facilitated from 2005 to 2008 was framed as my scholarly research as a faculty member in drama and theatre education at the University of Alberta, under the title “The Transformative Potential of Drama in the Education of Incarcerated Youth” and funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. The project passed rigorous ethical reviews by both the university and the Alberta Office of the Solicitor General. The question that guided my study, articulated for the academy and for the funding body, was How can participatory drama contribute to the education of incarcerated youth to avoid future negative outcomes of their “at-risk” behaviors? I was interested in exploring the following:

- The educational needs of incarcerated youth to help them make positive change in their lives
- What drama practices could best contribute to meeting those needs
- How spaces could be created within institutions such as prisons and schools for transformative processes to occur
- How we could assess the benefits of drama intervention in that context

The research was arts-based (Barone and Eisner 1997) using the arts, specifically applied theatre processes (Prentki and Preston 2009), as ways of collectively making meaning—in a qualitative research sense, to generate, interpret, and present (or, in our case, perform) understanding. The research was performative in the sense that performance studies or performance ethnographic (Denzin 2003) approaches explore the performative qualities of our identities, social interactions, and structures and in that it aims to do something in the world. The research was also participatory, valuing participants as coresearchers in the process of creating knowledge (Freire 1998; Park et al., 1993), to the extent that the institutional context permitted, by allowing the youths’ needs and perspectives to guide the process. The popular or applied theatre process (Prentki and Selman 2000; Prentki and Preston 2009), conceptualized as research, involved a series of TO-inspired projects with youth in jail to inform new understandings of the youths’ experiences, their crime, and incarceration.