Democratic Possibilities
Where Popular Art and Politics Converge: Legislative Theatre as an Approach to Citizen Action in Local Democracy

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts
Comparative, International and Development Education
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Abstract

Thesis Title: Democratic Possibilities Where Popular Art and Politics Converge: Legislative Theatre as an Approach to Citizen Action in Local Democracy

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This thesis looks at the following questions: a) Why use a popular theatre method (Legislative Theatre) rather than hold a town hall meeting? and b) How can the co-optation of popular theatre and civic engagement be avoided? Using a variety of methodologies including narrative inquiry, autoethnography, arts-based inquiry, and popular culture theory and methodology the converging points of democracy, civic engagement, and popular theatre are explored. This research provides the basis for a comparative analysis of four Legislative Theatre experiments and the exploration of the ‘democratic facilitator,’ an idea for revitalizing local governance.
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Introduction

This thesis on the “Democratic Possibilities Where Popular Art and Politics Converge: Legislative Theatre as an Approach to Citizen Action in Local Democracy” has been over two years in the making. I entered the subject area with an interest in political puppetry and a desire to participate in and influence social change at local, national, and international levels. An introduction to Boal’s Legislative Theatre experiment, which connects art and politics in a tangible way, led to the development and the basis of my thesis questions. However, the process of writing this thesis has been anything but a clear trajectory.

The initial draft of this thesis functioned mostly to clarify my thoughts on ideas of democracy, civic engagement, and popular theatre. Easily, over fifty pages of the original draft were scrapped. The notion of letting go became a practice for me rather than just another theory that applied to democratic learning. As with most people who complete a master’s thesis, much of the work was done in isolation. The irony of writing about working with groups and community while sitting alone in front of the computer for hours and days was not lost on me. The solitary act of writing was both a torture, particularly after weeks and weeks of this activity during the summer of 2002, and a relief, but only at those magic moments where I was actually able to make larger connections between myself and my subject.

Certain sections were more difficult for me to write than others. I found that writing an autoenthnography, the history of my connection with politics and popular art, really rooted me in my research area. The autoethnography had not been my original approach to the material, but later on in the process I realized that it was critical to clarify the basis of my learning and that it gave me a kind of joy to connect myself so clearly to my work and ideas. The methodology section, which I wrote last, was difficult for me to write because it required me to step outside my thought process and to clearly explain my approach. It was a challenge to my pedagogical skills to have to be so transparent about my analysis and process, but resulted in my having a deeper understanding of my learning style.

The literature review was also a very challenging section in that I found it
near impossible to decide which sources to include as the most relevant to the research area. There were many sources that I just could not include due to space constraints and, moreso, because of the insidious way more sources lead to potential tangents. Fortunately, Chapters Four and Five, were relatively easy to write. The comparative analysis of the Legislative Theatre experiments came very naturally out of the material. I felt it was a strong format for showing the possibilities and limitations of Legislative Theatre in a method that would be clear to the reader. The idea for the democratic facilitator was the subject of a research paper that I wrote for the adult education course “Citizenship Learning and Participatory Democracy” in January 2002. After researching the Joker/ animator figures of Boal’s work and seeing a presentation on the Ontario Healthy Communities Coalition’s work using animators to promote community health, I became intrigued with the idea of creating a hybrid role of dramatic animator/politician. Research on Native American Tricksters, that I completed while travelling in Arizona over the winter holidays, added another dimension to this image of animator/politician. Writing about the democratic facilitator was very satisfying because it gave me an opportunity to invent something with all the inspiring ideas I had come across in my research.

The last eight months have been a juggling act between working on this thesis, working full-time as the coordinator of the Ontario Council for International Cooperation (an umbrella organization for international development non-governmental organizations and global education centres), and all the other aspects of my life. As difficult as it is for me to juggle (and it is) there were many rewarding moments where my theoretical work overlapped with my life and employment. Often these moments were as simple as coming to the awareness that the democratic process plays a much larger role in my life than I had originally thought. Letting go of ideas and listening have become more than ideals, they have started to become part of my ‘practise’ as a human being. I have also discovered a network of individuals and groups, connected to my work with international development and global issues, that are interested in initiating popular theatre experiments with the hope of engaging citizens with global issues. This, I believe, is an appropriate stepping off point for me to end this research study and to put ideas into action.
Chapter 1

The Context for this Research

It was becoming simultaneously clear that human existence is, in fact, a radical and profound tension between good and evil, between dignity and indignity, between decency and indecency, between beauty and the ugliness of the world. In other words, it was becoming clear that it is impossible to humanly exist without assuming the right and the duty to opt, to decide, to struggle, to be political. All of which brings us back again to the preeminence of education experience and to its eminently ethical character, which in its turn leads us to the radical nature of “hope” (Freire 1998: 53).

Section One: Steps...

This chapter establishes the context for my research, specifically, what influences led me to write this thesis. I will discuss and explore the nature of my involvement with popular theatre - puppet-making and improv theatre - and the nature of my involvement with politics. These interests and activities involving arts and politics will be looked at in terms of how they almost concurrently developed in intensity and eventually converged into a vision of community-building and civic engagement. In this thesis I am going to explore two main questions a) “Why use a popular theatre method (Legislative Theatre) rather than hold a town hall meeting?” and b) “How can the co-optation of popular theatre and civic engagement be avoided?”

Being by nature an impatient person, I find democratic process difficult. Up until I became an educator within the formal education sector, I really had not paid much attention to the notion of process. In a common sense kind of way, I concurred with the idea that it was better to have patience and to be able to let go of ideas, but I had not linked it to democracy. My notion of democracy was limited to that of voting once every two or
three years and living with the results. However, in my current state of being, I work for an organization where I am responsible for carrying out instructions coming from a Board of Directors who are, in turn, responsible for the desires of a membership constituted from Ontario-based international development and global education non-governmental organizations. As well, I live in cooperative housing where the needs of the members are looked after through a mutually-determined process and carried out by a Board of Directors and a coordinator. Now, I can see where democracy affects every corner of my life and how I live with and contribute to ‘process’. For the most part, I enjoy participating in ‘process’ and decision-making, but also find it tiresome. In addition, it is not always welcoming to those who may not have as many formal education skills as others, or are easily intimidated.

In the process of researching and writing this thesis I feel that I have come to know a lot about myself and my disconnection with democracy. At the height of my frustration trying to meet deadlines for thesis drafts, a connection would suddenly become evident between writing a thesis and democratic process. Although there is an expected outcome, a product of sorts, when writing a thesis, the essential value of writing the thesis is the learning that accompanies the process of producing the thesis. Writing a thesis is a long and reflective process. One must have patience with the process of writing and creating and be willing to let go of ideas and practices that block the process. Perhaps this is a stunningly obvious idea, but it was a very meaningful process for me to consider the overlapping nature of what I was looking at, and how I was writing about it.

In this thesis I have focused on Boal’s Legislative Theatre because it makes a direct link between the communicative qualities of popular art and theatre and political action and decision-making. Legislative Theatre has the qualities of cultural resistance in that it has functioned to provide a voice or a kind of communication conduit for people on the margins to connect with and influence political decision-makers. Boal is certainly not the only dramatic artist making links between arts and politics, in fact, almost daily, new postings appear on web sites and listserves announcing the latest political/popular theatre initiatives. However, Boal’s work is groundbreaking in that through Legislative Theatre’s direct connection to politics and theatre, marginalized citizens were able to participate in the generation and implementation of municipal by-laws. It is through this concrete example of popular theatre used for civic engagement that I will explore the questions focusing on why one might use this method and not a town hall meeting and the dangers of co-optation.

This thesis will only start to answer the questions I have posed, as the data provides
much to be contemplated and further researched; however, the beginnings of this research have provided a base for understanding the convergence of popular theatre, democracy, and civic engagement. In examining these three areas of interest I first retraced some crucial steps in my own journey by beginning with an autoethnography, a look at my own history with art and politics. As this was my first major piece of research and writing I needed to be aware of where my base of knowledge had come from and what experiences had contributed to this knowledge. Through this thesis I explore the convergence of a number of ideas at particular points in my life. With caution, I explore my ‘non-popular’ self’s attraction to popular theatre methods and the dangers of my own interest in this method being a form of co-optation from dominant society and therefore potentially contributing to the dissolution of popular theatre as a form of cultural resistance.

**Step One: The Politics of Being Naïve and the bureaucratizing of the mind**

As a teenager I was drawn to the countercultural voices of Hunter S. Thompson and Kurt Vonnegut. Their often vicious humour (particularly that of Thompson), that lampooned the politicians and political sensibilities of the day, along with Vonnegut’s tenderness towards human fallibility, nurtured my sense of doubt about the world. Their talent for satire and their subtle and not-so-subtle ways of pointing out the horrific inequities that existed in the world made poking holes in the fabric of society very provocative. Through these voices it was evident that there was clearly something very unbalanced going on in the world.

A pivotal point occurred at my new school in grade 12 economics when my teacher told the class that grain is left to rot in silos in order to keep the market secure. At seventeen, I thought I knew a bit more about how the world works, about how my own government works...and was shocked by the truth. After expressing my concern over the morality of letting food rot when people were hungry, my economics teacher called me naïve. This was not the last time I was called naïve – it was a recurring theme throughout my senior year in high school. It was my introduction to the widely held notion that believing in a system other than the market economy was ‘naïve’ and unviable. Popular pedagogue Paulo Freire spoke of this pressure to accept what was problematic to the soul as, “the bureaucratizing of the mind”:

We are speaking of that invisible power of alienating domestication,
which attains a degree of extraordinary efficiency in what I have been calling the bureaucratizing of the mind. It is a state of refined estrangement, of the mind’s abdication of its own essential self, of a loss of consciousness of the body, of a “mass production” of the individual, and of conformity in the face of situations considered to be irreversible because of destiny.... To the degree that the historical past is not “problematized” so as to be critically understood, tomorrow becomes simply the perpetuation of today. Something that will be because it will be inevitably. To that degree there is no room for choice. There is only room for well-behaved submission to fate. Today. Tomorrow. Always (Freire 1998: 102).

Fortunately, there were two classes where the teachers did something I had never experienced: they put the desks in circles so that we could have discussions and encouraged us to express our opinions, and so I did (“continuously” as one of my classmates commented in my yearbook). Even though my ideas about politics and feminism were regularly deemed to be unsophisticated, at least the environment was ‘safe’ enough for a teenager to express herself. Initially, I tried to comprehend the majority politics (at that time it was the conservative party led by Prime Minister Brian Mulroney) as a logical system, but the fact that it was based on supporting finances rather than humans never made sense to me. Furthermore, it was disconcerting that my classmates were so ready to defend this system as being more ‘sensible’ than one based on social justice.

At the end of high school, students wrote comments in my yearbook about my political opinions. Looking at them now, almost twenty years later, the “bureaucratization of the mind” is fully evident. There was this odd mixture of gentle chiding about my ‘extreme leftist’ positions (as it was considered then) with an element of supportiveness. Even the students who took positions that were almost diametrically opposed to mine were writing comments in my yearbook that suggested that, even though my opinions were “naïve”, that ‘somebody’ should remain idealistic in these ‘materialistic’ eighties. Kind of like people seeing the necessity of the small sector of non-governmental organizations struggling to fix the world’s ills while the larger corporate machinery continues to wreak havoc in vulnerable communities. My high school classroom was a fascinatingly apt representation of the larger world in a micro context.

**Step Two: Popular Revolution and Popular Art**

My interest in popular arts came out of a dual awakening of sorts in Calgary between 1989
and 1991 through work and friendship with a Salvadoran solidarity group and an introduction to puppet-making. My young, middle-class, white Canadian self was finally starting to comprehend the connection between my peaceful existence and the political unrest around the globe. A lunchtime speakers presentation at Mount Royal College had turned out to be a second pivotal moment for me. There, I watched and listened, as a woman, maybe in her late thirties, only just five feet tall, who spoke no English, stood up on stage and told her story. This woman was a campesino (peasant) from El Salvador whose family and neighbours were being persecuted by the government. As I came to realize, her story was, unfortunately, typical of many living in Central and South America, although certainly not the story that was presented by the mainstream media.

Right after the presentation I joined SalvAide, a non-governmental organization (NGO) that functioned to bring about awareness in Canada of the situation in El Salvador. During those three years in Calgary, right up until 1992 when the Peace Accord was signed in El Salvador, I met many refugees from there. Many of these people were lawyers, teachers, and other professionals whom their government had ‘disappeared’ and tortured, particularly if they had any links with any kind of ‘popular’ movements. These people were able to make it North to the U.S. and Canada where they were attempting to help others still in El Salvador, particularly the farmers and people living in the rural areas who did not have the resources to leave the country and who were regular targets of the paramilitary death squads. Through the people in SalvAide, I came to understand that the ‘letting the grain rot in the silo’ type of injustice that had stunned me six years earlier, was just the tip of the iceberg in terms of the kinds of social injustices experienced worldwide.

During this period, the situation in many Latin American countries was so layered with U.S. and Canadian sponsored corruption that it was extremely difficult to grasp what was going on in these countries. The media served the corporate machinery that determined and supported the gross power imbalance that was present in most of Latin America. It is the repackaging of colonialism for the post-colonialist world. In the many vulnerable countries in Latin America (not to mention Asia and Africa), corporate interests were backing militarized governments to ‘depopulate’ the ‘communist menace’ lurking in the countryside and in the poverty-stricken neighbourhoods, and in the schools.... Increasingly, I began to see how this pattern of modern-day imperialism was replicated in countries all over the world. The Cold War was a convenient umbrella for the (United States) to help themselves to the resources of vulnerable nations under the guise of rid-
ding the earth of the communist menace. When the veil of communism disappeared, the political theatre became transparent, the U.S. lost its ‘do-gooder, save the world’ hero mask and the campesinos no longer looked like frightening thugs, but more like displaced and vulnerable people. By the early nineties, the brutal military dictatorships all fell away and the CIA trained death squads of young men were let loose to find their own means of survival with their primary job skills now including extortion, torture, and extermination. Somehow, to the wider uninformed public, it still appeared in the media as though the U.S. and Canada were supporting ‘justice’. The oligarchies and dictatorships were then replaced by ‘liberal’ governments supported by the U.S. and Canada. No more overt militarized oppression, just insidious economic sanctions and policies that ensured that the majority continued to live in poverty.

The history of the Americas became a fascination for me. Every Saturday, SalvAide presented the show “Fire in the Backyard” from the University of Calgary’s radio station. The show featured music from Latin America and the Caribbean, interspersed with news from Latin America and interviews with people who had insight on the situation in Central America. Week after week, we denounced the continuing atrocities occurring in Latin America. Although there was much to be celebrated after the Peace Accord was signed in 1992, there was also the loss of the unifying movement and force of the revolution. After the revolutions in Latin America peaked and quieted down in the early nineties, so did the solidarity movement.

When a revolution is going on, or an environmental disaster occurs, it is always a lot easier to gather people’s support. The quiet frustration, the poverty, the increasing gap between the wealthy and those living poverty, do not attract much attention. These countries, after the devastation of successive military dictatorships, are now run by supposedly ‘democratic’ governments. However, the inequities still exist, the campesinos are, for the most part, landless and working for low wages in dangerous and unhealthy conditions for transnationals who have taken root in these worn down nations. For one small moment, when the Peace Accord was signed, there was a feeling of cautious hope among my friends in SalvAide, but it had really not improved much at all. Like many people who work for social justice, I started to wonder what the point of all our information nights, walkathons, and radio programs really were; how were we to effect change in this world? What would become of this legacy of the ‘materialist eighties’ with not enough people paying attention?
I was an unwilling (or unconscious) accomplice to the barbaric behaviour of the United States’ and Canadian governments in their direct involvement with the oppression in Central America. It was overwhelming, frustrating, and depressing to talk endlessly about the oppressive conditions out in the world, but pretending everything was fine in the world was no solution either. Fortunately, I became aware of other ways of talking about sorrows and large-scale oppressions that addressed not only the fears and frustration, but also the happy, funny, and tender moments that are inextricably mixed with the pain. Understanding comes from witnessing, participating, and engaging in all facets of life, not only those of pain and loss. It is with this notion in mind that one can see that the sorrowful representations of the lives of people in developing countries that is perpetuated by the mainstream media creates a barrier of terror that dissuades cross-culturally engaged.

From looking at the history and culture of Latin America, it is clear that popular art has played an important role in supporting and communicating popular struggles. This art of the peasants, that used to have little or no commercial value, now does well in the foreign market, partly because it is born out of the excitement and exoticism of revolution, oppression, and poverty. Although that may sound tawdry on the part of mainstream consumers, it also shows that this art form has the potential to speak louder and more eloquently about a desperate situation than an editorial piece or a two-minute sound bite on the news.

**Step Three: A Search for Voice and Identity**

During the three years with SalvAide, I was also volunteered at The Loose Moose Theatre, which made an excellent complement to the work and learning I was doing with SalvAide. The Loose Moose was the home of Keith Johnstone’s Theatre Sports improvisational acting. I worked front-of-house and regularly watched the shows. Sometimes when I was watching the shows I would be convinced that this was terribly easy and I too would be an amazing improvisational actor, but I tried it a few times and found it extremely difficult. I had failed to grasp the part of Johnstone’s method that requires the actor to let go of preconceived responses. I always tried to figure out my response in advance. I was very AFRAID of acting impulsively. This struggle to control and to censor, limited my expression and increased my self-consciousness. Out of that experience I was convinced that I could never act. For me it was too raw and painful to expose my thoughts
During this period at the Loose Moose Theatre, I continued to watch and take note of the actors’ skills. I watched two to three improvisation shows a week. Eventually, I knew all the improv games that the actors used and, more often than not, I could predict where a scene was leading. Still wanting very desperately to be involved in the creative aspect of theatre, I tried writing skits with a group of women from the theatre who had decided to put on an all-female sketch night. Some of the skits I came up with were not horrible, but I have since realized something that has greatly affected my understanding of how my creative process works. I would have helped to create something exponentially more satisfying if I had opened myself up to the work of others. Even though I was working with a group, it did not mean that I was producing anything collectively. The frustrations I had experienced all my life with art and theatre were linked to my inability to let go of pre-conceived ideas about what is ‘acceptable’ art/theatre and my focus on art/theatre as an outcome rather than a process.

**Step Four: Improv and Puppets**

In 1991, during my last year living in Calgary, puppets entered my life. When I saw that a couple of puppetry courses were offered during the summer semester at University of Calgary I signed up right away. Puppetry would provide some levity to an otherwise heavy summer course load of medieval literature. The best part about it was the course instructor, Ronnie Burkett, the “puppeteer provocateur”. His puppetry was full of strong, satirical voices/characters that commented on society. This was my first strong link between expressing a political perspective and using popular art.

Burkett was a nurturing instructor, his method with the class was fully supportive of our individual strengths and interests. His work was a complete delight – the complexity of the characters, the emotional range that he was able to bring to his puppets, and the sheer bawdiness he brought to his exploration of local and global issues – from right-wing Alberta politics to family violence and gay and transgender issues. His disdain for a ‘neutral’ voice in theatre was clear.

...North American puppetry has turned into babysitting. So I have a lot of respect for underground puppeteers like the Punch and Judy guys, but also during the Second World War there were a lot of European puppeteers who did underground shows, making political commentary and risking their lives.... I think the most inspirational puppeteers to
me were the ones who really put it on the line and took the big risks. It’s the perfect medium to say whatever." (Burkett interviewed by Jack Jackman 2000: 11\texttt{www.jackjackman.com/burkett.html})

The class was encouraged to concentrate more on voice than what a puppet ‘should’ look like. At first, this was difficult because I just wanted my puppets to look as beautiful and well-crafted as Burkett’s; however, more than aesthetics, our instructor valued the art-form’s ability to communicate, and repeatedly warned us that if our puppets did not have something to communicate, we were just “wiggling dollies”.

The second half course on puppetry involved each of the students creating a puppet show that we would perform at the end of the course. I decided to use hand puppets and build a small set that I could hide behind. Being a summer course it was only one month long, which did not leave a lot of time for developing a story, a script and designing and constructing puppets and a set, not to mention rehearsing. My piece ended up being a story that took place on a distant planet, where there was the egotistical leader Dendron and two other puppets who were arguing over the ownership of a cat who had walked into their garden. There was accompanying music and I manipulated the three puppets at once, one on each hand and Dendron attached to a bent coathanger balanced on my chest. The performances were taking place at the university theatre and over 80 people had been invited to attend. Before the show, I vowed that once this was over I would give it all up. It was delusional for me to think that I could do any kind of theatre. I was petrified. Something strange happened to me that morning. When I got up on stage and waited for the music to cue my first puppet on, I had gone completely blank on the script, but…somehow when my cue came the words came out and the show was completed. The odd thing was that these were not the words I had written…I had ended up improvising the whole show.

This experience left me wanting to do more puppetry, but subsequent attempts were unsuccessful because of two main problems. The first problem was that I was still focused on my ‘success’ as an individual creator, and the second problem was that the ideas that I was deeply concerned about (SalvAide, and the more broadly-based issues of equity) were not being reflected in what I was creating. I ended up sculpting a few more puppet heads, but I did not go any further until I came to the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). In the meantime, I started to grow more and more interested in fusing the popular art of puppetry and my politics.
class, Burkett introduced us to the many kinds of puppetry from around the world. This was my introduction to the Bread and Puppet theatre. Their enormous puppets and their innovative and humanistic approach to political issues were captivating. Their puppet show on El Salvador’s Archbishop Romero made a strong connection between social justice and art, causing me to vow that I would work with them one day.

**Step Five: Chasing Mogigantes and Pedagogical Mythologies**

Puppet theatre is the theatre of all means. Puppets and masks should be played in the street. They are louder than traffic. They don’t teach problems, but they scream and dance and hit others on the head and display life in its clearest terms. Puppet theatre is an extension of sculpture. A professional sculptor doesn’t have much to do but decorate libraries or schools. But to take sculpture to the streets, to tell a story with it, to make music and dances for it – that’s what interests me (Schumann cited by John Bell, 1998: 272).

In 1997, I traveled to Mexico in search of the mogigantes – the giant pageantry puppets. It ended up being a very pleasurable but puppetless journey around Mexico. The closest I got to giant puppets were the mogigantes in a museum in San Luis de Potosi. There were just four giant puppets of two queens and two kings standing quietly in a museum. This was, of course, disappointing, but in no way dampened my enthusiasm and interest in puppets while providing ample time for reflection and re-direction. It was clear, in the hot dry Mexican streets, that art was a friend of the people, part of popular gatherings, and that it was integral to political expression. Back home in Toronto, I found the traditional art and theatre that were evident on most streets in Mexico sadly missing in Canadian streets and in Canadian politics.

Later that same year, a desire to finally ‘do’ social justice work led me to accept a position as an ESL instructor for a project on the East Coast of Nicaragua. A Canadian university had hired me, and during both the hiring process and in my first weeks in Nicaragua, there was much talk among the cooperants (volunteer workers) about Paulo Freire and the Pedagogy of the Oppressed. I had never heard of this methodology before, but was intrigued. The more I heard about this popular pedagogy, the more I anticipated witnessing it. Eventually, I came to realize that although popular pedagogy was in the history of the people of Nicaragua and made famous around the world by the Sandinista’s lit-
In the fall of 1999, I came to the OISE/UT, as a teacher candidate. Frequently, I would get
my peers excited about using puppets, and there would be a lot of plotting and scheming
to get puppets into the English and Individual and Society classrooms, but even though
my peers were highly receptive to puppets – the teenagers I was teaching thought I was
‘infantilizing’ them with such talk of puppets. Or even worse, they would profess a great
interest in including puppets in their work, but it was dreadfully obvious that they thought
that I would give them a better grade for incorporating puppets. I was not interested in
coercing young people, or anybody for that matter, into doing puppet theatre.

The next year I worked with the Equity Department of the Toronto District School
Board, (TDSB). This immersion into equity issues widened my perspective to link issues
of global justice with equity issues and to never (consciously) separate them. This led into
the spring of 2001, when, finally, I got an opportunity to participate in a Bread and Puppet
show. The troupe had driven their bus from Grover, Vermont to perform the *Domestic
Resurrection Circus and Funeral March for Rotten Ideas* at a conference for Social
Justice taking place at University of Toronto. There were so many elements to their work
that I was enchanted by: the wild old-style circus music played on accordions and accom-
panied by a cacophonous, yet delightful-sounding marching band of clashing symbols,
smashing sticks, and bells; the original songs and chants; and the expressive quality of the
very simply-constructed puppets.

There were a lot of us non-actor people helping out with the show. The show had been
written a long time before, and we were only able to participate in two rehearsals, so there
was no contributing to process. Most important to me was to have been a part of the show
and to have affirmed that yes, this is something I can do with my community too. This type
of theatre appealed to me because when I looked at those puppets, I knew that I could build
puppets, and when I participated in the play, it felt very comfortable to be working with the
other performers. I did not feel that I was good or bad, I just felt a part of it all. This was not
the ‘democratic’ theatre process that I eventually came to, but Bread and Puppet’s popular
art aesthetic with the direct connection to the audience, the breaking of freshly baked bread
at the end, and the breaking of many conventions all the way through, was a template for
what I imagined popular theatre could look like in my community. However, I knew by the
reserved contact between the performers of the troupe and the very specific artistic direc-
tion of Peter Schumann that this was not how I pictured myself working with a group.

The year before, I had applied to the OISE/UT Adult Education master’s program
with a letter of intent that clearly stated my interest in puppets and politics. The idea of
going to graduate school to work with puppets was met with resistance by a number of people who, quite reasonably, felt that puppets were something to actively ‘do’ rather than to ‘research’ and ‘contemplate’. Although, I had my doubts about the ‘rationality’ of attending graduate school as a means to work with puppets and political theatre, instinctually it felt right. Over the years, I developed a conceptual framework that supported the idea of using puppets as a means of communication. I realized the potential learning aspects of the participatory nature of ‘popular’ movements – particularly popular theatre - and began to get a sense of where I envisioned myself contributing the most to education and learning. This framework was further supported, and I would add, critically so, by the growing desire to be a part of, and to build community.

OISE/UT’s Adult Education Department proved to be the right environment to nurture relationships with others who were interested in arts-based learning and research and who were eager to experiment with a hybrid process of Adult Education principles, democratic process, and popular education – all of which espouse similar qualities. Overall, I did not find democratic learning to be the predominant pedagogy in the classes that I attended at OISE/UT, neither in the pre-service nor in graduate studies. However, there was respect and support for this methodology, particularly from within the Adult Education Department.

In countless ways, the Adult Education students’ group, Students on Seven, (SOS) proved to be the single most supportive ‘structure’ to both my academic interests and to my overall health and sanity as a graduate student. This group was where I found ‘community’ at OISE/UT. Besides providing much needed support around graduate studies, the SOS group also ended up being my testing ground for a democratic learning experience using theatre arts. Although I had been pushing to start putting together a puppet show since September 2001, we did not come together to make puppets until a retreat in early February 2002, and a solid plan for a puppet show was not to appear until the beginning of April 2002.

Amidst the panic of papers and proposals being due, a group of approximately ten students finally came together to work on a puppet show. One of the students invited us to put together a puppet show on environmental issues for a conference at the end of May at Innis College, University of Toronto. We were also asked to do the performance at the Citizenship Education Research Network’s (CERN), conference the following evening at OISE/UT. Having two bookings was an excellent incentive to start working on a puppet
show, but nerve-wracking because we had not started anything yet. As designated ‘coordinator’ and ‘puppet person’ I decided to piece together a framework for the show based on the materials we already had, a general ‘environmental’ theme, and a minimum number of puppeteers, in consideration of attrition rates during late spring. The initiative was presented as being a “democratic theatre process” which I tried my hardest to stay focused on. It was necessary to provide a framework for the show, a jumping off point, otherwise there would be too much initial work that would have to be done by the group. In providing the framework for the show I made it clear to the participants that it was only a starting point and that the group could change anything they wanted. At first, I felt that I was already sabotaging the democratic process by providing a framework, but was assured by the participants that they appreciated having something to ‘work from’ and that starting from scratch would have been far too much work.

Throughout the one-and-a-half months we worked on the puppet show, I repeatedly had to remind the group that the whole initiative was about process, and it really did not matter what the final result was. The initial ten students who started fleshing out the story line and building the puppets had joined the project because it promised a release from academic pressures. They could put their hands in clay and mould their thoughts, paint, draw, make crazy faces, and determine the physicality of imaginary creatures. At the first meeting, where I brought all the supplies – clay, paper, newsprint, etc., the students gravitated towards their interests. Some spent time contemplating the features and expression of Earth Mumma’s (the large puppet) face while others worked at placing the script in an Adult Education framework. We all took turns moulding, shaping, reading, and looking.

The initial puppet construction took a long time, and because of the nature of papier maché it meant that we had to work on the puppets every day. Of course, not everybody had time to come in every day. Since I was the spine of this initiative I made up a schedule and came in every day and put on layers, painted heads, and built set pieces. Almost every day, one to five students would show up to help out. However, after about a week and a half, about five of the initial group dropped out because of increasing pressure from academic work. At one point, there was a concern that making the puppet show would be a waste of time because our show would not be ‘professional’. This pre-conceived notion of what theatre and art should look like had stopped me before when I was trying to do improv in Calgary. I wanted to know how to overcome this deeply ingrained societal belief that art/theatre were an ‘exclusive’ experience. After an hour of revisiting the idea that we
were a group of Adult Education students, and that this was an arts-based inquiry into
democratic learning, and that it was about ‘process’ not ‘product’ we were mutually-reas-
sured and solidified our commitment to the project. Giving up on the project because it
would not be ‘professional’ enough was completely antithetical to what we were propos-
ing to achieve. Another example of the bureaucratization of the mind.

After that week, five other students, some from other departments and one person
from a group of Mob4Glob (a Toronto-based activist group) puppet-makers, joined on to
see the project to its completion. One participant was a pre-service teacher candidate who
was a drama specialist. She helped out tremendously by leading the group in drama exer-
cises to help us get into character. Other students from the Curriculum Teaching and
Learning department dropped in regularly to help paint and sew the Earth Mumma’s cos-
tume. We regularly took over the seventh floor Panoramic Lounge at OISE/UT, using it to
build puppets, make masks, paint, and rehearse. The puppet construction was all trial and
error. Building the Earth Mumma pageantry puppet was especially challenging. The
Mob4Glob group was also building a Mother Earth pageantry puppet, under the tutelage
of David Anderson of Clay and Paper Theatre who is an experienced and talented puppet
builder. Unfortunately, our OISE/UT Earth Mumma was built before the Mob4Glob pup-
net so we were not able to take advantage of the learning from David Anderson. As a
result, our Earth Mumma was very beautiful, but extremely heavy and somewhat difficult
to manipulate.

The goal of the group was to function as democratically as possible with all partici-
pants having input into the process at all times. Sometimes this was challenging, because
we did not all agree. However, the group took a number of approaches to problem-solv-
ing and conflict resolution. If an aspect of the show was causing difficulties or indecision
among us, we invited outside opinions, or we would take two or three examples from the
group and try them all on. We generally tried to ensure that everyone was comfortable in
their characters. Meetings/rehearsals sometimes went on a long time, but we simplified
story lines, strengthened characters, and encouraged one another. I kept track of what
needed to be accomplished at each meeting and tried to ensure that all needs were met,
but I did not ‘chair’ meetings or push specific agendas beyond staying on the agreed-upon
timeline. Sessions were facilitated by whomever had some expertise or something to share
about the subject.

After we had performed, our group was pleased with the outcome. Our show was
colourful and multilayered, it had a simple yet dynamic story line, and the puppets and masks added an other-worldly and magical aspect to it. Even though the emphasis had been on process, we were all relieved that the show had been well-received at both venues. In the end, the group expressed to me that they enjoyed being a part of the puppet show and seemed to appreciate especially that it had been a democratic rather than directive experience. Even the students who were only able to come by a few times to help paint or sculpt commented on how much they enjoyed being a part of the process.

Given that we were a homogeneous group (white, middle-class, graduate students) of participants, this made it difficult to judge the veracity of just how well the democratic process works. However, I do feel that it gave a good indication of the ability of arts-based inquiry (Cole and Knowles, 2001) to provide a complementary aspect to democratic learning and process. The experience of making ‘Earth Mumma: Dancing Around the Right’, supported my understanding that using popular art is both labour intensive, as the democratic consultation process among participants was extensive, and intensely rewarding. Many of us felt that we were experiencing certain elements of ‘praxis’ in the sense that we were contributing with our own knowledge, creating, assessing through our reflections, and making an action. In addition, creating masks, puppets, and sculptures allowed for a multi-sensory contemplation of complex ideas and conflicting interests.

Through this small experiment with democratic theatre I was able to realize the value of placing an idea into a group of hands, literally and figuratively, and allowing the hands to work the idea out through clay and from the clay to theatre. I learned from this experience that hard issues often need a soft, pliable, and imaginative means (like popular theatre) in order to facilitate a learning process that is not contaminated with fear of ‘otherness’. It also was apparent that the tensions caused by decision-making are often lessened by the aspect of ‘play’ that art and theatre bring to a group. Masks can be taken on and off, and distance can be created between the personal and the imaginary. In addition, having democratic decision-making being part of a process of theatre production gave the ‘issue’ an audience with whom we wanted to communicate certain ideas and concepts, which made us conscious of how clearly we presenting our message and what message was being relayed to the audience. We did not have an audience of ‘spect-actors’, audience members who participate in the dramatic action as in Boal’s Forum theatre; however, we did have a group that had worked collectively to problem-solve through dramatic process. This experiment helped me to better understand the ideas of Paulo Freire and Augusto Boal
whose work has provided a basis for my research and understanding of popular theatre as a means for citizenship participation.

I like being human, being a person, precisely because it is not already given as certain, unequivocal, or irrevocable that I am or will be “correct,” that I will bear witness to what is authentic, that I am or will be just, that I will respect others, that I will not lie and thereby diminish the value of others because of my envy or even anger of their questioning my presence in the world. I like being human because I know that my passing through the world is not predetermined, pre-established. That my destiny is not a given but something that needs to be constructed and for which I must assume responsibility. I like being human because I am involved with others in making history out of possibility, not simply resigned to fatalistic stagnation. Consequently, the future is something to be constructed through trial and error rather than an inexorable vice that determines all our actions (Paulo Freire, 1998: 54).

Being human is a process. As Freire has noted, we are human because we are in the making. We make our lives and we learn things by doing and by making mistakes. Making theatre appears to be a good way to figure out some of the more complicated aspects of our lives, or at least, to take a closer look at them.

**Next Steps**

This autoethnography of my experiences with politics and art has served to inform my research into popular theatre as a site for civic engagement. Obviously, much more than just these specific experiences with politics and art have shaped my perspective, but these are the moments that have created the basis of both my understanding and my desire to know more. A large part of what has drawn me towards puppets and theatre is the humour and absurdity that are often present in these arts. Humour, if shared equitably and with an aspect of caring and kindness, can play an important role in building community. To facilitate democratic action among citizens, I believe that participants need to identify their actions as somehow directly linked to benefiting their communities. Therefore, I see community-building, participatory democracy, and civic engagement as activities that are closely related and somewhat interdependent.

In terms of addressing the two main research questions of my thesis, this autoethnography begins to outline the basis of my comprehension and experience with ideas of popular theatre as a method of civic engagement and the danger co-optation
poses to popular movements. As this chapter sets out my personal relationship to the subject it suggests that my interest in popular theatre as a method of civic engagement over the use of a town hall method is linked to issues of voice, representation, aesthetics, and inclusion. This chapter did not delve into my overall resistance to political involvement which stems from lack of connection with the format. Although my interest in becoming more politically active and aware has increased over the years, I have consistently found the entry-points of town hall meetings, letters to my MP, and other such means of engaging with politicians as a citizen, to often be aesthetically unappealing (in any number of ways), tense, poorly facilitated, and more often than not, fruitless.

The next question concerning co-optation is considerably more difficult to address, considering the pitfalls of trying to pin down something as ephemeral as notions of what is “popular”, that is to say, characterized by representing typically marginalized voices. As media and corporate advertising become faster at picking up on the latest trends, absorption of popular ideology and culture into the mainstream happens quickly and seamlessly. There is a fine line between protecting the ‘veracity’ of popular voices and blocking them from being received by a wider audience. Some of the difficulties in circumventing co-optation may be addressed by remaining true to the medium of popular art and theatre, which traditionally exists on a community level. Ideally, the live nature of theatre and the grassroots approach would not be disturbed by the co-optation of the mainstream. Perhaps, as long as there are groups who use the method and are mindful of their intentions, then the method will remain a provocative means for marginalized citizens to participate in politics.

Chapter Two discusses my methodological approach to this study. Chapter Three will outline my findings from readings on democracy, civic engagement, and popular theatre, and discuss points where these ideas converge. Chapter four will provide a comparative analysis of four Legislative Theatre experiments. Chapter Five will propose an idea for revitalizing local governance with ideas generated from this research and Chapter Six will summarize and conclude this research and provide notes for a future research agenda.
Chapter 2

Methodology “Mind Frames”

Introduction

In addressing this research I felt that it was necessary to choose methods that reflected my practice both as a researcher and as a learner/educator. It was also necessary for me to use methods that linked to my approach to life in a more general sense. This has proven to be a difficult journey for me, best reflected in my concurrent elation and confusion around the learning that comes from postmodernist theory. I felt somewhat relieved to read Kershaw’s lighthearted take on the difficulties of approaching the research through a postmodernist lens:

The critical sources of this destabilisation are not difficult to locate. So long as we accept the full force of the post-modern paradigm and allow that Barthes has finally done for the intentional fallacy by murdering the author, Foucault has incontrovertibly shown that power is everywhere, Derrida has uncoupled the signifier from the signified forever, Lyotard has raised incredulity about master narratives to a new order of intensity, Butler has demonstrated that even gender is a cultural construct, and Baudrillard has possibly capped it all by banishing the real, we will be plagued by an acute indecision about the politics of theatre and performance in the contemporary world. The anti-foundational theorists of post-modernism and its cousins, though offering an exhilarating release from oppressive systems of thought, also threaten to plunge us into a miasma of ideological relativity (Kershaw 1999: 16).

The learning is challenging and I felt very concerned that I would lose my understanding in this “miasma of ideological relativity” that Kershaw refers to. I found the challenge of identifying a specific methodology that fit with my learning style to be problematic in that the best way for me to approach the subject was through my own way of knowing. My way of knowing is a combination of ideas, theories, and approaches that are both
named and unnamed.

As stated in Chapter One, the two research questions I explore in this study are a) “Why use a popular theatre method (Legislative Theatre) rather than hold a town hall meeting?” and b) “In considering a method of civic engagement like popular theatre that is rooted in the history of cultural resistance, how can co-optation by the dominating system be avoided?” In my approach to research, I found it necessary to explore the layers that composite my questions: the elements in my background that brought me to my questions; the actions and democratic/arts learning that I engaged in to attempt to answer these questions; and the learning that occurred during the process of writing an academic thesis using a variety of non-academic sources.

This study incorporates a hybrid of narrative inquiry, arts-based inquiry, comparative analysis, and an application of popular cultural theory and methods. The history/context of my interest in this research area is revealed through a narrative inquiry in the form of autoethnography which is presented in Chapter One as the introduction and basis of my interest and inquiry. Arts-based inquiry is the backbone of my own instincts towards this subject matter and is discussed in terms of its close relation to Legislative and popular theatre’s processes. This chapter will also discuss the choices made for data collection and how it was interpreted. The three sources of data include a) website based and popular writers, b) two types of literature: academic literature and a hybrid of popular media and journalism literature, and c) my experiential knowledge from puppet-making, democratic theatre practices, as well as my experiences with participation in the political system. This chapter is organized into four sections. The first section is called My Intention and discusses the theory and methodology behind my two research questions. The second section, The Data, discusses where I found information about my research subject. The third section, The Methodologies, discusses the various methodologies I engaged with in this study and the fifth and final section, summarizes and concludes this chapter on methodology.

Section One - My Intention

In looking at the two research questions, in relation to the first question there are many ways to explore this idea, one of which would be to conduct primary research and interview groups of citizens about their experiences with political participation. However, establishing a participating group of subjects for the research would require that the par-
participants have histories that reflect various levels and types of civic engagement. It would also require that they come from different communities (age, gender, race, class, etc.) in order to get a more accurate reflection of who has had opportunities to engage meaningfully with municipal politics and who has not. This type of primary research would definitely extend and provide solid backing for the exploration of this subject area; however, in the shorter time frame that constitutes a master’s thesis I made the choice to make a deeper personal inquiry and wider literature review in order to provide a solid basis for further doctoral level research.

I have chosen to explore the personal context that brings me to my questions. In the first chapter, questions of political efficacy and artistic expression are examined for points of convergence and to assess where personal convictions and experiences can verify my own beliefs surrounding this research. The first chapter sets the stage, so to speak, for the examination of other experiences with popular and Legislative Theatre as a site for civic engagement. In looking at ‘popular’ methods of learning I felt that it made sense that I too, grounded my learning within my own experience and that the research for this thesis came out of my own understanding.

In relation to the second research question that addresses concerns of co-optation of ‘popular’ methods by dominant culture I needed to explore the theory behind ‘popular culture’. As Steven Duncombe (2002) puts it: “How can culture be used as a means of resistance against the dominant capitalist system now that it has been transformed into the very building block of consumer capitalism?” In addressing issues around the idea of popular theatre as a site of cultural resistance and the contentiousness of identifying what is “popular culture” and who it is for and about, I looked at the writing of Stuart Hall from “Notes on Deconstructing ‘The Popular’” as cited in Duncombe’s Cultural Resistance Reader. Hall sees that what is essential about popular culture is “the relations which define ‘popular culture’ in a continuing tension (relationship, influence, and antagonism) to the dominant culture. Its main focus of attention is the relation between culture and questions of hegemony” (Hall cited in Duncombe, 2002: 189).

From the initial stages of preparing this thesis the notion of ‘popular’ has been difficult. Is ‘popular theatre’ only for ‘the popular’ – the oppressed? Who are ‘the people’? How then is this method to be used by those who are not oppressed by class or race but who want social change? My very first graduate level class at OISE/UT was taught using ‘popular’ pedagogy and through more studies I came to understand more about the ped-
agogy of Freire (discussed in more detail in Chapter One on page X), but there have always been questions about the legitimacy of its use by those who are not marginalized by the dominant system and the intentions of those who use it. The very notion of ‘the people’ and what is ‘popular’ has deep historical connections to class struggle and oppression. Without getting into too much depth around the complex discussion that surrounds what is ‘popular’ and what is ‘the people’ it was still necessary to be aware of these terms as they relate to politics and popular theatre. For the purposes of this thesis, I follow Hall’s line of thinking that views ‘popular culture’ as the site where those excluded from the decision making processes “the culture of the oppressed” or “the people”, those on the margins of society, resist the allied group of classes that constitute the “power bloc” (Hall cited in Duncombe, 2002: 192). Furthermore, there is a legitimacy to those who may not be marginalized by the dominant system, but whose ideas run counter to dominant ideology, using popular methods to engage citizens. However, this needs to be prefaced with the (expectation) that the group of people referred to does not promote racist, sexist, classist, homophobic, or any other kind of inequitable position in society. This group of people may not have ‘popular’ roots, but also they do promote notions of an equitable, democratic society, which I feel is in solidarity with popular movements around the world.

Preceding the inquiry into “popular culture” I needed to understand the relation between postmodernism and popular culture. I knew that they were connected but wanted more grounding in this theory to better prepare myself to understand the implications of working with “popular” movements. The postmodernist position of rejecting elitism created the rise in popular culture and disrupted the deeply entrenched old-school or modernist notions of what was ‘classified’ as art. The artistic movement that followed closely or grew concurrently with postmodernism was called “popular culture”; it managed to begin to break down discriminatory barriers by including previously marginalized voices (barred by race, class, sexual orientation) (Sim 1999: 149). Although the voices of marginalized others made it into the mainstream art world via “popular culture” and postmodernist theorists, the marginalized voices were legitimized by those of the ‘power bloc’ that exists within academia – the ones with the power to name.

To illustrate, one need just look at the Zapatista “movement” as this most likely would never have reached such heights without the leadership and (iconology) of pipe-smoking academic Marcos leading the way in the media. This is not to diminish the results of these movements, but rather to emphasize that ‘popular’ movements rarely are
exclusively of ‘the people’ and even if they begin that way, once recognition is achieved they unavoidably become part of the mainstream circuit. There is also the case of *El Teatro Campesino* that went from performing and acting exclusively to raise the efficacy and power of the migrant field workers, to touring bourgeois university campuses across the Western United States. This, of course, increases the amount of people exposed and contributing to this arena of resistance, but on the other hand, once cultural resistance movements have made it to the mainstream they are quickly absorbed and commodified, which links directly with my concern with co-optation. This also speaks to a culture of ‘boredom’ in that the keen interest in ‘taboo’ resistance movement activities is quickly diminished through market saturation. Where popular culture meets the market, pieces of the resistance movement get sold for profit. Whether it be in the form of clothing, music, or other entertainment, when it happens the ‘message’ and the ensuing “dialogue to action” of the movement becomes diminished because the focus is on a purchasable object and the message becomes a call to buy rather than to resist. In the case of the Zapatista movement the *bandanas* of the Chiapan rebels made it through to mainstream via the anti-globalization protesters and now are available in high fashion circuits as ‘protester chic’ and the images of Subcomandante Marcos and Che Guevara sell t-shirts and baseball caps. Increased recognition of popular movements such as the Zapatistas leads to the ‘mainstreaming’ of the culture of resistance. It would be interesting to assess the level of political engagement or ‘cultural resistance’ occurring among purchasers of ‘cultural resistance’ products and, as well, who is profiting most from the sales.

Hall’s description of the on-going struggle between those without power and those with power and the fluctuations that occur when causes and methods and means of resistance are co-opted into the mainstream and then sold back to the margins is, I believe, exactly what Foucault meant about power not existing in any one place but constantly moving in and out of even the smallest spaces. Hall makes the observation that just because a group of marginalized citizens is categorized as ‘the people’ this does not mean that they support ‘popular’ movements or ideas (Hall cited in Duncombe, 2002: 192). Culture is constantly being negotiated and this, combined with the notion of the power structure that supports a dominant ideology, or hegemony, being in every crevice of society has led me to conclude that strategies for social change have to challenge the power structure at every level of society from the micro to the macro. Using this popular culture theory as a base led me to choose to approach the research in a way that although was not
‘popular’ as described by the roots of this definition (as I am middle-class and white and not marginalized from the dominant power bloc), but that would honour the methodology that is ‘popular’ in terms of Freire’s popular education and the methodologies that have grown from it.

Section Two: The Data

Due to the nature of the subject - popular theatre, participatory politics, and an interest in popular methodologies, I chose to look at a range of data that reflected certain ideologies and realities. Chapter One illustrates, through the mapping of my autoethnography, my own history of politics and art and experiential learning. My personal experience and knowledge was the starting point and from there I sought to substantiate these ideas through both popular and academic sources. The data were collected from a variety of media, including websites, popular journals, contemporary authors (cultural critics), academic journals, and literature.

It was crucial for me to be able to reflect on where these ideas of art and politics converged and to gain some practical and theoretical understanding of how democratic practice could be enhanced or facilitated through a theatrical process. I was also interested in determining how my ideas developed, and what in larger society, institutions, and within my own circle of family and friends influenced my thinking and acting in terms of political efficacy and artistic expression. In exploring these ideas in a narrative personal history form I was able to provide reasoning based out of my own experience that emphasized the personal nature of my research questions. It was making obvious the clear connection between me and my research interests and how crucial it was for me to identify myself in my research process (Cole & Knowles 2001). Doing this research required me to reflect on the ideas and influences that shaped my experiences with politics and art in the first place. Through this reflection I have come to learn and accept new ideas; however, before accepting the new ideas I wanted to be as clear about what my initial preconceptions were.

The second layer of data were generated from my own experiential learning and knowledge. This data is based on the knowledge that has come out of my collective experiences with puppet-making, participation in democratic theatre initiatives, participation in the political system, experiences with facilitation (both my own and others’), community-building initiatives, and assisting in the development of equity initiatives. This experiential knowledge is closely connected to the data generated out of my narrative inquiry.
It shows the development in my awareness of self and my own context and community within and around popular movements.

The basis of this experiential learning is also strongly based in popular education methodology. The popular education methodology that I have referred to in this study follows the model outlined in the popular education workbook, *Educating for a change*, developed by Arnold et al, a group of Canadian popular educators who have worked on popular education and social change for over thirty years. In *Educating for a change*, the authors came up with the “spiral model” to describe how popular education methodology can work. The spiral model is made up of five parts starting with “the need to start with the experience of participants; then looking for the commonalities and differences among these experiences; collectively adding or creating new information or theory; practicing the new skills, making strategies, planning for action: and, eventually, applying in action” (Arnold et al 1991: 38). This model of experience leading to action, otherwise known as “praxis” as developed by Paulo Freire, provides a basis for both popular theatre as it links to popular education and for civic engagement as it reflects the need for recognizing the value of individual experiences and knowledges that can collectively be used to reflect a “popular” means of engaging with political action.

Other “popular” sources that I used for data collection included popular media and journal literature. It became evident that these sources provided the most current information and trends on Legislative Theatre and in popular theatre movements in general. In order to answer the first research question, “why use a popular method like Legislative Theatre as a method of engaging citizens over a more conventional method like a town hall meeting,” further information was needed on how Legislative Theatre functioned in various contexts. After searching academic databases covering a variety of subject areas from dramatic arts to adult education, I found nothing written on Legislative Theatre. It was therefore both necessary and apropos to use popular sources found on the Internet. However, I would stress that much of the data collected from web sources was developed and researched by academic sources. For example, the case study on the Brighton and Hoves Legislative Theatre experiment came out of the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex in Brighton, UK, but was most accessible via the Internet and was accompanied by a non-academic website that outlined the process.

The Internet proved to be rich with resources on the latest forum theatre initiatives. One helpful resource was an online newsletter *Under Pressure* published by Formaat in
the Netherlands; it provided monthly updates and continuing on-line discussions on forum theatre initiatives from around the world. This online newsletter reviewed initiatives happening both within and in collaboration with the academy and those occurring outside of academic influence. Because of its links with academia Under Pressure also provided regular articles that focused on assessing the impact of forum theatre. Through Formaat I subscribed to the Theatre of the Oppressed listserve which regularly filled my email box with messages that invite others to discuss different approaches to Theatre of the Oppressed methodology.

It was only through these popular sites that I was able to obtain information in the form of articles, case studies, and reports on recent Legislative Theatre experiments in order to make an analysis of the transferability of this method from site to international site.

Authors and contemporary thinkers like Judy Rebick, John Ralston Saul, and Michael Dobbin (among others) greatly influenced my ideas around political participation. They criticized the dominant system and, more importantly, suggest alternative models for civil society. Although many of these authors hold degrees from the academy, their writing is not academic. It is not specifically popular either, but this work is, by nature, cultural resistance. It does not work in a strictly popular format in that it does not only speak to marginalized communities, in fact, most of these authors are white and middle-class (or beyond); however these voices are representative of marginalized ideas, even if they are not coming from marginalized people. As such, I feel that it is critical to include their voices since they are in a position to (potentially) influence an enormous sphere of power – the middle-class professional. As mentioned in reference to popular culture and postmodernism in this chapter, in order to affect social change, resistance must come from within all aspects of society. The authors are in limbo between not quite being included in the academic sphere that influences policy and dominant thinking and not quite being included with popular movements. It is this positioning that makes them potentially powerful voices for marginalized ideas because they are not captivated by an isolating audience, instead they are presented via the mainstream. The struggle exists to ensure that their voices are recognized as dissenting ones and that their challenges to take action are acknowledged. The challenge is to have their ideas recognized by the popular media, television and newspapers, without allowing their voices to be modified into what is deemed ‘acceptable’ and therefore does not inspire reaction. As always, there is the danger of co-optation.
Popular authors have always been a great source of inspiration to me. Over the years contemporary authors like Kurt Vonnegut, Hunter S. Thompson, Barbara Kingsolver, and Starhawk who mesh fiction and reality to speak out about injustices have influenced my thinking. If I had not read these authors from the popular realm (mainstream) I do not believe I would have been inspired/encouraged to deepen my engagement with these subjects. The potential to ignite imaginations and inspire actions often happens on an entirely different level than that which is deemed knowledgeable by the dominant culture.

On the one hand, I resisted using a predominance of academic materials as data sources because substantiating my ideas through the classist-modernist method of acknowledging only dominant society-established intellectuals (from the academy) was contradictory to my exploration of popular methodology. On the other hand, it was important to explore sources of academic research that supported initiatives derived from popular movements. Reviewing recent literature on civic engagement revealed that a significant amount of research had been done on initiatives such as the participatory budget in Porto Alegre and this proved to be useful for augmenting and substantiating my ideas. While researching ideas about democracy I tended to look more at contemporary popular authors, but found the writing of Carole Pateman (see Chapter Three) from the early 1970s key to understanding how contemporary democracy has developed out of what are considered the origins of democratic thought and process. I also found solid examples of academic exploration in the area of political and popular theatre. There are some impressive contemporary works that have explored popular theory and its relation to guerilla, street, community, and other types of theatre rooted in cultural resistance which provided crucial background information to this study.

Section Three: The Methodologies

I used several different (named) methods to frame my ideas: narrative inquiry and autoethnography, arts-based inquiry, comparative analysis, and popular culture theory and methodology.

This study begins with an exploration of my personal history with the subject matter. This exploration in methodological terms is referred to as autoethnography by life history and arts-based inquiry researchers Ardra Cole and J. Gary Knowles. They define autoethnography as:

Placing the self within a sociocultural context. Unlike an autobiogra-
Autoethnography is closely related to narrative inquiry in that it draws on the “experience of the individual and the fact that life might be understood through a recounting and reconstruction of the life story” (Cole & Knowles, 2001 Lives in Context, 16).

Arts-based inquiry exists on two levels in this thesis. At the first level, some of the experiential learning that I write about is part of an arts-based inquiry about democratic learning through making theatre (the *Earth Mumma: Dancing Around the Right* puppet show). On the second level, Legislative Theatre, intentionally or not, follows the arts-based inquiry elements and associated features outlined by Cole and Knowles in their article, “Qualities of Inquiry: Process, Form, and ‘Goodness’”. In this article Cole and Knowles outline eight elements and associated features for evaluating arts-informed life history research. In the case of my experience with democratic theatre, the linkages to arts-based inquiry were intentional; however in the case of Legislative Theatre, it just happens to be a good example of how the tenets of arts-based inquiry methodology apply to an initiative. Although this work was developed for the framework of arts-based life history these standards or criteria can also serve to evaluate the research done within democratic theatre experiments.

Development of an artful representation is dependent on the soundness and complexity, perhaps even the ‘messiness,’ of inquiry and relies as much on the imagination of the researcher as it does on the information gathered through inquiry. Artful representations often emerge from intuitive responses to complex interpretations. In actions leading up to such representations we make analytical decisions that most strongly resonate with the information gathered (Cole, Knowles, & Neilsen, 2001: 211).

The eight elements and associated features of arts-based inquiry as determined by Cole and Knowles are: intentionality, researcher presence, methodological commitment, holistic quality, communicability, aesthetic form, knowledge claims, and contribution. In looking at Legislative Theatre initiatives through the methodological framework of arts-based inquiry one can see that it does the following:

1. Legislative Theatre supports *intentionality* in that it has both an intellectual purpose in
facilitating political efficacy and a moral purpose in capacity-building and working towards social justice for marginalized communities (e.g. addressing by-laws affecting homeless or ‘squeegee’ kids in Vancouver – see Chapter Four).

2. Legislative Theatre supports researcher presence by the participatory nature of the research. All participants in Legislative Theatre are potential researchers of the issues that affect their constituencies, and the research method begins at a very subjective and individual level.

3. Through a set of steps designed to take communities through the process of determining their issues, through forum theatre, to the informal Chamber in the Square meetings that translate issues into legalize, there is methodological commitment to a principled process and procedural harmony.

4. Through focusing on the value of process and not output, Legislative Theatre has a holistic quality that differs from outcome-oriented research methods. Legislative Theatre also bridges the gap between researcher and participants as they are all working towards a similar and community-based goal.

5. As a theatre arts form, Legislative Theatre works to create a transformative learning atmosphere through a highly communicative form. Legislative Theatre is based on forum theatre, which in turn is based on the popular education principles of Freire, a methodology that was developed expressly to be inclusive and bring out voices marginalized by poverty and political oppression.

6. Legislative Theatre as developed by Boal adheres to a specific aesthetic form in that Boal as an artistic director did develop a set of artistic processes and conventions that belong to forum theatre. However, it is the aesthetic appeal of Legislative Theatre that lends itself so well to this method as a mode of communication.

7. As Legislative Theatre was developed to include a multitude of diverse voices it also advances the knowledge from a wide range of human experiences, particularly from those that do not ever get acknowledged by the dominant culture.

8. Through a dramatic process that requires participants to reflect on one another’s realities and to assist one another in determining action, there is a contribution to the community from methodology developed by the academy (Cole & Knowles, 2001: 215).
This arts-based inquiry approach is also evident in the description of the democratic facilitator (see Chapter Five) which outlines a new idea for combining methods of popular art and theatre with civic engagement in order to revitalize local democracy. However, the ideas for what might work and what would not work were gathered from the analysis detailed in Chapter Four.

In order to identify the key elements of Legislative Theatre and to determine their transferability I chose to do a comparative analysis of three Legislative Theatre experiments that took place in different international sites. I first set out to define the components of Legislative Theatre from the description of the original experiment in Rio de Janeiro. I described how each experiment fit or did not fit with the profile of Legislative Theatre. Then I compared each to the original experiment and made a cross comparison to determine which components were most likely to contribute to a successful outcome.

The final method that I engaged with is not so easily named, as it borders between method and cultural theory and in fact, incorporates both. Given that popular theatre is rooted in the history of cultural resistance, as outlined earlier in this chapter, I needed to explore popular culture as cultural resistance for me to fully comprehend what the intentions and possibilities are for cultural resistance. Popular culture methodology (should such a formalized structure exist) seeks to create space for voices from the margins. The framework that could be called popular culture methodology, or one that is at least conducive to it, consists of elements that act as conductors for the multitudes of voices that are not represented in the mainstream, thus supporting a pluralistic society. These voices, which are not normally heard, create a resistance to the dominating cultural force. Through popular culture methodology, existing structures are broken down, rules are rewritten or tossed aside, and new theory is born out of the lack of representation from within existing theory (Hall 2002).

Section Four: Summary

In consideration of the subject matter of this thesis I chose to analyse my data with complementary methodologies. Methods that emphasize personal history and experience were used as a starting point which connects with the “spiral model” of popular education that emphasizes starting with experience. The element of arts-based inquiry is a direct reflection of the kind of research and inquiry that political popular theatre can facilitate. I used a comparative analysis methodology to glean information/understanding to
answer questions about the transferability of the Legislative Theatre model and also to provide a means to address issues around the various international communities that were interested in the method and the ensuing issues with cultural differences. Popular culture theory and methodology grounds the research question in that the ideas proposed by the political popular theatre model described in this thesis are based on diversity, equity, and pluralism which is supported by popular culture theory that looks to bring forward marginalized voices. Chapter Three reviews the literature on democracy, civic engagement, and popular theatre to determine converging themes.
Chapter 3

Literature Review

Introduction

In looking at the two main research questions of this thesis (on popular theatre as a method of civic engagement and the danger of co-optation) I explore three main areas: democracy, civic engagement, and popular theatre. I chose to look at these three subject areas because they were integral to determining what was at the root of the research questions. This literature review looks at what democracy can be as an inclusive and consensual structure and how it is currently being interpreted. I explore the nature of civic engagement as it relates to participating in and attempting to alter current democratic structures. Finally, I look at the historical roots and contemporary examples of popular theatre as it connects to both democratic and civic engagement structures. Within these groups are sources of information that come from both academic and popular or contemporary sources, with the final intention of this chapter being to determine where common goals among the three intersect.

The first section of this chapter reviews the literature on democracy, in order to gain a working definition of democracy and the challenges to democratic process. The second section reviews examples of civic engagement and what the general impression is about where and why it is or is not working. The third section reviews how people have been engaging with popular theatre locally and internationally. Finally, the fourth section summarizes the literature reviewed and discusses converging elements among the three sections that have emerged from this research.
Section One: Democracy

democracy n. (pl –ies) 1a a form of government in which the power resides in the people and is exercised by them either directly or by means of elected representatives. b a state is so governed. 2 any organization governed on democratic principles. 3 a classless and tolerant form of society (Bisset, Alex, (ed) The Canadian Oxford Dictionary, Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 2000, pp 251).

The literature indicates that the ‘democratic’ness’ of any nation, state, institution, or group has never not been in question. Since the Industrial Revolution, Western society, and eventually most other societies, have leaned most heavily towards a capitalist economy, yet held on to the desire to be within a democratic system. Not that capitalism and democracy are necessarily mutually exclusive, but they do generally co-exist with some tension. ‘Ideals’ of democracy have created tensions over just how ‘participatory’ it should be. Strong participation has been connected to fascism and totalitarian regimes and can make the organization of institutions impossible, thus leading to the notion that, although the concept of democratic ideals is good, mass participation could lead to political instability (Pateman 1970: 2). The third interpretation of Oxford’s definition of democracy noted previously as a, “classless and tolerant form of society”, is not usually endorsed by political scientists. In fact, a definite class bias has revealed itself in many of the theories of democratic participation over the last half of the twentieth century. During that time, social researchers used their empirical data to show that citizens, particularly those in lower income groups, were not only disinterested in participating, but that they had ‘authoritarian attitudes’ and that therefore the ‘democratic ideal’ of a fully participating population was not only naïve, but dangerous (Pateman 1970: 3).

Pateman’s research concludes that there were commonalities between the theories on democracy developed in the first half of the twentieth century. She refers to these theories as the “contemporary theory of democracy” which has been supported by most theorists (although it has had many critics as well) over the past few decades as an acceptable norm. This theory contends that the ‘democratic’ element of the method is that citizens can vote for their leaders in periodic free elections. The leaders are from the elite of society and the non-elite citizen participation is restricted to voting politicians of choice into office. Participation does not go beyond choosing the ‘decision-makers’. In order for such a ‘democratic’ system to remain stable, participation must be kept to a minimum as “any
increase in participation by the apathetic would weaken the consensus on the norms of the democratic method” (Pateman 1970: 14). It would appear that, according to these theories, the apathy and non-participation of citizens is necessary to retain societal stability and that democratic principles need only be followed by the elite voted into the political structure, and only among themselves.

No longer is democratic theory centred on the participation of ‘the people’, on the participation of the ordinary man, or the prime virtue of a democratic political system seen as the development of politically relevant and necessary qualities in the ordinary individual; in the contemporary theory of democracy it is the participation of the minority elite that is crucial and the non-participation of the apathetic, ordinary man lacking in feeling of political efficacy, that is regarded as the main bulwark against instability (Pateman, 1970: 104).

Democracy, having been open to interpretation over the years, has been usurped by the elites and represented to society as having exactly the qualities and attributes that support and abet the activities and goals of the capitalist/market/economic sphere. Democracy is about power. Ideally, it is about the equitable sharing of power, as in the third Oxford interpretation – “the classless and tolerant form of society.” The constant movement of that power is marked by peasant uprisings, the suffragist movement, various civil rights movements, rebellions, the French and Spanish Revolutions and any other time the underclass, the under-represented, the oppressed have actively regained power as citizens.

A United Nations (UN) report published on July 24, 2002 announced that a significant number of countries had not retained their previous democratic systems, and that some had turned back to either authoritarian rule or entered what the UN called “pseudo” democracies. Since September 11, 2001, some countries have implied that “fostering democracy might endanger world security” and that “authoritarian rule would help to stabilize unstable countries” (The Globe and Mail July 24, 2002: A1). The UN report was by no means in agreement with this position, but instead indicated that the theory that development (poverty reduction and education) should precede democracy was severely flawed. Weak democracies are decidedly unstable, but it takes many years to develop a strong democracy and therefore, as political science professor Richard Sandbrook stated: “It takes a lot of understanding and tenacity. It requires that the political goals of the U.S. take back stage” (The Globe and Mail July 24, 2002: A1). At this time, the U.S. is the most
powerful democracy in the world, yet, as George Soros writes, “there is almost a complete disconnect between how the U.S. perceives itself and how it is perceived by others” (Soros 2000: 2). Soros is hopeful that there can be a fruitful alliance of what he calls ‘open societies’ that could address and reform the inequitable dealings that go on in the larger agencies like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. However, for this initiative to ever take place, the U.S. would have to make a fundamental shift from unilateralism to multilateralism (Soros 2000: 5).

Some theorists, such as Jürgen Habermas and Christopher Norris, believe that positionally different groups have to set aside their differences in order to find some consensus and through that become the stronger majority. Identities do not have to be sacrificed to make this consensus. Their approach assumes that people are able to find like values and qualities within their identities that can be used as a mediating or joining factor between the members of the group. This idea harmonizes with the idea of a ‘Venn diagram’ indicating overlapping circles of interest. Habermas has an exceedingly positive view of society, believing in the “self-corrective, critical community of enquirers without any absolute beginning or finality” (Sim 1999: 268).

Chantal Mouffe lends a provocative twist to Habermas’s theories. Mouffe, an anti-essentialist/post-Marxist believes in what she calls “Agonistic Pluralism”, that even if the class structure is somehow flattened out, that there are always divisive factors at work that will never be in agreement, because they are a natural part of a pluralistic society (Mouffe 2000: 24). Thus, we are a society of Others, which, in essence, would agree with Habermas’s work, but Mouffe disagrees vehemently with Habermas on the notion that consensus can be reached on liberty and equality through deliberative procedures (DeStitger 2002: 242). Mouffe states that in a radical democracy all groups would work non-hierarchically towards liberty and equality, but would be in conflict over almost everything else (cited in Cantelli 2000: 1 www.politeia.net/seminar/Papers/Fabrizio.html). Mouffe’s position seems to posit that consensus is just a kind of a place marker that pacifies a group enough to facilitate moving on with the larger issues, which is entirely due to time constraints. This does not mean that consensus is truly achieved, rather everyone agrees to move on. In most circumstances it is difficult to imagine people from varying backgrounds coming to agreement on the same issue. The idea of consensus as only a ‘pacifying place marker’ rather than an agreement seems to be a harsh judgement of our society’s ability to act as a community. However, if all parties agree to move on and let go
of certain ideas in the interest of making a resolution that will lead to the betterment of all, particularly for the most marginalized, then consensus might lead to a more equitable society.

In Canada, the democracy we are currently experiencing on a national and regional level is the very diluted ‘contemporary theory of democracy’ as described by Carole Pateman. Participation is limited to elections on a federal level every four years with irregular and infrequent consultations and referenda. This weak democracy allows market forces to stay in power and to make economic-driven decisions with little interference from the citizens as they have already given their consent when they elected (or did not) the officials making the decision. According to Fair Vote Canada, a non-partisan citizens’ campaign for voting system reform, Canada uses a ‘Winner-take-all’ voting system which is one of eight types of voting systems. In this type of system 40 to 50 % of the votes are ‘wasted’ because they do not become parliamentary seats, while proportional voting systems recognize all votes as being worthy of a seat in parliament (Fair Vote Canada, August 2001: 4). The ‘Winner-take-all’ voting system coupled with infrequent and diluted opportunities for citizens to have influence over political decisions made on national and provincial levels, make moving to a participatory and inclusive system of democracy in Canada a difficult challenge.

Current Canadian popular literature authors, including writings by Judy Rebick, John Ralston Saul, Michael Dobbin, and Mark Kingwell has focused on attempting to engage the Canadian public in a dialogue about democracy. They express deep concern over the corruption of state-run politics; the insidious and inhumane qualities of corporate rule; and the disturbing disconnect between citizens, politics, and social change. Rebick comments in her book Imagine Democracy that the current mantra from the ruling elite that ‘there is no alternative’ is “the most insidious form of repression” (Rebick 2000: 50). This idea that there are no alternatives has slowly made its way into the vernacular since the late 1970s. As Rebick puts it, this “is the slyest means yet invented of eroding democratic participation” (Rebick 2000: 50). Almost collectively, we have turned our backs on democratic decision-making because it is not only time-consuming, it is almost beneath us in that we pay somebody else (a politician) to do that job. We changed from groups of societies that were collectively and individually skilled at creating things for our society (food, clothing, entertainment) and at making decisions for these societies to our current (North American) society where we are encouraged to specialize in only one
slender area of expertise and to be consumers of everything else. John Ralston Saul writes:

> Serious, important decisions are made not through democratic discussion or participation but through negotiations between the relevant groups based on expertise, interest, and the ability to exercise power. I would argue that the Western individual, from the top to the bottom of what is now defined as the elite, acts first as a group member. As a result, they, we, exist primarily as a function, not as a citizen, not as an individual. We are rewarded in our hierarchical meritocracies for our success as an integrated function. We know that real expressions of individualism are not only discouraged but punished. The active, outspoken citizen is unlikely to have a successful professional career (Saul 1995: 34).

Saul’s argues that “we live in a corporatist society with soft pretensions to democracy” (Saul 1995: 34) and that citizens have become products in the market place – either performing acts that are valuable to the corporatist society or not and becoming marginalized (Saul 1995: 34). Vancouver activist, Murray Dobbin writes, in The Myth of the Good Corporate Citizen, that:

> The challenge to re-establish majority rule must take place at both the level of ideas and the level of power. At the level of ideas it is really no contest. It would be difficult to imagine a more impoverished set of ideas, principles, assumptions about human nature, and goals for society than those promoted by the new right. They would have us believe that the end point of thousands of years of civilization is a globally homogeneous marketplace of customers (not citizens) whose vision can be summed up in a single value, economic efficiency, and whose ultimate expression of human achievement is the universal availability of Coke and Nike running shoes (Dobbin 1998: 282).

Dobbin and Saul’s allegation that the corporatist agenda is one of the most powerful barriers to participatory democracy is also the opinion of Professor Mark Kingwell. In Kingwell’s popular non-fiction book, The World We Want: Virtue, Vice, and the Good Citizen, this political and cultural theorist states:

> Corporations and firms have not simply taken over the mechanisms of production and consumption. They have usurped our private selves and our public spaces. They have created bonds of belonging far stronger than any fractured, tentative nation could now hope to offer, providing
structures of identity, ways of making sense of one’s place in a complex world. They are also more powerful, and richer, than many nations... But corporations are not democratic, and they do not possess the political legitimacy that is necessary to justify that kind of power. We have global markets, however unjust and skewed; and we have a global culture, however banal and enervating. What we don’t have, but desperately need, is a global politics to balance and give meaning to these troubling universal realities (Kingwell 2000: 2).

Kingwell, Rebick, Dobbin, and Saul all point out the way in which corporations have manipulated themselves into a position of power by taking advantage of the individual’s desire to belong to a community. A shared notion among these thinkers is that “The rule of the market is of necessity anti-democratic” (Rebick 2000: 230) and that active citizenship is essential to strengthening the democracy and social justice in Canada.

Section Two: Civic Engagement

Vonnegut – We have no idea what technology has done to us. Last night I went to a party for Gordon Parks, a black genius. Walter Cronkite was there. Cronkite’s an old friend. I said to him, “You know, the country you did so much to shape seems so shapeless now.” One thing about TV is you don’t have to do anything. Hoppe – We become spectators. Vonnegut – Yes. And that’s enough. We’re thanked for that: “Thank you for watching...” (laughs) (David Hoppe interview with Kurt Vonnegut 2003: 88).

In the political arena, as Vonnegut notes, all too often citizens are relegated to the role of spectators. Thus, civic engagement is often seen as the solution to many of our political problems. However, according to the literature, civic engagement in a political system relies on several factors. The socio-economic status of a group of citizens is often directly correlated with their level of education that in turn can be correlated with their level of political efficacy or political confidence (Almond and Verba: 1963, Pateman 1970: 70). Voter turnout, which has been very low in North America and Europe since the Cold War, (Saul, 1995; Swift, 2002; Rebick, 2000) tends to be viewed as the beginning and end of citizen participation. Even though voting is thought to be the epitome of citizenship rights and privileges, many citizens abstain from voting because: they do not feel represented by any of the candidates and/or because they do not believe that their vote carries any weight.
Attempts to address the lack of participation come mainly in the form of citizenship education, now a half credit requirement for all high school students in Ontario. As with most educational initiatives, the effects of citizenship education courses will not be evident until many years in the future. For those who are new to Canada, a textbook is offered that provides information about Canada’s political, social, and economic system, and on how to participate in the political process. For all other citizens, there are few formal processes for learning how to participate in the political system beyond voting, even though, as Pateman noted, we learn democracy by doing it, not by being told how to do it.

Yet we have seen that the evidence supports the arguments of Rousseau, Mill and Cole that we do learn to participate by participating and that feelings of political efficacy are more likely to be developed in a participatory environment. Furthermore, the evidence indicates that experience of a participatory authority structure might also be effective in diminishing tendencies toward non-democratic attitudes in the individual (Pateman 1970: 105).

Engagement in the political process requires not only personal resolve and tenacity in order to effect political change, but also the financial and educational privilege that assists people in understanding and decoding the opaque workings of the political system. With no overt standards of practice in place that encourage input and participation, and that contribute effectively to the political efficacy of all citizens, it is reasonable to assume that although the system is democratic, it is not necessarily a participatory one. As discussed earlier, participatory democracy requires a political system that enables and encourages citizens to participate at all levels.

The ordinary man might still be more interested in things nearer home, but the existence of a participatory society would mean that he was better able to assess the performance of representatives at the national level, better equipped to take decisions of national scope when the opportunity arose to do so, and better able to weigh up the impact of decisions taken by national representatives on his own life and immediate surrounding (Pateman 1970: 110).

The models of civic engagement looked at in this section are models of citizenship education that occur in informal sites of learning. This type of informal learning can allow learners to overstep the boundaries of government-issued curriculum and to participate fully in the practice of policy-making. “Practising” citizens in informal learning situations
can shape their own roles as participating citizens according to their interests and abilities and, ideally, enable themselves to experience locally the fruits of their efforts.

In looking at civic engagement, a vicious circle of events is apparent. Not participating in local politics distances citizens from the policies that affect them. Governments make assumptions that citizens do not want to participate and exclude them from the decision-making processes. Those who are most vulnerable are often those with the least access to, and influence over, the decision-making process. The exclusion of certain marginalized groups from the decision-making process tends to further marginalize these already vulnerable groups while emphasizing the contributions and suggestions from those that already have power and privilege.

It is critical that the political system works first and foremost to provide for the most vulnerable in society, ensuring that all citizens have equitable access to opportunities and resources. According to Rebecca Abers, the three obstacles to participatory democracy are: implementation, inequality, and co-optation. Abers explains that powerful private interest groups that are used to influencing economic policy and the distribution of public resources create implementation issues by blocking the efforts of less powerful citizen-based groups by threatening to withdraw electoral support (Abers 2000: 8). Inequality and equity issues are the basis of citizen engagement barriers. Disadvantaged social groups are far less likely to participate in public forums as they are more likely to have the following impediments:

- less free time and money for attending and transporting themselves to meetings; lack of formal education often makes participating in political dialogue an intimidating and difficult process; women are affected by their caregiving and domestic responsibilities; those belonging to traditionally disadvantaged groups often are uncomfortable expressing themselves in a public forum (Abers 2000: 9).

Due to these impediments, participation by marginalized groups tends to be low. Even when marginalized groups are present at such forums they are often overwhelmed and manipulated by the voices of those who have already been privileged by the system and who can therefore speak confidently and eloquently in favour of their own interests. In addition, some of the skepticism around participatory systems stems from fears that if checks and balances are not in place it can be easily co-opted and used to favour already privileged elites (Abers 2000: 9).

As Abers points out, along with creating a time and space for civic engagement to
happen, larger issues of exclusion have to be addressed. ‘Others’ are often consciously excluded from the political system. Canada, Europe, and the United States are home to large populations of migrant workers who never get to vote, yet may have contributed to the cheap labour for those societies for decades. In some places, people with criminal records are not allowed to vote. In the United States, a large portion of the young, black male population has been or is imprisoned, and in many states that do not allow people with criminal records to vote; this becomes a “category of racial exclusion” (Swift 2002: 23). These insidious ways that citizens are barred from participating in the political arena is a result of the strength of the hegemonic forces that are very focused on ensuring that the majority does not succeed in gaining any power.

Rebick refers to the current condition as a kind of “postmodern feudalism” where socially supported groups (from cultural arts to schools) are having to resort to fundraising money from private capital in order to survive. The public purse is shrinking while the private purse overflows (Rebick 2000: 3). This is yet another huge barrier to civic participation. The imbalance of wealth in the system forces the increasing numbers of marginalized people and the public’s de-valued sectors (public education and arts among them) to literally beg the private sector to give back the money that was once public. This forces the general public, and most certainly the marginalized sectors of society, to be forever justifying the practicality and efficiency of aspects of society such as arts and education to the private sector. Healthcare, education, employment programs, and other social welfare programs are expected to conform to capitalist structures and turn a profit. The increased use of business jargon such as “bottom line”, “outcome”, and “profit margins” and the positioning of citizens as “clients, customers, and consumers” and the government as “corporate service providers” creates an effective barrier that states: if you do not have the money you cannot afford the services (Dobbin, 1998; Rebick, 2000; Saul, 1995). The vicious circle is completed with social services costing more than ever, and those experiencing poverty having less and less access to the resources needed to acquire those services. To leverage this, the responsibility for educating citizens has been taken on by the informal sectors in society. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), community groups, coalitions, and other grassroots organizations have the ability to educate communities in a more equitable way due to their micro-societal status. Building cross-sector education programs that work with already-existing social groups, works to strengthen existing community bonds and social identities while focusing on larger issues of equity and access.
In the North, there are relatively few, if any, strictly homogeneous urban societies. Within even racially and ethnically similar communities there is difference and discord. As cities lean towards amalgamating with outlying boroughs and regions, citizens become members of “mega-cities” that are low on representation and become even more stretched financially when attempting to service such large areas. Those wanting to promote civic involvement in these areas, where the local becomes as large and almost as inaccessible as the provincial/state governments, are faced with the challenge of organizing and educating thousands of disparate groups.

The barriers to participation are not insurmountable, but they are significant obstacles to creating a democratic society. The following examples of various civic participation models from informal settings gleaned from the literature set the stage for imagining what the possibilities might be for overcoming obstacles to civic participation and implementing and encouraging social change.

Among the most celebrated of civic engagement initiatives of the past decade is that of Porto Alegre, Brazil’s Participatory Budget. Since 1989, when the Workers’ Party introduced participatory budgeting to Porto Alegre, this method of civic participation has been increasing in popularity and participants. This participatory budget is a model of public deliberations that has been successful in including many of the most marginalized citizens of the urban centres. Part of the success of this program has been the holistic approach taken by the Workers’ Party (PT) members and citizens who have developed this participatory process. Representatives have to visit each neighbourhood to witness and experience firsthand the conditions there. Each neighbourhood is credited points for population and degree of need so that those with the least are served first by the budget. This ensures at least a baseline of social justice, indicating that the system is in place to serve first and foremost those who need it the most (Abers, 2000; Avritzer, 1999; Baiocchi, 1999; Rebick, 2000). This kind of active ‘listening’ and acknowledgement of the experience and reality of others, coupled with the ‘point system’ that gives those with fewer resources a better chance at receiving municipal funds, challenges and encourages the participants of this process to make decisions that are more equitable rather than solely out of self-interest.

Other civic engagement work happens in pockets all over the world, from India to Argentina, to Canada. Much of it is neither formally recognized nor developed, but in the context of looking at the impact of informal sites of citizen engagement and learning, it is important to recognize the potential in all sites, particularly those with little or no support.
from the formal structure. Jonathan Barker in his work *Street-Level Democracy* looks at public spaces being used for micro-political actions. He and the other five authors in this investigation have defined political settings based on a theoretical premise: “public discussion, in which people give voice to their knowledge and opinions about matters of general concern in the presence of other people, is central to human political life” (Barker 1999: 21). The research looks at public engagement in political settings in Nigeria, South India, United States, England, Uganda, Nicaragua, and Pakistan. They found that people organized themselves around and within what was central to their life and work. Whether it be a market or a mosque, people gathered around and supported what was important to them.

People at the margins of power are already creating relatively democratic political spaces and using them in pursuit of political objectives. This fact is clearly subversive to those at the centre of global corporate and state power who discount the capacities of ordinary people in order to ignore them, oppress them or render them dependent. It also challenges activists who want to deliver benefits to people but recoil from according them autonomous power (Barker NI June #324 2000: 22).

Barker continues by saying that the hardest part for most people to accept is the fact that marginalized people are “capable of effective and open action that is responsive to the welfare of the local population” (Barker NI June #324 2000: 22).

At all levels, international, national, and local, the way to build a strong citizenry is to build capacity. Here in Ontario, two coalitions, the Metro Network for Social Justice (MNSJ) and the Ontario Healthy Communities Coalition (OHCC) both promote capacity-building as part of their broad-based goals. The MNSJ puts particular emphasis on the notion of ‘praxis’ and with it participatory knowledge creation, democratic organizational development, and broad-based campaigning (Conway 2001: 4). At the centre of this work “was the forging of participatory forms of democratic organization and collective action nurtured by facilitative leadership...essential to these processes was a culture of capacity-building premised on the existence and development of popular democratic knowledges” (Conway 2001: 4). Capacity-building included the development of skills as well as critical political perspectives in people and organizations and was most developed through the MNSJ’s Economic and Political Literacy Primer (EPL) (Conway 2001: 17, 18).

The Ontario Healthy Communities Coalition (OHCC) supports the desire of citizens to develop their own communities. OHCC supports them with community animators
(facilitators) who work with whole communities to connect social, economic, and environmental issues and to help initiate dialogue and a working relationship between members from all sectors of society. They use four key strategies to approach community health: broad community participation, multisectoral involvement, local government commitment and, the creation of healthy public policy (OHCC 2000:11). At the centre of the work of the OHCC is the ability of the animators to “awaken the dormant capabilities of the ordinary and extraordinary people who make up local communities” (OHCC 2000: 27). Animators take the community through a process of envisioning their healthy community, then a self-assessment of all the skills and knowledges that are already present in their community, then finally, linking members and skills and visions together to start building their healthy community (OHCC 2000: 27). As with the MNSJ, OHCC takes the Freirean notion of praxis – the combination of knowledge, reflection, action, and assessment, used for a basis for assisting communities in achieving self-determination.

The ideas around participatory democracy and civic engagement that are focused on inclusive practices, equity, and experiential learning are the potential points of convergence with popular theatre as a means of civic engagement.

**Section Three: Popular Theatre**

For the purposes of this study, popular theatre is defined as theatre that is developed through direct contact with audiences as participants and works to produce commonly-founded ideas in order to challenge existing inequities.

On the other side of the theatrical spectrum we find mainstream theatre, or what existentialist philosopher, Jean-Paul Sarte referred to as ‘middle-class’ theatre. Mainstream theatre tends to facilitate the reproduction of status quo by continually representing the same dominant perspectives without critical analysis, as in the commercialized and commodified monster musicals created by Andrew Lloyd Webber. On theatre’s commodification, Drama professor, Baz Kershaw writes:

...the theatre estate in post-industrialist societies is a victim of its own general success in the late-capitalist global market place of culture. In embracing the disciplines of new consumerism, the theatre and its performances succumb to a commodification that stifles radicalism in the moment of its birth. Because the commodifying process is created by the current protocols of audience membership contemporary theatre is unlikely to crack this dilemma, even as it stages the most radical of post-modern plays (Kershaw 1999:23).
In contrast, popular theatre includes the heterogeneous voices of a community and can be a medium for dialogue between community members, as well as a never-ending process of thinking, challenging, presenting, re-inventing, re-working, and thereby challenging oppressive forces (e.g. market fundamentalism). Popular theatre is live and open to interaction. It assists in the reclamation of the public sphere where the process of transformation can occur, or where the heterogeneous qualities of the community can be addressed in what Foucault calls heterotopia, “a quasi-public space which functions to reflect, expose, invert, support or compensate for the outside world” (Fortier 1997:114). Popular theatre demands that the participants use their imaginations to envision change. The vision of popular theatre as a ‘process’ extends its value to a community. Theatre that reaches beyond merely performance can engage with tensions in order to re-assess established ideas, theories, traditions, and practices (Kershaw 1999:16).

Internationally, people have historically been linking the heart and mind through popular art and drama. To understand more fully the significance popular theatre plays in civic engagement throughout the world, it is important to look at foundational work that has existed for centuries.

In Africa, drama has played an enormous role in community politics. Ngugi wa Thiong’o writes about the traditional drama of Kenya in his work Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature. The Agikuyu held the Ituika ceremony every twenty-five years or so to mark the handing over of power to the next generation. They celebrated the Ituika by feasting, dancing, and singing over a six-month period. The laws and regulations of the new government were embodied in the words, phrases, and rhythmic movements of the new songs and dances (Thiong’o 1986: 37). Drama in pre-colonial Kenya was part of the rhythm of daily and seasonal life of the community. It was an activity among and within other activities, often drawing its energy from those other activities. It was also entertainment, moral instruction, and a strict matter of life and death and communal survival. “It could take place anywhere – wherever there was an ‘empty space’ (Thiong’o 1986: 37). Thiong’o also related his experience working with the Bata shoe factory workers in the 1970s who, through theatre, worked out “the process and quantity of their exploitation to explain it to those who hadn’t worked in a factory” (Thiong’o 1986: 55). The theatre forum opened up the space for dialogue on their oppression. They not only recognized the oppressive regime of the Bata shoe factory, but they progressed through the discussion to calculate the amount of money they earned for the
factory owners in Canada (Thiong’o 1986:55). “The balancing of opposing ideas and social forces, of all contending forces, is important in shaping the form of drama and theatre” (Thiong’o 1986: 54). Thiong’o’s work with political theatre resulted in his imprisonment and exile.

In South Africa during the 1930s, South Africans used performance as a site for contesting the barriers to African participation in a South African sphere and to represent and negotiate their non-representation in the neocolonial institutions and practices of the time (Kruger 1999: 25). Later during the apartheid, the Market Theatre in Johannesburg provided a site for resistance by providing a venue where voices of the oppressed majority could be heard.

This theatre of testimony is distinguished by the dramatic interpretation of individual and collective narratives, and of politically provocative topics, such as the pass laws, prison conditions, workers’ rights, and, to a lesser degree, the condition of women. Its presentation combines physical and verbal comedy, impersonation of multiple roles with minimal props, and direct address of the audience by performers representing themselves and their own convictions as well as those of fictional characters... At its initial stages, this theatre had its institutional basis in groups who used scripts generated through improvisational or workshops rather than private composition (Kruger 1999: 154).

At the same time, there were theatre groups touring the townships trying to mobilize the people. There was a view that the Market Theatre was ‘protest theatre’ that catered to “an elite audience’s appetite for indulging in sympathy with oppression” (Steadman cited in Kruger 1999: 155) unlike the ‘theatre of resistance’ that worked to actively challenge the poverty within, and state violence against, the black population. In this sense, the Market Theatre pushed theatre on the margins into the mainstream, and in the opinion of some, co-opted the voice of the marginalized black population.

The Vietnamese have used theatre throughout history as a cultural-political tool and a weapon. One of their most popular traditional forms of theatre is that of Cheo. Cheo performers float down rivers on boats while singing text and inviting the people along the shores to join them in the performance. There were never any fees and it was neither subsidized nor condoned by the government (Gainor 1995: 6). Later during the Vietnam war, the National Liberation Front and the Viet Cong drew from historic forms of Vietnamese theatre to create educational drama programs about communism that would be present-
ed to villages in order to encourage resistance against the South Vietnamese and the United States’ armies. This method proved to be so successful, that the Americans felt it to be a serious threat to their chances of winning the war and created their own theatre group to promote their own cause (Gainor 1995: 2).

Popular theatre in the Philippines goes back to pre-colonial times, however the more contemporary groups, such as Philippine Educational Theatre Association, (PETA), were inspired by the numerous popular theatre initiatives that sprouted up, independently, all over Latin America during the 1960s and 1970s. Fidel Castro’s newly formed government, and the ideology of Che Guevara created a politically charged atmosphere that inspired collective action and popular theatre movements out of Colombia, Cuba, Peru, Venezuela, Brazil, Ecuador, Mexico, Uruguay, Argentina, and Nicaragua. The political in theatre can be a ‘reactive’ process, as has been the case for most of history, where dominant forces are ‘reacted to’. For instance, the Bugokos theatre group of the Philippines thrived on clear-cut political objectives, such as ousting the dictator and ridding the country of U.S. military bases, but once their targets were gone, these ‘reactive’ theatre groups tended to vanish (van Erven 2001: 23). As in the rise in popularity of the carpas and actos during the Mexican Revolution, political theatre has very often been a collective means of challenging distinct and overt systems of oppression (Broyles-Gonzalez 1994: 54).

In the Philippines, PETA uses a collective and deliberative process with its members to develop scripts contributing personal experiences to enhance character development. This theatre collective deals with serious issues within the community, such as violence against women, and encourages input from the audience that helps to ensure that the dialogue is reflective of the communities and issues they are representing (Barrameda and Espallardo 2000:50).

For hundreds of years in Europe, theatre has merged with politics where traditional political theatre and entertainment challenged and resisted the status quo. Early theatre in Athens was an arena where political issues were examined using comedy and satire. Court jesters who criticized the ruling class and the commedia dell’arte, which allowed the Italian peasantry to mock the aristocracy, were encouraged, because it was felt that these small, mostly ineffective acts of resistance, would act as a safety valve by letting off steam to reduce the pressure and thereby defuse any potential political unrest (Orenstein 1998: 4).

This notion of the “safety valve” effect of political theatre returns again and again throughout history, as a necessary nuisance to those in power. From this point of view,
theatre, in the hands of the state, was used to legitimize its power by demonstrating that subversive thought and activity represented on stage was subdued by the state, thus reinforcing the authority of the monarchy (Fortier 1997:112). Depending on the viewer, these theatrical subversive acts either worked to legitimize those in power or, on some level, to emancipate the oppressed. Either way, it was recognized that there needed to be some kind of outlet for the suppressed voice of the people in order to deter revolt.

At various times during European history, direct representation of politics was banned from the stage, as in 19th century England (Samuel 1985: xiii). During the 1870s and 1880s, theatre seemed to anticipate major political themes, “as though the live performance on stage constituted a kind of symbolic recognition of the entry of some new issue into the arena of public debate” (Samuel 1985: xv). A “liberated” woman (Henrik Ibsen 1879) and Irish nationality were represented on stage before they ever ended up on political agendas (Samuel 1985: xv).

In the same vein as the Court Jester, but pre-dating him by hundreds of years, indigenous cultures all over the world have had trickster characters who have critiqued society. They revealed what the consequences were for behaviour driven by base motivations (anger, lust, and greed), and told stories of law and history (Hyde 1998: 7). In the early 1980s the Aboriginal voices started to secure their own theatrical space and ensured that the trickster character carries on in contemporary Aboriginal theatre. In Canada, playwright’s Tomson Highway and Drew Hayden Taylor create work that often deals with “the clashing of cultures between First Nationals and Euro/urban society” (Encyclopedia of Canadian Theatre 2003: www.canadiantheatre.com/dict.pl?term=aboriginal).

In recent history, political theatre has been understood to mean ‘left-wing theatre’, that which, in a Marxist sense, promotes the battle of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie in order to overthrow capitalism and replace exploitation with justice (Kershaw 1999: 67). The Russian-originated agit-prop, refers to theatre that agitates and contained propaganda as a popular method of communicating worker ideology to the masses. It was not participatory, but it was ‘popular’ in its form and was embraced by workers’ movements in the United States in the 1930s. In Germany, Bertold Brecht, one of the most commonly referenced political theatre playwrights, created plays that were a reaction to Nazi Germany and emphasized the roles of ‘everyday’ people during World War II by asking audiences to question what was going on around them. Brecht is renowned for breaking the fourth wall by having his characters break through the illusion of theatre and com-
municate directly with audiences to draw responses and reactions to the issues.

As with other popular theatre, workers’ theatre drew directly from the audiences’ experience and history and gave the audience a part in the play’s action. This audience connection to theatre was often very emotional; audiences ‘reacted’ strongly to images and sounds and responded with “enthusiastic exchanges with the actors” (McConachie 1985: 14). These theatrical productions were so localized, spectators often would be watching their family members, friends, and neighbours acting out a conflict that the audience themselves were personally experiencing and therefore felt it their right to voice their opinions and concerns. “Good workers’ theatre teaches about activism, animates participants with a vision of social change, and leads them to question and challenge, in thoughts, in words, and in deeds, existing structures of social relations” (Hyman 1997: 5).

In the U.S. during the 1960s the United Farm Workers (UFW) organized, fundraised, and were politicized through the productions and actions of El Teatro Campesino (ETC). ETC created actos and carpas and performed them on the backs of flatbed trucks. Actos are improvisational skits which were to “inspire audiences to social action, illuminate specific social problems, satirize the opposition, hint or show solutions, and to express what people were feeling” (Broyles-Gonzalez 1994: 25) and carpas “enacted the realities of domination and subordination from a working-class perspective” (Broyles-Gonzalez 1994: 53). These skits were about the exploitative conditions in the agribusiness. Through theatre groups like ETC, Chicanos and other marginalized groups worked through the process of “deconstructing and decentralizing social and theatrical norms and taking a step towards creating the ‘politics of difference’.” Through this action the norms of the dominant are challenged by the marginalized in order to place marginality into a position of “power and agency” (Elam Jr. 1997: 135). The politics of difference have to be taken into account in order for the collective democratic process to negotiate consensus.

Honor Ford-Smith from Jamaica’s Sistren, a women’s theatre and cultural organization founded in 1977, documents the challenges of working in a democratic collective in her book Ring Ding in a Tight Corner. Ford-Smith’s experiences working with the collective have led her to believe that there are a number of problems with working in a traditionally democratic manner. Primarily, the long process of democratic consensus and decision-making tends to take precedence over the intended outcome of the initiative (Ford-Smith 1989: 97). Another concern of Ford-Smith’s, is that the anti-managerial ethic of democratic collective work leads to unstructured and unproductive work from the
group. She suggests that collective democracies would function better with “limited and tightly defined objectives” (Ford-Smith 1989: 98, 99) and leadership that is both accountable and removable.

Generally speaking, popular theatre practitioners aim to follow a participatory democratic process. Popular theatre activist, Julie Salverson has worked with others in the popular theatre community in Canada to develop principles and processes which could guide the work of people wanting to engage their communities with popular theatre. Following the roots of popular theatre and focusing on the goal of bringing marginalized voices to the forefront, the four main principles and processes are:

a. We do theatre for, with and by specific communities defined by shared geography, gender, culture, origins, or by shared experience and interest... and {those} who have not been given access to resources in our society;
b. We act in partnership with other organizations committed to social change;
c. The cultural and aesthetic standards manifest in our work are shaped by those of our intended audience(s);
d. Our work is engaged in a process of Popular Education, which has its own traditions and methods of work (Salverson 1996: 91).

Of course, with popular theatre, there is always the threat of co-optation, which speaks to the need of having a strong set of guiding principles that will attempt to ensure that practitioners are using the method in the spirit of social justice and solidarity, rather than to reinforce the status quo. Dwight Conquerwood writes about popular theatre used within a Hmong (Laotian) refugee camp in Northeast Thailand. There are 48,000 residents on 400 acres of land. Conquerwood, who has lived in many different refugee camps across Asia and Africa, has noted a “high incidence of performance in the camps... through its reflexive capacities, performance enables people to take stock of their situation and through this self-knowledge to cope better. There are good reasons why in the crucible of refugee crisis, performative behaviours intensify” (Conquerwood 1998: 221). Conquerwood assisted in the development of a health education campaign using a refugee performance company. He was keenly aware of the risk of co-optation by authoritarian structures (which happened regularly with puppet shows) and avoided this by focusing more on process than presentation. He ensured that the performances were “rooted in and begin with the cultural strengths” of the Hmong (Conquerwood 1998: 222). His critique at the end of this initiative was that it ended up being too one-sided, too directed at the Hmong refugees, whereas,
the ideal is for the two cultures, refugees’ and relief workers’, to enter into a productive and mutually invigorating dialogue, with neither side dominating or winning out, but both replenishing one another. Intercultural performance can enable this kind of exchange (Conquerwood 1998: 228).

Conquerwood has identified that grounding one’s work in the principles of solidarity and equity, as outlined earlier by Salverson, encourages a more equitable exchange of ideas between participants and positions all as learners and contributors.

All of the aforementioned theatre groups (only a handful of the many that exist and have existed) have served a dual purpose of making socio-political commentary and striving for social change. This study is interested in those theatre groups that utilize democratic practices to act out and facilitate social actions in order to effect change in greater society. Central to this relationship between democratic political action and theatre, is the work of Brazil’s Augusto Boal and his deep connection with the work of educator Paulo Freire.

Freire’s progressive pedagogy does not separate theory from practice. This dedication to praxis, the combination of reflection and action, is part of what made Pedagogy of the Oppressed (PO) so amenable to Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed (TO). Most of PO’s neologisms from ‘conscientization’ to ‘problematization’ smoothly translate into Boal’s theatrical pedagogy creating new ways and means of exploring ‘praxis.’

As in PO, TO also strives to ‘transform’ the student from passive receiver of knowledge to the active subject who creates knowledge. Boal’s theatre is a “rehearsal for revolution.” These ‘rehearsals for revolution’ should evoke in the spectator a desire to practice in reality the act she has rehearsed in the theatre in order to be an ‘actor’ or ‘subject’ in her own life. According to Boal, the theatre of the bourgeoisie presents the world as complete, and therefore it is presented as a spectacle; however, the oppressed classes’ theatre is unfinished and is therefore a rehearsal (Boal 1974: 142). As with workers’ theatre audiences, popular audiences want to talk to the actors and to stop the action to ask questions. There is a blurring of where their reality ends and the fiction begins on stage.

Forum theatre offers a liberatory education to those who participate, in that they challenge and change the world by working as a community to re-vision the possibilities. Through their theatrical dialogue, participants build political and personal empowerment that supports their larger struggle for liberation and political and economic justice. Boal’s work takes Freire’s concept of ‘problematization’ and embodies it in the role of the ‘joker.’
The joker is ‘a difficultator,’ the person who overturns and “undermines easy judgements, reinforcing our grasp of the complexity of a situation, but not letting that complexity get in the way of action or frighten us into submission or inactivity’ (Boal 1995: xix). For Freire and Boal, this idea of exploring and accepting the complexity of ourselves and others was critical to understanding the possibilities (for better or for worse) of our action or inaction.

Section Four: Summary and Points of Convergence

In looking at the literature of the three areas of democracy, civic engagement, and popular theatre, the following observations can be made:

It can be surmised that democracy is in constant negotiation and there has been an ongoing tension around just how ‘participatory’ democracy should be. Currently, the democracy we experience in North America is decidedly weak, a diluted version of the “contemporary theory of democracy” as described by Pateman. Market fundamentalism and corporate power have been edging out democratic decision-making through powerful private interest groups that carry the most influence with the government and ultimately, the corporate agenda is the most powerful barrier to participatory democracy.

The literature on civic engagement indicates that for the most part, the citizen has been relegated to the role of spectator. Politics is a spectator rather than participatory activity that is left in the hands of ‘experts’ rather than citizens. The level of political efficacy is seen to be a challenge, with limited civic education opportunities to address low levels of political efficacy. There are relatively few entry points for active or meaningful engagement with the political system. Those most marginalized in society tend to have the least access to the political system. The main barriers to participatory democracy are implementation, inequality, and co-optation as outlined by Rebecca Abers. The responsibility of civic education has become the responsibility of the informal education sector made up of non-governmental organizations and not-for-profits. Models of civic engagement that have had some success do exist, such as the Porto Alegre Participatory Budgeting model.

This review of literature on popular theatre looks at theatre that is developed through direct contact with audiences as participants and works to produce commonly-founded ideas in order to the challenge status quo. The typical “middle-class” theatre that is very
prevalent today facilitates the reproduction of the status quo by continually representing the same mainstream (dominant) perspective. The vision of popular theatre as a process extends its value to community-building. Political theatre has, internationally and historically, laid foundational work in civic engagement. Political theatre often anticipated major political trends. The “safety valve” notion of political theatre put forth that popular theatre released tension among citizens and thwarted unrest. The breaking of the “fourth wall” is a major characteristic in popular theatre, and its intention is to connect with participants as more than spectators. Popular theatre groups/movements have defined the principles and processes of their work as being based on equity and solidarity with those who are marginalized. When the principles of popular theatre are consistent with the principles of equity participants and practitioners alike are positioned as contributors and learners.

Within the three areas (democracy, civic engagement, and popular theatre) there are points of convergence. Present within the three areas are the struggles that exist between those who hold the power and those with limited power. These areas overlap where elements of participatory democracy, particularly the process of democratic decision-making, and civic engagement, particularly civic education, are present within popular theatre (as defined in this thesis). As well, popular theatre shares other characteristics with civic engagement and participatory democracy. All areas rely on the participation of citizens, and are thereby challenged by corporate rule and the governments with weak democracies that provide few openings for citizens’ input and influence.

Participatory democracy is the process and the political state that will support and be supported by civic engagement. Civic engagement requires the political education and knowledge of “the people”. Popular theatre meshes with both participatory democracy and civic engagement by using democratic processes and community-building practices as part of its methodological framework and guiding principles. One of the desired outcomes of popular theatre is a learning outcome of greater political efficacy. Greater political efficacy will better prepare citizens (especially those most marginalized by the dominating system) to understand and to actively engage with ideas generated out of the experiences and needs of those not currently served by the dominating system.

Involvement in local politics assumes a reasonable amount of political knowledge and confidence. To increase this political knowledge and confidence, citizens need to have a safe space where they can learn and inform their own thinking about their ideas on policy-making. Traditional approaches to civic education involving jargon-heavy language
and bureaucracy may serve to further alienate marginalized people from the political process. An inclusive approach to increasing political efficacy and involvement may have to cross the boundaries of orthodox political behaviour and explore alternatives, such as Legislative Theatre, that take a conscious approach to including the many different realities of citizens.

The history of popular theatre reveals lifetimes of citizens creating a plurality of resistances through the existing power structures. The passivity of modern society that has functioned to distance the citizen from an active role in political decision-making is not unrelated to the passivity of modern theatre/entertainment. However, citizen-generated drama can be a profound method of expression providing a balance of imagination and political expression that can act as a catalyst for social change, and as an alternative to citizens being primarily receptacles for information.

In light of what has been discussed so far, it is a wonder that any democratic citizen-based work ever actually comes to fruition. When the ‘reasoning’ of the elite political class has repeatedly revealed itself to be flawed, anti-democratic, self-interested, limited in vision, unsustainable, unimaginative, politically sophisticated, as well as savagely defended by those with vast amounts of powers, the attempts at democratic actions and organizations, both the small and the local, and those with international aspirations, are achievements to be celebrated, studied, and duplicated.

Chapter Four presents a comparative analysis of Legislative Theatre experiments from different international sites.
All landless activists thus are great artists. The Landless Rural Workers’ Movement MST is a beautiful expression of a radical opposition to the cannibalism known as corporate globalization. For the cannibals, everything is already imagined. The powerful are not able to create. They buy everything already made. They don’t construct beauty. The Center for the Theater of the Oppressed CTO and MST together invert the globalization logic (Geo Britto 2000: www.ctorio.com.br/Ingles/ingles-index.htm).

Introduction

This chapter looks at the original Legislative Theatre experiment in Brazil, and three subsequent experiments that occurred in the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Canada. This chapter sets up a comparative analysis between the four experiments in order to evaluate Legislative Theatre’s possibilities and limitations as a tool for democratic civic engagement. This analysis is not focused on differences based on geographic location or culture, but specifically the primary differences between the four experiments in their use of the key components of the original Legislative Theatre experiment.

Section I introduces the history and key aspects of Legislative Theatre. Section II looks at three Legislative Theatre experiments occurring in three different international sites. Section III is a comparative analysis of the three Legislative Theatre experiments. Section IV discusses Legislative Theatre in Brazil post 1996. Section V looks at other international sites of political learning and action, focusing on the relation of politics and theatrical praxis. Finally, Section VI discusses the potential for Legislative Theatre as a strategy for civic engagement and social change, the possibilities and limitations.
Section One: Theatre as Politics

Acting effectively requires practice and training, political acts ultimately depend on the presence of spectators. These spectators in some fashion determine truth in political action and regulate in some ways the standards of that action... (Gorham 1994:3).

Canadian philosopher, John Ralston Saul comments that “if we cannot see ourselves, then we cannot act as humans” (Saul 1997: 23). He attributes our loss of self-respect, our inability to act politically, to this inability to see ourselves. An extension of this idea is Boal’s belief that humans are theatre in that we are able to see ourselves seeing, and in doing so we can simultaneously be the protagonist and spectator of our actions which, furthermore, enables us to combine memory and imagination to reinvent the past and to invent the future (Boal 1998: 7). The next question might be, if humans are theatre, then why would they need to make theatre? The Boalian answer would be: to engage in dialogue and to voice their collective desires.

“He who desires, but acts not; breeds pestilence” (William Blake’s The Marriage of Heaven and Hell 1790-3 ‘Proverbs of Hell’ also quoted in Bread and Puppet Theatre’s “The Insurrection Mass with Funeral March for a Rotten Idea”)

Boal’s development of the forum theatre, with the improvisation of possible solutions, the spect-actor interventions, and the search for alternatives to oppressive and unjust situations, not only helped citizens to represent themselves and solutions to societal problems, but also helped them develop concurrently their “taste for political discussion (democracy) and their desire to develop their own artistic abilities (popular art)” (Boal 1998: 9). This encouraged Boal to go one step further and to use the energy and ideas channeled in the forum theatre for something that could be applied usefully in other settings.

Our mandate’s project is to bring theatre back into the centre of political action – the centre of decisions – by making theatre as politics rather than merely making political theatre. In the latter case, the theatre makes comments on politics; in the former, the theatre is, in itself, one of the ways in which political activity can be conducted (Boal 1998: 20).

Legislative Theatre (LT) was the product of a transformative “moment” in history where Boal had a small window of opportunity to realize his dream of actualizing the marriage of politics and theatre. In 1992, Boal’s Center for the Theatre of the Oppressed (CTO)
was in financial dire straits and was ready to fold when they decided to support the Workers’ Party campaign. It was only after Boal was elected into Rio de Janeiro’s Legislature that he was able to make the connection between Forum Theatre and politics. Boal encouraged people to be part of Legislative Theatre’s ‘participatory research’ in their own communities, in order to learn from the shortcomings of representative democracy and the candidates that rarely ever come through with their campaign promises. Boal served two terms as City Councillor between 1992 and 1996, and during that period 34 bills originating from the LT process were presented, with thirteen of those bills eventually becoming municipal laws. With this experiment, Boal established a precedent that has since inspired many other civic-minded theatre groups to adapt the same process for their own communities. The adaptation of the LT process will be discussed in more detail in sections two and three of this chapter. At this point it is important to look closely at the political/theatrical process that was initially developed by Boal while he served in the Legislature.

In Rio de Janeiro, Boal’s LT group was organized into a network of partners called nuclei and links. A link consisted of people from the same community who communicated periodically with the mandate. The relationship between the link and the mandate could take place in the Chamber, the community, or any other place that mandate activities occur. They could communicate through personal encounters, the Chamber, or the interactive mailing list. A nucleus was a link that was a Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) group that collaborated with the mandate on a regular basis (Boal 1998: 40). The nuclei fell into three main categories: community, defined by geographical community; thematic, defined as a community of people with a shared interest, e.g. black students; and thematic and community; made up of participants of both the aforementioned characteristics, e.g. Terceira Idade - a group of elderly people (Boal 1998: 44). During the four years that Boal was in the Legislature, many groups were created including those with elders, students, street children, those experiencing severe poverty, and the landless peasant farmers.
The structure of Boal’s Legislative Theatre (1992 -1996) was as follows:

**MANDATE**

**CITY COUNCILLOR**

Central Directorate

*Internal Cabinet*  
All internal work matters -  
Legal and parliamentary  
Business, press, office support

*External Cabinet*  
Jokers, dramaturgy,  
images, sound, laboratory

The Chamber in the Square

The interactive mailing list

The permanent company

The mandate’s shows

**NUCLEI AND LINKS**

CONSTITUTION: a) by community; b) by theme; c) by both

ACTIVITIES: a) workshops; b) shows for the community itself;  
c) inter-community dialogues; d) festivals; e) festive events

**Summaries**

**THE METABOLISING CELL**

Projects of law; legal actions; direct interventions (Boal 1998: 39)

The LT process began with research. First, the nuclei did research in the community on current issues to develop a Forum performance. Then there were inter-nuclei dialogues that served to promote better understanding of what was happening in other communities and to form a “network of solidarity”. These inter-community dialogues were very similar to the “community tours” given to the representatives in the Participatory Budget of Porto Alegre in order to build awareness of all the communities in the city, not just one’s own. When a community group suggested a problem specific to themselves they were asked to create a parable play, preferably without text, that would emphasize the problem as being universal to all communities. Once a show was developed it was presented at political demonstrations and other non-theatrical occasions. Twice a year the groups showed their work at festivals so that people could exchange experiences with all the other groups (Boal 1998: 90).
The later stage of the research process was completed through the cabinet, mostly within the Chamber in the Square and via the Interactive Mailing List. To run a “Chamber in the Square” consultation, a very clear question had to be created for the groups. A legislative assessor would also attend the meeting to clarify legalities and to translate the issue into legal terminology. Participants were to have received material on the law well in advance of the session to facilitate their understanding of the direction of the debate and to avoid participants making premature judgements. The Chamber in the Square sessions were very flexible in time and location. Those who had shown interest in the issue were given notice of location and agenda items. Participants were required to vote on the issues and explain their positions. The Jokers gave feedback from the Chamber in the Square session to the nucleus that was originally consulted on the issue, and facilitated a session where the participants made a summary of the issues and suggestions from the Chamber in the Square. The law proposal that the city councillor would present in the Legislature would reflect the opinions of the various nuclei, and therefore, the summary was used when drafting legal projects and preparing actions.

The summaries were passed on to what Boal referred to as the “metabolising cell” that had one permanent constituency (including general administration and the legislative assessors) and one occasional and changing constituency (all those interested in the particular subject). Within the metabolising cell the summaries were carefully read and edited of extraneous material. The proposed law was then brought to the municipal chamber to be voted on (Boal 1998:104).

Boal notes that participants would respond more profoundly to the Chamber in the Square sessions that were more “theatricalised” and also when the sessions were well prepared. The Jokers facilitated civic learning during the sessions where the summaries were made to increase participants’ capacity to understand and theorize about what had been discussed in the Chamber in the Square sessions.

**Key Aspects of LT Experiment in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (1992 -1996)**

1. The Legislative Theatre group was organized into a network of partners (nuclei - TO groups and links - other communities). The relationship between the link and the mandate could take place in the Chamber, the community, or any other place that mandate activities occur.

2. The nuclei did research in the community on current issues to develop a Forum performance.
3. Inter-nuclei dialogues occurred to form a “network of solidarity” and community groups created parables emphasizing universality of issue.

4. Participants were invited to Chamber in the Square session via the Interactive Mailing List. Participants received material on the proposed law well in advance of the session.

5. A legislative assessor attended the session to clarify legalities and to translate the issue into legal terminology.

6. The Jokers facilitated a session where the participants made a summary of the issues and suggestions from the Chamber in the Square.

7. The city councillor used the summary when drafting legal projects and preparing actions.

8. Proposed laws were brought to the municipal chamber to be voted on.

During Boal’s time in the Legislature, up until 1996, his mandate promulgated thirteen laws, the most important of which was the Amendment to the Constitution of the City 43/95 to allow the promulgation of Law 1245/95 - “the law that protects the witnesses of crimes” (Boal 1998: 104).

Section Two: International Sites of Legislative Theatre

The United Kingdom: “Brighton and Hove Rocks” 1999

To date, the most well documented translation of the LT methodology, outside of Brazil, is from the United Kingdom. In June 1999, the East Sussex Brighton and Hove Health Authority, together with the Brighton and Hove Voluntary Sector Forum developed a process for involving the community in the identification and integration of their priorities into a new local Health Improvement Programme (HImP). A team was created that included development workers from other community groups. Four national priorities that the central government had already identified and that were to be included in the HImP initiative were: heart disease and stroke, cancer, accidents, and mental health. The other priorities were to be agreed upon locally. The intention was to involve the community in making changes in health care policies so that the changes would actually have a positive effect on the greater community (Goetz et al 1999).

The project was designed to be informative and creative, accessible to all, an open and wide ranging discussion, in plain language, with trained facilitators, and accessible
for people who speak a range of community languages (through translators and interpreters) (Alexander 1999). Local officials received “Brighton Rocks” as invitations to the meeting. “Brighton Rocks” were rocks with bandages on and googley eyes with cards attached that listed health inequality statistics. Over 200 diverse (including ethnic minorities, women, young people, people with disabilities, and unemployed people) community members attended the meeting at Hove Town Hall. In the morning, the participants were divided into ten working groups where they worked with trained facilitators to collect their ideas about the following: a) the social causes of ill health, b) how to influence change in policy, and c) how to identify the social causes of ill health. They then explored ways that policy could be changed to address these issues. Participants placed colour-coded stickers on the enormous list of issues and policy initiatives to identify the priorities. In the afternoon, participants viewed a play that reflected the realities of those citizens whose needs were not being addressed by the health-care system.

The Brighton team had to restructure the Legislative Theatre methodology to work for their situation. They decided to create only one play, with a group of people from the various communities in Brighton and Hove, that would most accurately reflect the reality of the group’s experiences. The play “Stayin’ Alive” focused on one character experiencing social exclusion. The methodology also differed in how it dealt with audience interaction. Instead of replacing the actor and coming up with an individual solution, the audience members were encouraged to yell, “STOP!” and then shout out their ideas for community initiatives or policy changes that would have a positive impact on the main character. These ideas were then quickly recorded and the play would continue.

The ideas and recommendations generated by the participants were then passed on to the local council who held a follow-up meeting in November 1999. During this meeting, the Brighton team conducted a workshop that reviewed the outcomes of the process. The minutes of the meeting were to be translated into four languages and sent out to 250 community members in order to publicize the meetings and build accountability and responsiveness from the authorities.

All the recommendations from the participants of the Brighton and Hove initiative that were put before the Primary Care Group in April 2000 were rejected initially. These recommendations had included the release of funds for community-based initiatives, voluntary representation on the Primary Care Group board, and improvements in board responsiveness. Finally, a senior officer, concerned about what kind of reaction the 250
community participants would have towards this rejection, called another meeting with the Primary Care Group where all these recommendations were reconsidered and approved (Goetz et al 1999).

**The Netherlands: Formaat Theatre’s “Death at the Hang-Out”, Wijchen April, 2001**

In Wijchen, the Netherlands, a community of 37,000 was experiencing increasing conflict between the youth and the adults. The mayor of Wijchen called in the Forum Theatre group, Formaat, to initiate and facilitate a dialogue and to create common images in order to start a community-building process. The mayor was initially only interested in having the groups in conflict communicate with one another. However, he was informed that because this was LT, he would have to take the community members seriously and he would also have to agree to implement the proposals presented at the Chamber in the Square.

The theatre group only had eight days to complete the LT process so they had to rework the methodology to suit the situation. In general, the project was greeted with pessimism. However, twenty youth from various neighbourhoods joined the workshop and presented their side of the story, which had to do with them being “assigned” a hangout place in the park that was floodlit and highly visible, making them feel too exposed. They refused to use the hangout and chose to frequent the mall, and consequently, to annoy and threaten people. This situation was exacerbated by the fact that the community centre did not have programming for youth under eighteen. Later, almost fifty adults joined the workshops. They remained suspicious of the youth, but admitted that the youth needed somewhere to “linger”.

Based on the issues raised in the workshops a Forum play entitled, “Death at the Hang-out” was presented. During the second performance many interventions were made by the audience (spect-actors). By the end of the performance there were twenty-five people (young, old, police officers, the mayor) on stage discussing common solutions. A few nights later the group performed the play in a solution-oriented manner. From a crowd of ninety, four proposals were accepted (one of them being that the community centre had to be opened for the youth). The proposals were then projected on a screen and written up as minutes. Local government officials promised to start working on the proposals, and a committee was formed by the audience to support and control the process (*Under Pressure* No 6: 2001).
In the spring of 1999, Headlines Theatre in Vancouver, British Columbia produced *Squeegee*, the first Legislative Theatre experiment in North America. This play addressed the issues around the criminalization of youth. With funding from various sources, Headlines Theatre set about producing a Forum Theatre production with street youth. Headlines Theatre paid them a living wage and hired a full-time youth coordinator and a councillor to deal with problems that might occur. David Diamond, the artistic director of Headlines Theatre, decided to attempt a Legislative Theatre experiment, because the production would be dealing with youth criminalization issues that were obviously being affected by the current City Council’s recent by-law enforcement. Lawyer Rena Zweig attended all the performances and recorded all the interventions from the audience that had to do with youth safety, particularly those that could be interpreted as a desire for making a law or by-law that could create safety in the street. The notes were gathered from all of the performances, collated, and then translated into a report in legal language. The report was then presented to City Council.

Diamond attempted to get the Mayor’s office to acknowledge this upcoming work with street youth, but the Mayor’s office never responded. Some staff and councillors, who were enthusiastic about the production encouraged Diamond to proceed with the initiative and bring the suggestions to City Hall. Adrienne Montani, Child and Youth Advocate for the City of Vancouver, was involved and was considered to be the connection to City Hall. None of the politicians that were invited attended the shows and the only police that came neither participated in the Forum, nor identified themselves as police. The performances often initiated intense and emotional discussions between the audience and the performers; however the audience was less inclined to participate in interventions.

As a result of the Squeegee project, The Legal Advocate’s Report on the Findings of “The Squeegee Project” was sent to contacts at the United Way who had seen the performance and wanted to adapt their services to the suggestions in the report. Also, a judge asked if there was any way to show the play to groups of other judges with the hope of changing attitudes towards youth in the court system, and possibly having a spillover effect into the political realm. Moreover, a meeting was scheduled with the police, but the chief of police who had originally indicated some interest in the LT experiment had been fired and the meeting never occurred (Diamond 1999 Notes).
Section Three: A Comparative Analysis of the Three Legislative Theatre Experiments

These three LT experiments were similar in that they all used theatre to approach issues that could be addressed through adjustments to existing laws and bylaws. However, each group adapted the original LT experiment to the social, political, and cultural environment they needed to work in. All the experiments attempted to secure what seems to be the key element of LT, having a politician/official/policy-maker guarantee that they would follow through on the suggestions made by the citizens. Brighton and Hove did not have a secure guarantee that the health authorities would follow through on the process; however, the fact that 250 of the community participants would be expecting follow-up, and receiving the minutes of the Health Authority’s meeting was enough to ensure that all the suggestions made by the citizens were accepted and implemented. Formaat’s group in the Netherlands would not even start the project until the Mayor of Wijchen agreed to implement all the suggestions made by the participants thus ensuring that the will of the people was a priority from the outset. Headlines Theatre in Vancouver also attempted to have political authority on side with the project, but did not end up receiving support from any authority that could actually affect policy. In fact, the Mayor’s office never responded to any communications with the artistic director of Headlines Theatre regarding the “Squeegee Project”. Even though the “Squeegee Project” had a lawyer and City Hall’s Child and Youth Advocate working on the project, this did not guarantee any action on the part of the municipal government.

It is evident that the LT projects that took place in Brazil, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands were all reasonably successful in achieving their goals, because ‘authorities’ were interested in the project from the outset. In Brazil, of course, Boal’s position as city councillor permitted him to link the municipal government with the citizens through his TO groups and their work. In the United Kingdom, the East Sussex Brighton and Hove Health Authority had requested the Hove Voluntary Sector Forum’s assistance in creating a health improvement program that would include the input from marginalized members of the community. Even though the Health Authority never guaranteed that it would follow through on the suggestions made by the community members, it was obliged to recognize its role in initiating the project, and the impact that rejecting the suggestions by the 250 participants would have on the community. The connection between the Health Authority’s request for public consultation, regardless of how much real consultation they
were actually expecting, and the Brighton and Hove Voluntary Sector Forum’s ability to consult effectively with a large number of people from the marginalized portions of society, succeeded in solidifying the Health Authority’s obligation to follow through on the community’s recommendations.

In the case from Wijchen, the Formaat’s LT group would not agree to the project until the Mayor made a commitment to follow through on the proposals made by the participants. This case had a successful combination of creating a public sphere where groups in conflict could work through their differences, and most importantly having the agreement that once they had found solutions to their problems, that these solutions would be taken seriously and implemented by their local government. The “Squeegee Project”, on the other hand, went ahead without even tacit agreement by those whose authority could effect change. To fulfill this project’s mandate, Headline’s Theatre would need to have secured the agreement of an authority figure who could guarantee the follow-up on the citizen-generated proposals. The other possibility is that if the audience members/Forum participants were guaranteed personal follow-up on the issue, as the participants in the Brighton and Hove and Brazilian LT projects were, then perhaps the authorities in Vancouver’s municipal government may have been more pressured to address the issues in the performance.

In the projects from the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, the participants/audience members were all quite involved with the development and process of outlining the issues before the performances were viewed. Both of these groups were prepared to discuss the issues, as were the Brazilians who either participated in the workshops or received information about the issue in advance from the interactive mailing list. In the Canadian case, the audience/spect-actors, although aware of the topic and nature of the performance, were not a part of the development of the performance, nor was there necessarily any expectation on the part of the audience for there to be follow-up on their suggestions. Also, because the street youth were the performers in the play who represented the situation rather than performers who are outside of the immediate area of contention, there was an us-and-them dichotomy set up between the audience and the performers. The tension between the privileged audience members and the street youth performers should have been explored and anticipated by the performers prior to the presentation. In addition, it should be noted that, in both cases, Brighton and Hove and Wijchen, the LT experiments took place in relatively small communities, compared to the populations of
Vancouver and Rio de Janeiro, which may have had an effect on the success of the experiment.

As will be discussed later in this chapter, there are many ways that TO can and has been adapted. A balance needs to be struck between all parties partaking in the LT experience. The different experiences of the participants must be taken into consideration, as must the time constraints and the physical location, but most importantly the participants must be prepared to enter into this theatrical dialogue. They need to be welcomed, encouraged, and prepared to engage in the action. If citizens do not feel that they will be listened to or if they believe that they will be silenced by an imbalance of power then there will not be equitable representation of ideas, the project will not have a satisfactory outcome. In Rio de Janeiro between 1992 and 1996, with Boal in the Legislature, the CTO Rio had a system that invited and prepared citizens to participate in a political/theatrical dialogue where their voices would be heard. When Boal’s time in office was up, and the link between theatre and politics was momentarily broken, the CTO Rio had to look at new ways to re-establish that link.

Section Four: Legislative Theatre, Brazil, Post 1996

In 1998, the LT initiative was re-ignited through funding from the Ford Foundation. Currently, there are six popular theatre groups doing LT out of CTO Rio. The six groups are: Artemanha, CIA Participativa, Body in Scene, Tide Art, and the Marias of Brazil: Pot of Oppression. CIA Participativa is in partnership with the Participatory Budget (PB). This group works with civil society to popularize the themes of the PB through theatrical work. A bill was passed that gives civic groups the right to voice their suggestions regarding the themes that will be discussed during Budget sessions at the City Hall, thus allowing the legislative proposals of this group to be systematized and directed by the PB. The show, The Budget is Good and I Like It (rough translation), was developed to discuss the need for popular participation within the Legislature and The Happy Silva Family, With Preachers in the Nose was developed to discuss the difficulties of community organizing and understanding the budget process (Center for Theater of the Oppressed – Rio www.ctorio.com.br/Ingles/ingles-index.htm).

We are doing theatre in their assemblies so before discussing how much money we spend on this or how much money we spend on that, they see concretely in theatre what are the problems that we have to solve with
that money. So the discussion about money is not a quantitative discussion. It is a qualitative discussion. The theatrical discussions precede the real money discussions. Money is not a question of money. Money is a question of power. Power is a question of well being in the population, so theatre brings this humanity to the budget discussions. (Boal interviewed by Tom Magill 1998: www.northernvisions.org/boal.htm)

Without the direct link to government, Boal and the CTO Rio have had to develop other means to influence politics. Two new LT initiatives are the Symbolic Solemn Sessions and Lightening Legislative Theatre, both conceived with the intention of replicating the political learning of the original LT model, but in a substantially shorter time period (months shortened to days or even hours). In the Symbolic Solemn Sessions, citizens play the roles of the legislators, and the procedures of legislative houses are replicated as theatre with citizens playing the roles of legislators. Forum theatre presentations are used to explore the issues with spect-actors intervening and offering suggestions. The audience then votes on the suggestions. During Lightening Legislative Theatre, the Jokers introduce the themes, then facilitate a discussion with the audience. From this discussion, images and scenes are made and eventually a Forum Theatre piece is presented. The audience then votes on the suggested laws from the Forum Theatre. Lightening Legislative Theatre in its entirety takes place within a three-hour time span, allowing citizens to address issues quickly, but still retaining the holistic approach of theatre (CTO Rio 2000: www.ctorio.com.br/Ingles/ingles-index.htm).

Boal’s international work initiated the development of these condensed versions of LT. In London the Solemn Symbolic Session was held in the Debating Chamber of the Greater London Council Building:

The Solemn Session consisted, first, of the invocation of divine protection (I sought protection, as you can imagine, from the two excellent friendly gods, Apollo and Dionysus); this was followed by the presentation of each of the three scenes, with spectators intervening in search of legal solutions. At the end of each forum, spectators drafted the laws in their own manner, writers gave them a literary form, lawyers added the legal trappings; at the end of the evening I put these to the vote (Boal 2001: 336).

These condensed versions of LT opened the doors for new possibilities elsewhere in the world. Even before LT came into existence, theatre groups and social justice organizations (often one in the same) were adapting Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed methodol-
ogy to create its offspring in the form of Theatre for Development, Conflict Theatre, Theatre for Everybody, and Theatre for Living, to name a few. The evolution of Forum theatre to Legislative Theatre has challenged Forum practitioners worldwide to come up with new ways of linking theatre to municipal politics.

Section Five: International Sites of Political Learning Praxis

In April 1999, Tim Wheeler, who develops dramatic art programming for people with disabilities, performed a Solemn Session in Bradford, England with a cast of citizens with Downs Syndrome, in front of the Mayor of Bradford and elected legislators. There were similar condensed LT sessions produced in Rio de Janeiro, in June 1999, focusing on local issues and one in October 1999, during a TO festival in Vienna, where a Minister of State and four state deputies participated in the closing panel discussion. More recently, in April 2001, Boal was in Graz, Austria attending a series of events called “Theatre as dialogue, interaction and participation”. These events culminated with an international meeting entitled “To transform desire into law – Legislative Theatre as a way of political participation and a dialogue between citizens and politicians.” Boal and the Austrian TO group, InterACT presented a Lightening Legislative Theatre session for the city council, regional parliament members, representatives of children’s, youth, and civil rights initiatives, and experts on civic participation and urban development. The response to the Lightening Legislative Theatre session in Graz was favourable, ending with the Mayor inviting InterACT and Boal to perform a Lightening Legislative Theatre session at City Hall (Under Pressure No 6 2001). Austria’s InterACT has continued to experiment with LT and is currently preparing to participate in the upcoming “European Cultural Capital” event in Graz 2003.

In 1999, in Toronto, Ontario, the new City of Toronto council introduced a strategic plan to encourage civic engagement and to follow up on four newly adopted key principles of civic participation. These key principles included: a) collaborative decision-making; b) accessibility; c) continuous improvements in citizen participation; and d) community capacity building. As part of this initiative, Toronto City Councillor David Miller hosted an experimental session of LT that involved the presentation of a Forum theatre play produced by Mixed Company Theatre. The play, “Ready, Set, Civic Action” used theatre as a means to explore citizen participation and how people define issues and find solutions, by
calling on the audience to participate and be part of solutions (Strategic and Corporate Policy Division/Healthy City Office, February 2001). This was an especially interesting use of Forum theatre in that it was used to create a dialogue around civic participation, and to introduce the concept of using methods like LT to increase civic participation. Unfortunately, to date, the City of Toronto has not introduced any further LT projects to their mandate.

Theatr Fforwn Cymru (TFC) of Wales has been working on an initiative for improving the health of Welsh citizens through the use of participatory drama technique that is a modified version of LT. Their approach is called “Rehearsal for Reality” and involves increasing the number of facilitators or “animators” and thereby increasing the number of citizens participating. The idea is to ensure that the animators have the best possible rapport with community groups in order to maximize the impact of their efforts and to ensure that the work reflects the community’s desires. Addressing good health in the widest possible sense, including physical, mental, emotional, social, and spiritual well-being, and disseminating discoveries and good practices through publication, training, demonstration, and encouragement are some of the ways that the animators work towards facilitating the creation of healthy communities (Under Pressure No 4 2000: 1).

As part of a three year plan, by year two TFC intends to, “develop direct lines of communication formed between peer groups and local and national legislative and policy-making bodies” (Under Pressure No 4 2000: 4). This TO group wants to build on active citizenship practices by “developing participatory methodologies for the promotion of active citizenship and accountable political processes through facilitating a safe and rewarding space for dialogue between the ‘empowered’ and the ‘in power’” (Under Pressure No 4 2000: 7). In 2002, TFC received funding to formalize the Rehearsal for Reality project. There were 20 TO groups throughout Wales that received training through the Rehearsal for Reality project. These groups were a part of the TLC’s Agora 2002 Conference that offered the opportunity for policy makers and citizens to “discuss and develop policies collaboratively as an experiment in creative democracy” (New Welsh Review 2001: www.theatre-wales.co.uk/news).

Small World Theatre is also a TO inspired group. It started in 1979, named with economist Shumacher’s “small is beautiful” in mind, works out of Wales and has a number of projects overseas. They have become well known for their use of participatory theatre, LT, and theatre and culture for development techniques to improve conditions and commu-
communications where other “formal” systems are ineffective or non-existent. In Tanzania they have cooperated with Tanzanian performers to share skills and expertise while working on a voter education project that used participatory theatre as a research tool, and provided life-size puppets for the use of local people, to create stories that reflected their experiences. The performances were taken to larger audiences in surrounding communities, where participants were invited to join in, change the play, argue with the characters and each other, and explore the nature of democracy. Small World Theatre’s work extends into India, Vietnam, China, Kenya, Nepal and numerous other countries (Hamblett and Shrosbee 1999: homepages.enterprise.net/smallworld/international.htm). One of Small World Theatre’s co-founders, Bill Hamblett, is a strong advocate of the regular use of LT in Welsh politics as he feels it is “a more equitable way for citizens to access the halls of power than via the professional lobbying company.” (Hamblett 1999: www.theatre-wales.co.uk/critical/critical_detail.asp?criticalID=61)

There are TO groups working very hard to introduce these new versions of LT, but it is not yet clear whether these condensed versions are, or will be, effectively linked with the political powers. Even without the direct link to politicians, (yet!) these condensed versions of LT offer citizens a civic education, one where they can experience sense of agency by making law from the seat of a legislator.

**Section Six: Legislative Theatre’s Possibilities and Limitations**

For us, to learn is to construct, to reconstruct, to observe with a view to changing - none of which can be done without being open to risk, to the adventure of the spirit (Freire 1998: 67).

Legislative Theatre in its various and evolving forms is a means for citizens to experience the playing out of politics and democracy as a learning process. This helps to create a new vision of political action, one that emphasizes the process rather than the outcome.

What was fundamental about the spect-actor’s intervention was not whether he was able to change the outcome, but the active process through which he sought by his actions to comprehend the social problem in its complexity. Forum Theatre valued “the learning process” as much as it valued “final results (Krishnan 1996: 1).
In Sanjay Krishnan’s paper “Waiting for Theatre”, from 1996, he writes about two Forum Theatre (FT) pieces, *MCP* and *Mixed Blessings*, (on the themes of domestic abuse and interracial marriage) that were presented in Singapore by the company, Necessary Stage. In this paper he responds to the critics reactions to FT. Critics accused FT of provoking the audience by unfairly arousing emotions and also of promoting a Marxist agenda. Krishnan points out that one could view the emergence of FT as just one of many ways to respond to the government’s request for a new politics based on “pluralism” and “consensus” (Krishnan 1996: 2). He sees FT as a means and a place where “rational engagement is combined with empathy to produce an expanded experience of the aesthetic” (Krishnan 1996: 3). Not only is the artistic more viable in FT, but so is the civic learning. Forum theatre allows for a democratic framework where citizens can deliberate on an issue, but they can also simulate the experience of ‘acting’ on their ideas. It is one thing to bounce an idea around the room, and another to put yourself, physically, mentally, and emotionally into the idea to experience it and re-vision this idea through an arts-based process.

One of the problems in the adaptability of FT and LT is the differences in both the audiences’ capacity and in their desire to be spect-actors. In cases like the Necessary Stage’s *MCP* and *Mixed Blessings* and Headlines’ *Squeegee* the audience members did not feel inclined to participate as much as in other FT and LT productions. The propensity for audience members to get involved only in dialogue rather than making interventions is a phenomenon that could be cultural or societal, as it is less likely for a North American, Northern European, or possibly Asian audience to spontaneously participate ‘theatrically’ in comparison to, for example, a Brazilian audience. Cultural participation is an issue that can be viewed from many different standpoints, economic, gender, ethnicity, and the many other influences that determine how easily a person can ‘act’ socially. However, those are considerations for another time. Beyond the socio-cultural bias that might work against an audience’s capacity to participate, the other aspect that helps facilitate participation is sustained involvement with the process. It appears that when FT and LT are used as stand-alone performances, the audience does not necessarily have the comfort level required to enable them to spect-act, and will more often resort to engaging in a dialogue. This resistance to the crucial element of ‘spect-acting’ can be disappointing if it is expected that the issues raised in the performance can be approached holistically, with the audience involving themselves in the problem-solving.
David Diamond, from Headlines Theatre, made the following observation on the subject of audience discussion instead of interventions:

Augusto Boal is really strict about this in his work. He allows no discussion at all, because it stops the theatricality of the event. I have always felt differently, thinking that some analysis helps deepen the nature of interventions as the event proceeds. The task for me has always been, having made a decision to allow discussion in the Forum, to try not to let it out balance the active interventions. It is a theatrical event. As the Joker (facilitator) part of my responsibility is to attempt to sculpt the arc of the event - in other words, make sure it has a beginning, middle, and end (Diamond, 1999 – Squeegee Notes).

Diamond’s concerns about the role of discussion versus intervention are reiterated by other TO groups and practitioners. In his notes from Squeegee, Diamond comments that one of the audiences only made six interventions during the performance. Most of the evening was spent in “heated debate”. Diamond felt that it was a good discussion, but that it was not good theatre (Diamond, 1999 – Squeegee Notes). Krishnan also notes the fact that the ‘spect-actor’-driven format of FT is not guaranteed. Audiences in Singapore often “failed to respond to the strenuous demands of the form, and the performance seemed doomed to regress to the level of personal identification or therapy” (Krishnan 1996: 5) which speaks to the need for this process to be well-facilitated and for the audience to be part of the process before the play is even presented. On the other hand, if FT and LT are viewed first and foremost as methods of civic engagement, then it can be said that these initiatives challenge any notions that the general public is unable to participate in public political dialogue. The process of FT and LT prepares the audience for interacting with the performers, and the issues are clearly laid out, the rules are transparent, and the Joker is present to ensure that rules are followed.

The ability to empathize with a condition, to formulate a sustained argument, to comprehend a problem in its complexity, all these would have contributed to the production of a critical public discourse and a fulfillment of the state’s purported desire for a vibrant civic society (Krishnan 1996: 4).

Krishnan argues that FT took up the challenge the Singaporean government made for liberalization by making a creative space “as a miniature public sphere in the absence of a genuine public space” (Krishnan 1996: 3). However, the question remains: How much
can you adapt FT and LT before they lose their theatrical aspects and all that is left is a town hall meeting?

Some would argue that a town hall meeting is certainly better than no opportunity for citizen participation, but this depends on the intention of the TO group. Is good theatre more important, or is civic and political action? How are the two balanced and meshed? Ideally, a group would follow the format set out by Boal for making LT, but, as even Boal realizes, the direct transposing of these initiatives has its drawbacks:

Yes, I would say it would be dangerous if it was a sort of catechism, a recipe that you have to take the experiment exactly like it was made in Brazil and now you have to transplant it to Northern Ireland.... I think that you should apply the Forum Theatre because it is democratic. Everyone participates. I think that the interactive mailing list, the consultation directory to the people that are mostly concerned with the problem is good. I think that the chamber in the street simulating a meeting of the chamber in churches, in trade union halls, in schools are good because it activates people. But there are other things that are perhaps even better here and I cannot imagine so I think that the bad results can come from an automatic, mechanical transposition forcing a method that is flexible and not stratified, so if it serves as an inspiration it is good. (Boal interviewed by Tom Magill 1998: www.northernvisions.org/boal.htm)

Boal, of course, encourages widespread use of FT and LT methods. The intention to be inclusive is at the heart of the method. Sometimes, in order to include more people in the process, the adaptations have to be extensive, which means creating dialogue and exchange between practising groups, to develop these adaptations to their most meaningful potential. Ronald Matthijssen, TO practitioner and editor of Formaat, wrote that in an interview, “Boal expressed the view that you can change the shape of TO according to the context in which you use it, but you can’t change the rules. He also pointed out that he didn’t invent the rules, but merely discovered them” (Matthijssen 2000). Matthijssen remarked that now TO practitioners are re-shaping TO by abandoning old rules and making up new ones, thus continuing the evolution of the TO practice.

Format theatre, as mentioned earlier, is used all over the world and in many manifestations. Most of these variations on TO practice are enthusiastically embraced by both practitioners and participants who enjoy the element of liberatory politics; the sensation of practicing ideas, praxis; and the holistic, creative approach drama can bring to prob-
lem-solving and envisioning the future. However, in this era of corporate co-optation and consumerism, others are wary of ‘widespread’ use of TO techniques. Boal’s son Julian Boal, who is a writer and dramatist, has questions about the future of TO work:

What form will the relationship between the artist-intellectual and the people-artist take now? How will it be possible to develop that relationship democratically, when one knows that a method, any method, is elaborated according to a living and earthbound ideology, and not in the ideologically aseptic purity of a laboratory? How will it be possible to offer that method to the oppressed without it arriving already impregnated with the ideology which inspired it? (Boal 2001: 338).

Augusto Boal responds to this question by commenting that TO does not give answers, that it, as in the Socratic method, only asks questions. Krishnan also notes this about FT work, “At no point did this form offer solutions or alternatives; rather, it sought to begin a process through which a more adequate grasp of various situations could be achieved” (Krishnan 1996: 3). Julian Boal, despite Augusto Boal’s assertion that TO was created in a process of exchange, contests the very notion of someone choosing those particular questions, as Socrates deliberately narrowed the field of questions. However, the elder Boal believes that this was an inducement, not coercion (Boal 2001: 339). Regardless of whether it was inducement or coercion it is still a challenging point about the structure of TO work, and whether or not it has its own ‘oppressive’ characteristics.

Top Lab, a TO group from New York, NY has raised some similar questions regarding the politics of TO. Top Lab believes that “it is fallacy to believe that simply practicing the forms – exercises, games, and techniques – creates political vision... as this is dependent on the model of cultural practice in which it is embedded.” (The Theater of the Oppressed Laboratory 2000: www.toplab.org/discuss.htm). The questions from Top Lab are aimed predominantly at practitioners in the North (advanced capitalist nations) to reflect on and challenge (if necessary) their current mode of operation to ensure that through their TO work they are not reproducing the models of oppression. Top Lab is exploring a popular education model, seeking to adhere to the Freirean principles that inform the practice of Boal’s TO work. The challenging questions that they are posing to themselves and other TO practitioners are as follows:

1. What might be some solid and viable operating definitions of the following key terms: revolution, democracy, democratic process, oppression, community?
2. In North America, what does it take for the Theater of the Oppressed to function as a revolutionary cultural practice?

3. a) When we practice Theater of the Oppressed, what model of democratic process do we bring to the communities we serve?

   b) What model of democratic process should a radical practice of Theater of the Oppressed entail?

4. What vision of democratic process informs the day-to-day workings of our Theater of the Oppressed groups?

5. Under what conditions can Theater of the Oppressed become a force of oppression or reaction?

6. In North America, under what conditions does Theater of the Oppressed become a commodity? And what would it take to de-commoditize it?

7. How can the popular education model of cultural practice help radicalize the practice of Theater of the Oppressed in North America?

8. Why should grass-roots organizations be interested in the Theater of the Oppressed? If a Theater of the Oppressed group owes its existence to a capitalist institution (educational or financial), can this group ever be a force for revolution? (The Theater of the Oppressed Laboratory 2000: www.toplab.org/discuss.htm)

These are important questions to be asking at this time in TO’s evolution. With LT being a marriage between theatre and politics, and most often those politics are of the mainstream, bourgeois democracy, how does the TO remain a “Rehearsal for Revolution”? Can there be a revolution from within the political system that is being resisted? Can theatre be the mirror within the system that reflects the atrocities and injustices out into the wider world? Or does placing TO within the realm of the mainstream market system merely make it easier for it to be swallowed up and re-packaged for the “consumer/citizens”? Obviously, intention is everything and often not enough, given the powers of co-optation. If those involved with TO (from all groups – politicians, practitioners, citizens) have the intention of truly creating an equitable society, then it is more likely to be the outcome. However, if the form is co-opted in order to reproduce the status quo, then the original intention of TO is lost, and devastatingly so.
Section Seven: Summary

Much of what I have been considering is in fact about marketing, and about how the pressure to entertain has compromised much theatre. To entertain means to engage agreeably and amusingly. Marketing has invaded the stage to the point where the peripherals occupy the centre and the actors become products; the look, the image, the surface. The screen has replaced perspective and depth (a ‘bad’ word these days); acquiescence and quiescence stifle contradiction and action. Once theatre is shunted to the edges it becomes safe” (Gilbert 2003: 112).

Legislative Theatre is not “safe” mainstream theatre. It was the product of a transformative moment in history when supporting the Workers’ Party’s campaign in the municipal election led to Boal being a City Councillor in Rio de Janeiro. He was thus able to connect theatre and politics in a tangible manner. From 1992 to 1996 a process was developed whereby Jokers of the CTO Rio company were hired as cultural animators to do participatory research with various communities. Issues were played out in FT style and shared with other communities. The ‘parables’ that were developed were shared among the communities, and collectively the participants decided on which issues to bring forward as potential bills. A Chamber in the Square was held wherever it was most convenient, and all participants received information on the potential bill so that they could participate fully. The Chamber session was translated into legal language and sent to Council, where 13 of 34 potential bills were passed as municipal bylaws.

Three LT experiments that took place outside of Brazil were explored to try to determine how translatable this method is from site to site. The three experiments originated in the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and in Canada. A comparative analysis revealed that all three experiments were similar, in that they all used theatre to attempt to address issues of inequity in society that could potentially be resolved through changes in existing by-laws. They all made adaptations to the original Brazilian experiment to suit their social, political, and cultural environment. All experiments attempted to secure the guarantee of a policy-maker in order to follow through on the citizen-generated recommendations. This was the most critical element of the experiment. Not having the “buy-in” of a policy-maker at the outset made it likely that the recommendations of the citizens would never come to fruition. This would also undermine any further attempts to engage citizens, particularly marginalized citizens, who are less likely to have been well-served by the political system. Another critical element was involving the participants in the process all
the way along. The LT experiment that only included one group (by default) in the process, suffered a disconnection with the audience, who were not prepared to “spect-act”. To engage, one needs preparation, and to be contributing to the process all along.

Legislative Theatre in Brazil after 1996 was not solidified again until 1998 when the CTO Rio group received funding from the Ford Foundation. As of 2002, there were six LT groups active in Rio de Janeiro working with a variety of issues including the Participatory Budget, (PB). The PB group most actively follows the LT model in that a bill was passed to give civic groups a right to voice their suggestions regarding the themes to be discussed at City Hall Budget Sessions.

Without his direct link to government, as City Councillor, Boal has developed other methods to influence policy, such as the Symbolic Solemn Sessions and the Lightening Legislative Theatre, both conceived with the intention of replicating the political learning of the original model, but within a shorter time frame. These new condensed models have increased the adaptability of LT and therefore opened the doors to many different types of exploration.

One of the arguments against LT as a method of civic engagement is the difficulty in convincing people to express themselves physically as actors. There are great differences in the levels of adaptability of the method from site to site, depending on the particular audience’s capacity and desire to “spect-act”. Forum theatre and LT do not work well as stand-alone performances as they are meant to include the audience in the “process” of sorting out issues. An even larger issue around the use of LT is the possibility of co-optation. Boal’s son Julian Boal raises some important questions about retaining the democratic nature of LT when the LT method has the potential of coming already “impregnated with ideology” rather than leaving it up to “the people” to determine its direction and focus. Top Lab of New York City has similar concerns over the co-optation potential of LT and has been determined to ensure that their work is not reproducing models of oppression. This was also noted in the “Principles and Processes of Popular Theatre Workers” (Salverson 1996: 91) discussed in Chapter Three. In defense of LT and FT methods, Boal and Krishnan both note that on top of everything, this work is a process of exchange and learning and does not have the intention of bringing ideology or pre-conceived notions to the table.

Once again it comes back to having the creative space to explore other ideas, particularly those ideas that do not support the status quo. Even with the recognizable limita-
tions, the possibilities for LT and TO work are many. The roots of TO work are inclusive and therefore the form suits the intention and goal of building an equitable society. The form is also somewhat open, so that it can be adapted to different frameworks and for the kind of civic education that will build the public space for the creation of new ideas.

Chapter Five will look at an idea for revitalizing local politics that I developed while researching popular theatre, civic engagement, and democracy.
Chapter 5

The Democratic Facilitator: An Idea for Revitalizing Local Democracy

Introduction

During the last couple of years, while researching the converging points of politics and popular theatre, I began to formulate an idea for revitalizing local governance. This research led me to believe that in order to build a more inclusive political system that a strong civic education program has to work concurrently with the development of a participatory democracy. My research focuses on the possibilities of using popular theatre for civic engagement, as in the case of LT, as a means to increase political efficacy and civic participation, particularly in cases of under-represented communities. In Chapter Four, the comparative analysis of the four LT experiments indicates that the key factor to success in a LT experiment is the connection to and dedication of a politician or policy-maker. In light of widespread mistrust of politicians as a general ethos, it stands to reason that perhaps the role of the politician in local politics could be re-assessed and restructured to reflect democratic principles. In addition, the local politician could also be an advocate and facilitator for civic education, and for the increase of political efficacy through the use of the principles and processes of popular theatre. In this chapter this new idea for revitalizing local governance is explored in the following sections:

Section I explores the history of the original democratic facilitators, the provocateurs. Section II will look at the role of facilitators as interpreters, mediators, and community animators. Section III discusses the role of democratic facilitators as capacity builders and civic educators. Section IV will look at both existing examples of politicians who are provocateurs, and openings in local government for provocation, animation, and learning and Section V will provide a summary of this chapter.

As discussed in Chapter Three, lack of citizen participation has often been regarded
as the Achilles’ heel of the democratic process. If participatory democracy is a goal for society at large, then we need to move far beyond the highly symbolic, but mostly ineffective, act of voting in a constituency once every few years. Even when there are efforts made by the various levels of government to include citizen input, there are more obstacles to participating than there are means to facilitate the participation. When, from time to time, citizens are invited to participate in a consultative process, there is a lot to be considered when deciding who and how to consult. The government has to consider the size of the region, the cultural and racial make-up of the region, and just ‘how’ people are capable of participating. The government (or any government for that matter) may or may not be interested in supporting citizen participation. However, regardless of a government’s interest in such a venture, two of the key elements of developing a participatory democracy are: 1. Having the capacity (financial, human - facilitators) to support broad-based and profound participation, and, 2. Having a citizenry that is prepared and adequately informed.

Simply expecting citizens to get involved because the system is said to be ‘open’ to citizen participation does not mean that citizens are well-prepared for such action. In order for citizens to participate in a meaningful way, it is necessary for them to have at least rudimentary knowledge of the political system. This means having the confidence to express their opinions and ideas; a viable medium through which to express these opinions; and tangible evidence that their ideas are being relayed to, and considered by, the government.

The current expectation is that citizens get enough information to participate through the citizenship education that they may or may not have received through the public school system and/or government information circulated through various news and advertising media (television, radio, newspaper, and Internet). If citizen participation is too low, is it because there is true disinterest in getting politically involved or is there a lack of opportunity for citizens to effectively communicate with the government? Disinterest and lack of knowledge support one another. This could be remedied by addressing the issue of disinterest through improving the availability of knowledge.

In order for Canadians to participate in their government in a meaningful way, at least one role in the government needs to be redefined. Starting at the local or municipal level, the role of the councillor (city or county) could be redefined and expanded into the role of democratic facilitator. As noted in Chapter Four’s comparative analysis, the key
feature that indicates success in a Legislative Theatre experiment is the guarantee that the policy-maker will follow through on the citizen-generated recommendations. It could be generalized that this could be a key feature in any civic engagement experiment, arts-based or not. With this idea in mind, the democratic facilitator could fulfill three roles. First the democratic facilitator could act as a medium for transmitting the desires of the citizens to the government. Second the democratic facilitator could provide the means of decoding and restructuring government procedures so that they are citizen-friendly. Thirdly the democratic facilitator could provide the means through which citizens hold the government accountable to their ideas and issues. The democratic facilitator would be considered a non-partisan position. This highly-skilled individual would be responsible for relaying information back and forth between citizen and government and in doing so would have to be less citizen, less government, and more a highly aware, non-biased medium for communication. The democratic facilitator would be accountable to the citizens, and mandated to ensure that the government followed through on citizen-generated recommendations.

Picture this: Every month, meetings are held in each constituency of a city or town. Everyone from that area is welcome to that meeting; there is free daycare available, transportation is subsidized, and lost wages are reimbursed should constituents have to miss work to attend the meeting. Before the meeting is held, all the citizens are sent comprehensive material on the issues that will be raised at the meeting so that they can participate in an informed manner. To begin the evening, there is music, storytelling, and performances, all presenting themes related to the issues to be discussed. The performances will attempt to portray the many sides to an issue and will have been developed out of contributions and ideas of the citizens. The performances will tell stories that relay all the human qualities related to the issues, including the sadness and the humour, emphasizing the complexity of decision-making and the care we have to take with one another. Participants are encouraged to add to the stories, to question the outcomes, to explore all their options. One person, the democratic facilitator, organizes this meeting and acts as a master of ceremonies by introducing material, noting down suggestions from the audience, mediating discussions between actors and audience, and most importantly, attempting to ensure that each citizen has an opportunity to voice an opinion that is included in the overall summary of the meeting. These citizens feel further encouraged to participate and contribute to the process because they are guaranteed that their suggestions will be used to develop citizen-generated policy.
Section One: The History of Provocateurs

Being a good democratic facilitator would take an extraordinary amount of skill. Being an excellent democratic facilitator would mean taking this method one step further and indulging in theatre. Politics and theatre have been conjoined for centuries. Even today’s politicians, although not blatantly theatrical, often make it difficult to separate fiction from reality.

The term “political theatre” acquired new meaning in 1980, when a former actor became President of the United States. Once the phrase simply meant theatre of a political nature; today it has become equally applicable to the politics of a theatrical nature (Schecter 1985: 5).

Our politicians have a close connection with such characters as the Trickster, the joker, and the clown. This connection between the historical Trickster figure is important to explore, because part of building a community is creating a community, and to create is to make stories. These traditional characters have dual personalities – they are at once visionaries and fools. It is through these characters that people are encouraged to do something that in today’s creative co-opted vernacular is known as ‘thinking outside the box’.

Crazy wisdom goes deeper than humor, satire, or simple bad behavior. It puts something at risk – possibly our sanity, certainly our stake in the stabilizing effect of conventional wisdom. Often it goes after the very social and spiritual structures that allow us to make sense of the world: our trust in language, for instance, or our certainty that the boundaries we see are real. In the name of something more important than our comfort, this mad wisdom makes us uncomfortable; but it accompanies the discomfort with a laugh and an “ah-ha!” that fill us with energy, joy, a little fear, and a renewed sense of life (Spayde 2002: 64).

The Native American and African Trickster character, whether a he or a she, a coyote, a spider, or a crow, or whether a European jester or Javanese clown, all have taken on the philosophical embodiment of, as Carl Jung described, “absolutely undifferentiated human consciousness, corresponding with psyche that has hardly left the animal level. He is” (Lopez 1977: xvii). These characters, who played with societal codes of morality, were the facilitators of the past, they revealed what the consequences were for behaviours driven by base motivations (anger, lust, greed), and told stories of law and history. The Trickster is the ‘wise fool’ who appears when honorable codes of behaviour leave someone unable to act. To remedy the situation, the Trickster suggests an amoral action (either
right or wrong) to get things moving (Hyde 1998: 7). It is just this inability to act that Foucault suggests is a result of our inability to take responsibility for our own actions – good or bad. Some consider the Trickster character to fall under the “steam valve theory” that, like other forms of mild, organized rebellion against the state, allows the necessary tension and aggression to blow off and to maintain social order (Konrad 1993: 138).

Javanese clowns, the Panakawan, are considered to be “fat and ugly, speak a foul language, are sexually ambiguous” yet are also considered to be very powerful, as they are blood relatives of the gods. These clowns hold contradictory roles – they are healers, thieves, religious specialists, but are, most importantly, social commentators who make examples of those who abuse their power. These fearsome, yet interesting clowns, bend the norms, expose what is behind the scenes, and embarrass and annoy the authorities.

Court fools’ foolery often opened a space for wisdom in royal deliberations. They were important members of the royal entourage, attending councils and, when policy was discussed, offering criticism in witty asides and jokes. Often the fool was authorized to express the king’s own reservations about a plan or a policy, allowing the royal personage to remain above the debate (Spayde 2002: 69).

Why did societies worldwide create these anti-models of civic values and virtues? Societies created these characters as a form of social balance. These characters who bend all the codes of ethics and morality (committing everything from theft to incest), also make examples of corrupt officials, and bring (stolen) gifts from heaven to give to the human race. Why are these Trickster characters so popular? People love these characters because they bring meaning and action together. They make people laugh and cry, they scare people, and through these actions and words and movements, people are listening with all their senses and understanding. Within this multi-sensory approach, the morals and values of a society are co-determined.

Unfortunately, we have far too much experience with the lesser relation to the Trickster, the confidence man, often found sitting at the head of state. Some people view the confidence man as a kind of North American anti-hero, because he is a person who dares to symbolize the unspoken qualities of the American Dream ideology. The corporate takeover mentality requires the same kind of ‘confidence’ found in the confidence man (Hyde 1998: 11) and the market fundamentalists promote this ideology in order to increase the popularity of the private sphere. However, this ‘opportunist’ in the land of opportunity is not a balanced Trickster...the confidence man may be “pandemic” (Hyde
1998: 11) in North America, but he is not the paradoxical character who straddles both sides and defines action. The confidence man is missing the Trickster’s ability to play the role of mediator.

The Trickster is often a “marginal man”, a “cultural hybrid” who is caught between two antagonistic societies and must mediate between them. He symbolizes “the socio-cultural properties of the liminal or marginal period, common to all rites of passage” (Konrad 1993:132) and common to the notion of “the people” or “popular” as defined in Chapter Two. Trickster’s desire to contradict and oppose, reflects the mediating aspect of the character. Although it may seem odd to liken a mythical character with a modern-day facilitator, one can look at the role that myths have played historically in problem-solving to see the relevance. According to Levi-Strauss, all myths “were logical tools used to resolve apparently irreconcilable contradictions” (cited in Konrad 1993: 137). “Tricksters used elements from nature and culture (animals, gods, and heroes) in place of propositions to mediate terms” (cited in Konrad 1993: 137). Through these myths, the Trickster figure, along with her audience, explored and experimented with the human potential.

Like the Trickster, democratic facilitators must mediate between two antagonistic worlds, that of the citizens and that of the government. The power imbalance lies in favour of the government and its not so silent partners (corporate funders) who demand and usually receive accountability to their corporate and private interests, whereas the majority of citizens, who cannot afford to make large campaign donations, have little influence on the government beyond the almost ineffectual ritual of voting in new politicians. It is the citizens’ “inability to act” in order to effect cooperation and accountability from the government that makes the potential abilities of the democratic facilitator to stimulate and support action among citizens most critical.

Unlike the Trickster, it is implausible that a mere mortal can be allowed to make blasphemous statements and actions with impunity, especially when facilitating the normally sober relationship between government and citizens. However, the democratic facilitator would be wise to make use of other theatrical elements that have been part of the popularity of the Trickster tradition. Humour, melodrama, improvisation, and singing can all work, both as an emotional outlet and as a human connection, to the tragi-comedy of our reality. It has never been beyond a politician to tell a well-placed joke, as it can be quite indicative of success if constituents are made to laugh. This use of humour can be manipulative, but it can also be welcome, particularly when discussing potentially explosive or
devastating issues, and it is most effective when it can both reflect the reality of the citizens and, most importantly, be a shared experience. By expanding on the mediating role of the Trickster, modifying the vulgar behaviour, and adding some diplomacy, the democratic facilitator role would be more like that of Boal’s Joker figure.

The Joker evolved from Boal’s desire to remove one character from the centre stage and bring her closer to the spectators – a mediator between the actors and the spectators. Eventually, the Joker’s role was so successful, it facilitated the creation of the Boalian hybrid of the “spect-actors” (Boal 1998: 29). Rani Moorthy, a lecturer in drama and performance at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, wrote the following about the Boal’s Joker work within the context of the theatre-in-education framework:

The Joker acts as the mediator between the actors and audience and most importantly teaches the audience the rules of this theatre game. The Forum encapsulates all the different ideas, strategies and experiences of the audience. At no point should the audience feel that there is a hidden agenda that the actors and Joker are evoking. Both audience and actors are in the same learning situation and each has access to answers and solutions (Moorthy 1999: 2).

The Joker functions as a dramatic artist with pedagogic and political functions. The role is to assist people in understanding their situations, and to encourage the expression of ideas and emotions that help people see their own problems and seek solutions to them. The Jokers’ primary role is to formulate questions that will encourage answers that are potential solutions to problems. This is based on Socratic pedagogy. Jokers should have a very broad, yet deep background in many areas, including: politics, popular culture, history, psychology, and theatre. They also have to be effective group leaders who can coordinate, facilitate, communicate, listen and synthesize the ideas of the group (Santos 1994: 1). Most importantly, the Joker must be able to detect the “desire behind the conflict” which requires “deep insight” and a “high level of observation” (Matthijssen 2001: 2).

David Diamond of Headlines Theatre in Vancouver defines a Joker as the following:

...a clown, an animateur, an activist, a trickster, an improvisationalist, a psychologist, a wild card. To questions seeking truth, knowing that people in the room already know what it is and just might need some help articulating it (Diamond 1998: 44).

Mady Schutzman further defines the characteristics of the Joker: “Flexibility is the key. The Joker’s job is that of midwife to the process. The Joker must continually find the
balance between honouring the process of the group and the needs of an effective final product” (Schutzman 1994: 179).

The use of drama and arts allows for an expansion of the political arena and the capacity of the human mind, in order to broaden the language and means of expression so that all community members can be involved in the process. Of course, the ‘crazy visionary wisdom’ of a Trickster/Joker-like political figure will certainly have its critics, considering that “every imaginable kind of aberrant behavior is classified as a pathology somewhere in the DSM-IV psychology manual, making craziness itself highly suspect and detaching it definitively from wisdom” (Spayde 2002: 67). Fortunately, there are politicians out there in the world who are unafraid of psychological classifications, and have envisioned the meeting of citizens and government as a creative space, as will be explored in Section IV.

**Section Two: Role of Facilitators**

The role of democratic facilitator would have to be a creative mélange of characteristics and skill sets. A basis for the development of this role would be that of community or social animator. An animator is a person who coordinates or acts as the driving force behind an event – usually cultural (Oxford 2000: 31). Animators have collaborated with various agencies – non-governmental, governmental, or religious – by working with people to “encourage dialogue within the community” which would help the citizens to work through and take responsibility for issues in their own community (OHCC 2000: 26). In trying to conceptualize what the role of the democratic facilitator might look like, the Ontario Healthy Communities Coalition’s (OHCC) animator is a good place to start. Since 1994, OHCC has used community animation to create “healthy communities” by connecting community leaders, businesses, government representatives, citizens, and marginalized community members and offering them economic and social analyses with similar goals (OHCC 2000: 27). Animators work with the community by offering concrete means for citizens to participate in local politics – in the form of consultation, facilitation, information, and skills training on topics that range from community mobilization and strategic planning to how to find funding resources (OHCC 2000: 28).

Animators work with the community to ‘enable’ people, but do not ‘lead’ the people. Rather, they assist the community in finding its own natural leaders for the various projects being undertaken. A democratic facilitator would not necessarily act to connect citi-
zens to other citizens, although that would be an encouraging outcome, but specifically to connect a community of citizens to its local government. A councillor who facilitates citizenship learning can strengthen the ability of citizens to work together and to conceptualize their own ideas of how issues can be resolved and communities can be developed. The collective learning and brainstorming in a citizen group “think tank” has the potential to be far more innovative and effective than government-issued policies that cover (blanket-style) all communities in a province.

At an International Institute for Educational Planning conference in Paris (1991) the use of community animators was discussed and described in terms of the pivotal role they played in focusing the process of implementing educational policy. The community animators were able to mediate between the “formal structures of the bureaucracy” and the “more informal structures at the community level.” Community animators were very successful in gaining the support of both the political figures and the citizens, through their skills and values. They had to be specialized in one discipline (such as accounting, nursing, or education) in order to be credible to the community; they had to be able to “animate” or “motivate” local participation; they had to be able to synthesize the lessons learned from the various groups and to encourage communication and collaboration among the groups; they had to have adult educator skills; and they had to be pragmatic and familiar with the communities they worked with (Shaeffer 1992: 23).

Democratic facilitators would create opportunities for citizens to work with one another. Their knowledge and skills would be thorough, but not used obtrusively as in conventional pedagogy, but rather subtly to initiate recognition of issues and to assist in finding solutions. Their primary role would be to ‘guide’ citizens to any number of resources that will help them achieve community goals (Hart 1997: 79).

In a typical town hall-style meeting an issue is raised, then citizens get to voice their opinions on that issue, and after a few suggestions have been made as to how to resolve the issue, a vote is taken on the most popular course of action. This is an example of ‘classic’ local democracy and how it seemingly addresses everyone’s needs; however, in many cases the town hall meeting is not led by a skilled facilitator, and inevitably not everyone’s voice is heard. A skilled facilitator must listen carefully to everyone who is at the meeting and that means creating possibilities for conversations and actions (sites of deliberation) that will reveal, either verbally or otherwise, the outcome desired by all or most of the participants (Gorham 2000: 161).
In addition to creating sites of deliberation, the democratic facilitator needs to give concise interpretations of government actions and policies in order to give citizens the necessary time and space to think through issues; the facilitator, in a deft and unobtrusive way, will ‘direct traffic’ by revealing the movements of each side (citizen and government) to the other, so that all actions are transparent and on the table (Diamond 1998: 44). Integral to this process, is the use of art and theatre as a means of communication. The democratic facilitator would be as much at ease with government processes as with artistic and democratic processes, as all are valued and viable ways and means of learning and decision-making.

Effective democratic facilitators must be aware of themselves with respect to race, class, sexual orientation, gender, and disability, in addition to keeping their biases in check. When exploring issues with the community, the facilitator must remain aware that the results must belong to the community and therefore should reflect the wishes and desires of the individuals in that community. Although facilitators should be responsible to the citizens in their community, they should not feel responsible for the citizens’ ideas and actions as this would reflect a paternalistic approach, tending to disempower citizens by not encouraging personal action and responsibility (Schutzman 1994: 179).

Section Three: Civic Educators As Capacity Builders

In order to build capacity among citizens, one of the first objectives of the democratic facilitator would be to reverse the damage done by politicians who have considered residents of a community solely as consumers and taxpayers, rather than citizens. A key area of redress for the facilitator is to re-educate citizens in their roles as decision-makers and to step away from the easily manipulable position of being regarded as the passive receptacles of goods and services. The democratic facilitator must also be able to create a ‘non-threatening’ space to work within that allows people to speak freely about themselves and their experiences and to learn from one another (van Erven 2001: 25).

Often, education only serves to ‘mystify’ knowledge and to create hierarchies and distance between ‘professionals’ and ‘workers’, (Thiong’o 198: 56) rather than emphasizing what citizens do know. It is imperative that the democratic facilitator encourages and exposes all the knowledge, skills, and resources that are already present within the community, or group of citizens (OHCC 2000: 29). According to Anne Hickling-Hudson, citizenship education should be far more comprehensive than what currently exists:
...politically, education should prepare people to assess the quality and performance of their political systems, be aware of international changes and patterns of injustice, to hold politicians accountable, to problem-solve both nationally and with international movements, and to run for local and national political office with informed and creative platforms (Hickling-Hudson 1999: 236).

This certainly is a tall order for a civic education curriculum, but these skills, information, and abilities should be accessible to all citizens.

**Section Four: International Provocateurs**

“Es un genio, es un loco, es un irresponsable, es un gran educador, es...es...es...el alcalde de Bogotá.” (English translation: “It’s a genius, it’s a lunatic, it’s reckless, it’s a great educator, it...it...it...it’s the mayor of Bogota.”) (Rey 2001)

Without a doubt, Bogota’s Mayor Antanas Mockus is a living Trickster character. In this Colombian city of 7 million, the mayor faces numerous challenges, from a high rate of violent crime to heavy pollution. Mockus has not been afraid of being called a lunatic, and continues to use art and humour to capture the minds and hearts of the citizens of Bogota. Whether by hiring mimes to cajole traffic violators into following the rules, or placing dummies around the city that people can beat on to vent their anger, Mockus puts into action his belief that “if people know the rules and are sensitized by art, humor, and creativity, they are more likely to accept change.” He also said that “The crucial point of a citizens’ culture is learning to correct others without mistreating them or generating aggression. We need to create a society in which civility rules over cynicism and apathy” (Mockus 2002). Mockus has also initiated a very successful car-free day in Bogota where violators are fined $25 and a “Man-free” evening, where only women are allowed out on the streets, to draw attention to the seriousness of violence against women.

In 1999, the City of Toronto put forth an initiative to investigate various kinds of civic participation. In their report, Reflections on Civic Engagement, they announced their adoption of four key principles of civic participation: collaborative decision-making; accessibility; continuous improvement in citizen participation; and community capacity building (City of Toronto 2001). To initiate the process, the City of Toronto, through Councillor David Miller’s office, organized a five part discussion series designed to investigate possibilities for improving citizen and community participation. One of the sessions
was an interactive play (Forum theatre style) called, “Ready, Set, Civic Action” by Mixed Company. This initiative was an attempt to introduce theatre into the political arena. This play used Joker facilitation to explore people’s reactions to civic participation, to define the issues, and to try to find solutions to low civic participation. The City of Toronto hoped to develop a civic engagement policy from the results of the play, although to date no such policy has been developed. Ten major themes arose during the discussion session. They were:

- Think about residents as citizens, not consumers or clients.
- Civic participation processes need to be guided by clear goals and objectives.
- The City has a responsibility to assist communities to resolve issues.
- The City has to take an active role in combating citizens’ distrust of government.
- The City should use many different methods to consult with people and engage them in political decision-making.
- The City needs to make consultation processes more accessible and provide increased support for people’s involvement in political decision-making.
- The City should ensure that information is accessible to the public. Accessibility includes plain, easy to use language and sufficient notice for events.
- The City of Toronto can learn from innovative civic practices in other cities.
- Avenues provided for civic participation must be genuine and provide real opportunity to affect results.
- The City has a responsibility to promote civic education.

(City of Toronto 1999: 5 www.city.toronto.on.ca/civic_engagement/ reflections.htm)

In looking at these themes in relation to the proposed role of the democratic facilitator, one can see how these concerns could be actively addressed by the creation of this mediating role. The democratic facilitator could play an instrumental role in reintroducing the public sphere and encouraging citizens to participate in government as citizens and not only as taxpayers, consumers, clients, or voters. As well-trained facilitators, they could guide citizens through the processes of government while encouraging the develop-
ment of citizen-based processes and procedures. As a neutral party the democratic facilitator could act as a bridge between the world of the citizen and that of the government, thus increasing government accountability and increasing citizens’ trust in government. The democratic facilitator would ensure that meetings were accessible, provided child care, translation, and, in general, were conducted in easy-to-understand language. The democratic facilitator, like the OHCC’s community animator, could link citizens up with citizens of other communities who are taking innovative approaches to issues. The key role of the democratic facilitator would be to increase civic education and civic participation on an ongoing basis.

**Section Five: Summary**

In this chapter, I have proposed an idea for revitalizing local governance through a revisioning of the role of the local politician. The idea for the “democratic facilitator” came from my initial thoughts and research for this thesis, which I began to formulate in the fall of 2001, in an adult education course at OISE/UT, on citizenship learning and participatory democracy. During this course, I began to look at the history of my own civic learning, and what would encourage me to participate in local politics. Concurrently, I was studying the works of Boal, particularly his work on Legislative Theatre, and became fascinated by the role of the Joker. In addition, I was introduced to the Ontario Healthy Communities Coalition (OHCC), that uses community animators to build healthy societies. It occurred to me that the role of the politician should be to give a voice to “the people” but, instead they tend to serve private interest groups with financial clout. A strong democracy is represented by one person one vote, but in our democracy, one dollar equals one vote. However, if the role of the politician was to be altered into that of a facilitator role, and the principles and processes of popular theatre were followed, perhaps this might increase overall political efficacy and citizen envolvement in local politics.

The democratic facilitator has its roots in popular art and theatre, where drama has provided a means for communicating and enacting complex ideas about society. The Trickster character, who exists in societies around the world, is a key source of inspiration for the democratic facilitator. The democratic facilitator role emphasizes civic learning, communication, and increased political efficacy, and the methods through which this could be achieved are art, drama, and storytelling. The primary role of the democratic facilitator is as a conduit for information between the government and the citizens. It is
imperative that citizens are able to understand the workings of their government and that in turn, the government produces policies based on consultation with a wide and diverse base of citizens. Using a combination of civic learning principles, equity principles, and the principles and processes of popular theatre the democratic facilitator could provide an opportunity for increased political efficacy and increased participation of those most marginalized by the system. Chapter Six will summarize and conclude this research and provide notes on a future research agenda.
Chapter 6

Summary, Conclusions, and Notes for a Research Agenda

Summary

In Chapter One, I introduced the context for this research through an autoethnography which examined my own experiences with politics and popular art. Here I looked at the formal and informal learning I had experienced in areas of civic education, politics, and popular art, and how this learning brought me to my current interest in the research subject of popular theatre as a method of civic engagement. In this first chapter, I also introduced my two research questions a) “Why use a popular theatre method (Legislative Theatre) rather than hold a town hall meeting?” and b) “In considering a method of civic engagement like popular theatre that is rooted in the history of cultural resistance, how can co-optation by the dominating system be avoided?” Chapter Two outlines the methodological approaches that I used to research the subject area. This chapter reviews how I incorporated a hybrid of narrative inquiry in the form of an autoethnography with arts-based inquiry, comparative analysis, and popular culture theory and methods. Chapter Three provided a literature review of academic and popular sources of information on democracy, civic engagement, and popular theatre. This chapter looked at where these three subject areas (democracy, civic engagement, and popular art) converge in order to address the main research questions. Chapter Four reviewed Boal’s original Legislative Theatre experiment in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil and provided a comparative analysis of three other Legislative Theatre experiments that took place in various international sites. This chapter looks at the key features of Legislative Theatre and the adaptability of the method. Chapter Five introduced an idea for revitalizing local governance through a re-visioning of the local politician as ‘democratic facilitator’. The idea for the democratic facilitator evolved out of the research and learning from this study. Finally, Chapter Six provides some concluding ideas on the subject of popular theatre as a means of civic engagement and includes some recommendations for a future research agenda.
Conclusion

For our present needs, it may also be important to allow space for uncertainty, disruption, disharmony, and other forms of non-celebratory experience in the area of cultural production. Art that challenges can sometimes be of greater value than art that merely affirms existing prejudices (Krishnan 1996: 2).

In order to challenge the status quo with its existing prejudices and to listen to the doubts, the democratic system itself has to have the inclusion of marginalized citizens built into its structure. The popular arts-based methods discussed in this thesis are a means of challenging an exclusive system. To begin with, we can start to look at the democratic structures that currently are in place, and how we might conceive of a different approach. This, in turn, requires us to let go of strongly held notions and practices that impede the development of an inclusive and participatory democratic structure.

Activist and educator dian marino writes about this difficulty we have with thinking outside of convention as it relates to democratic action. Within groups seeking social justice, much effort is placed on the Marxist desire to acquire the means of production, yet there is a “form of social amnesia” that disables us from “replacing the old ways and inventing new practices” (marino 1997: 42). By using the same practices, we reproduce the existing power structures, and social transformation ceases. marino’s ideas about imagination are supported by the ideas of John Ralston Saul and Augusto Boal, among others, who believe that in attempting to address the democratic malaise, the collective imagination must be unleashed.

Saul, in On Equilibrium, discusses the need to make decisions based on more than just reason or logic, decisions that are balanced out with five components: intuition, memory, imagination, ethics and common sense. We are led to believe that there are only two ways of approaching decision-making. One deals with the head and is logical, and the other deals with the heart and is idealistic and is therefore marginalized by our logic-based society. Saul argues that decisions need to incorporate both (Saul 2001: 26). marino’s work also supports this idea, as she stated that she, as an artist and educator, needs to use both her ideological and her intuitive sides. She felt that each side balances off the other, in order to move towards ‘equilibrium.’ The ideological side can challenge power differentials, and with the intuitive, marino felt that she can “play [her] way into difficult places” (marino 1997, 42).
At the core of certain popular theatre methods, such as Augusto Boal’s Forum Theatre, one can see the democratic actions referred to by marino and Saul. The comparative analysis (Chapter Four) of the structures and fundamental concepts that guide democratic-type theatre, such as Legislative Theatre, shows that these are principles of citizen-based democracy put into practice. In Forum Theatre, the democratic action is demonstrated through the welcomed participation of all people involved in the production, including the audience members. Nobody is considered inessential to the action in the play; all can have input into the direction and outcome of the story. This kind of theatre brings the principles of democracy to life, and provides an opportunity to envision change. The two practices, politics and theatre, have very similar and complementary elements that can be used to effect a greater level of participation.

The attribute that puts the popular theatre on a different level, and far closer to actual participatory democracy, is that popular theatre is used in a variety of ways to challenge power structures, including: building resistance, critically reflecting, learning about issues, and sharing knowledge (Catalyst Centre 2000: 3). If policies are changed or created because of conscious theatrical moments, or even if political actions are followed after being acted out on stage – then democratic theatre has engaged and activated citizens, and citizens have used theatre to envision and act out their future, and to problem-solve.

The socio-political solidarity that we need today to build a less ugly and less intolerant human community where we can be really what we are cannot neglect the importance of democratic practice. Purely pragmatic training, with its implicit or openly expressed elitist authoritarianism, is incompatible with the learning and practice of becoming a “subject” (Freire 1995:45).

The political encompasses the very manner in which we make sense of our lives. The value of art rests in the fact that aesthetic experience can provide insights into our collective selves, insights that might otherwise have remained hidden.

Focusing back on the primary thesis questions, a) “Why use a popular theatre method (Legislative Theatre) rather than hold a town hall meeting?” and b) “How can the co-optation of popular theatre and civic engagement be avoided?” this study has found some possible responses. A number of academic studies support civic education through arts-based learning, including David H. Malamah-Thomas’s “Community Theatre With and By the People: The Sierra Leone Experience” (1987) that emphasizes the potential of Theatre for Development in its ability to utilize the experience and intelligence of the community
regardless of literacy levels. This research indicated that capacity within the village was developed out of existing experience using the popular education “praxis” model of naming the issues; reflection; action; and assessment (Malamah-Thomas 1987: 66).

In Salihu Bappa’s article on the “Maska Project in Nigeria: Popular Theatre for Adult Education, Community Action and Social Change” (1981) he notes that the drama did create an environment where people could “have an insight into the deeper meaning to their problems”; however he also emphasized the importance of follow-up as it is necessary to ensure that these methods are not co-opted by local authority figures to intimidate citizens (Bappa 1981:31).

Alan Kay reviews various community arts projects from different international sites in “Art and community development: the role arts have in regenerating communities” (2000). He concludes that:

> The arts have a particular role to play in: encouraging people into training and employment; supporting volunteers and participants in personal development; improving the image of an area; social cohesion and active citizenship; local people recognizing their own cultural identity; and improving the quality of people’s lives through individual and collective creativity. (Kay 2000: 423).

Kay emphasizes that the arts need to be “valued by policy makers and practitioners in community development and regeneration” and that the integration of arts-based methods into these community projects have to be appropriately evaluated (Kay 2000: 423).

In Darlene Clover’s article “Community Arts As Environmental Education and Activism: A Labour and Environment Case Study” (2000) she discusses how “feminist educators have long understood the way in which community arts can make “visible” the invisible in society” (Clover 2000: 21). Clover looks at a Toronto-based Cultural Animation Project that used community arts as a medium to discuss the environmental impacts of waste. The project was facilitated by Toronto animator Min Sook Lee and brought together twenty-four artists, sanitation workers, and environmentalists. The group created a “political weather map” which placed the issue in a political and global context. The project attracted enough media attention that City Hall was bombarded by calls from citizens wanting them to change policy. From this study, Clover concludes that: “Community art can be more than just a support or appendage to this process, it can be something that itself challenges the political process” (Clover 2000: 29).

The history of popular theatre reveals lifetimes of citizens creating a plurality of
resistances through the existing power structures. The passivity of modern society that has functioned to distance the citizen from an active role in political decision-making is not unrelated to the passivity of modern theatre/entertainment. However, citizen-generated drama can be a profound method of expression, providing a balance of imagination and political expression that can act as a catalyst for social change, and as an alternative to citizens being primarily receptacles for information.

Popular theatre can also create a public space, as Ngugi’wa Thiong’o described it in *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* that theatre, like Boal’s Chamber in the Square from Legislative Theatre could take place “wherever there was an ‘empty space’” (Thiong’o 1986: 37).

The public realm in which politics takes place is above all else a space between people, created by their discourse and mutual recognition (Calhoun 1997: 9).

This notion of public space is particularly relevant to the question around “why use popular theatre” due to the current trend of privatization and decline of public space or “public sphere”. With the market fundamentalist push of the last few decades eagerly repositioning citizens as consumers, comes the loss of what Hannah Arendt terms the “public sphere” over the rise of the “private sphere”. In the private sphere, individual or personal goals, such as economics, family, and religion, are believed to be beyond the reach of government interference (cited in Calhoun 1997: 212). There is an emphasis on placing increasing value on these “private” goals, and safeguarding their value beyond anything that is considered to be within the public sphere. The public sphere is a place where narrative action can occur, and goals that move beyond the good of the individual to the benefit of a community can be discussed. However, with the rise of the private sphere, even the public sphere, or the polis, has been commodified. Although democracy may be practiced by North Americans, politics are not. Taking political action – in a conventional sense (e.g. running for office or lobbying) is equated with having time, money, power, and interest. The majority of citizens do not have the kind of privilege (financial and educational background) necessary to participate in politics beyond a spectator level (Gorham 2000: 2).

The decline of the public sphere and the emphasis on the private sphere (privilege) has been a successful campaign of divide and conquer that has left the North American public defenseless against the corporate agenda of their own governments. However, as this research has indicated, not all North Americans in the political arena are succumbing
to the allure of corporate dollars. In Maine, Arizona, Vermont, and Massachusetts, the work of pro-democracy activists has made it possible for candidates to opt out of private campaign donations and instead, receive full public financing. This has allowed almost a third of Maine’s legislature and a fifth of Arizona’s to be elected following a “clean” campaign. These elected officials, free of influential funders with special interests, have more freedom to voice their opinions and, quite probably, to represent sincerely and honestly citizens’ interests (Moyers 2001: 26).

If the private sphere continues to gain importance in Canada, as corporate Canada mirrors the movements of corporate United States through their inextricable linkage, the public sphere could shrink even further. Fortunately, movements other than those of the market fundamentalist will also be mirrored, for example those of the pro-democracy activists who have worked to create the clean campaigns. These actions will assist in re-strengthening the public sphere, and in turn create opportunities for dynamic and innovative citizen participation.

“Nothing proved easier to destroy than the privacy and private morality of a people who thought of nothing but safeguarding their private lives” (Calhoun 1997: 215).

It is in the public sphere that Arendt’s idea of the political community – a community created by humans who are “social creatures and want to live together...yet at the same time are unlike one another” and need to live in a community that recognizes the individuality of its members (Gottsegen 1994: 52) – can be joined together through shared speech and ideas. The sharing of ideas allows the individuals to exist within the group, as recognized by Habermas (cited in Gottsegen 1994: 56). Although the public sphere is threatened by encroaching privatization, the ‘space’ can be reclaimed by those willing to vocalize and theatricalize their visions within this sphere.

As discussed in Chapter Five, the democratic facilitator could potentially assist in the reclamation of the public sphere. This role of democratic facilitator begins from the need to establish a viable link between citizens and government and to create a space for dialogue and political learning. Starting at a local level, the means for opening up communication between citizens and government could come through the municipal government position of councillor (city or county) as redefined and expanded to embody the role of the democratic facilitator.

The mandate of the democratic facilitator converges with the overlapping principles within participatory democracy, civic engagement and popular theatre and, as noted in
Chapter Four, addresses the issue of the struggles that exist between those who hold the power and those with limited power: the struggles on the margins of society. The democratic facilitator potentially is a means to greater political efficacy within a community so that “the people” will be better prepared to engage as citizens (especially those most marginalized by the dominating system). Ideally, this role will encourage citizens to understand and actively engage with ideas generated out of the experiences and needs of those not currently served by the dominating system.

The democratic facilitator would have to be a non-partisan who is willing to be the medium for communication between citizens and government. With citizen participation being as low as it is, one part of the democratic facilitator’s duties is to provide citizens with a motivation to participate and to continue participating. A large part of the motivation for participation should stem from citizens receiving accountability from the government through regular communication via a democratic facilitator. These facilitators should be highly-skilled individuals who are not only well-versed in politics, but are also able to relay and translate bureaucratic procedures into easy-to-understand language. The facilitator must be a skilled civic and adult educator who can continue to support the learning curve of citizens and their efforts to directly confront their issues. They should use community animator techniques of capacity-building which seek out and build on the knowledge and skills already present in a community.

These democratic facilitators would fill the gap left by the ancient traditions of Trickster, jesters, and clowns, who were considered to be marginal figures who bridged the world of the common people to the higher beings or authorities and provided a means of critiquing the status quo. Modern day facilitators should be able to provide the kind of vision of human potential that was communicated through Trickster’s stories. The closest existing model of a democratic facilitator is that of the Boalian Joker figure whose role of multi-disciplined master of ceremonies, therapist, and cultural mediator has made its way into the Brazilian Legislature as a medium for voicing the desires of the Brazilian people.

This is but one of the ways that popular theatre could potentially provide a role model for current political practices. There is, of course, an inherent danger in assuming that the successful practices of one community (i.e. Legislative Theatre in Rio de Janeiro 1992 –1996) can be easily adapted and successful in the next. However, there is much to be learned from the practice of Legislative Theatre as it offers a way of approaching politics that is based on the idea that people are living, breathing, multi-sensed creatures.
The democratic facilitator in its hybrid form of civic educator and Trickster, could, on the one hand, easily be co-opted by the dominating system, and be used to coerce citizens into agreeing to political actions that they had not been given a chance to think through. On the other hand, developing a multi-faceted approach to civic education that includes arts-based learning, with the intention of raising the political efficacy of the wider population, could also work to dissuade co-optation. The more “able” citizens are to participate in the political system and to read and interpret the political environment, the more they, in theory, would be able to ward off self-interested parties from the dominating mainstream. As long as the intention of the civic education remains true to its mandate of making political learning available to everyone, particularly to those who are most marginalized by the system, then we might be able to experience through this practice an equitable approach to governance and civil society. There is always the threat of this method, or any other method based on popular movements, being co-opted into a form of glitter-coated coercement.

In light of what has been discussed so far, it is a wonder that any democratic citizen-based work ever actually comes to fruition. When the ‘reasoning’ of the elite political class has repeatedly revealed itself to be flawed, anti-democratic, self-interested, limited in vision, unsustainable, unimaginative, as well as savagely defended by those with vast amounts of powers, the attempts at democratic actions and organizations, both the small and the local and those with international aspirations, are achievements to be celebrated, studied, and duplicated.

**Notes for a Research Agenda**

My interest in completing this study was to get a basis for understanding where art and politics could meet, and how this meeting might potentially impact civic engagement. Looking at the convergence of art and politics has led to many new ideas, stemming from the valuable and exciting research of hundreds of practitioners from around the world. Of course, during the process of writing this thesis I had to remain focused on the limitations of both my area of research and on the limitations imposed by time. Inevitably, the research led me to numerous future research possibilities. One possibility is the continued exploration and analysis of the adaptation of Legislative Theatre experiments in their international sites. I would be interested in doing a more in-depth analysis focusing exclusively on the principles and processes of Legislative Theatre and how effectively they are
adapted from site to international site.

My interests also include the notion of reclaiming public space or the “public sphere”. An area that warrants further research concerns the lack of community in North American suburbs, and specifically how public space could be created in suburbs with the assistance of popular theatre methods. With the construction of isolated, sometimes gated, communities on the increase, how can participatory politics survive or even take root? Where do citizens get an opportunity to meet and voice their opinions in a shared space? A model for participatory politics might ideally be designed concurrently with building more participatory communities in suburban settings as well as in high rises and condominiums. In looking at these questions, future research would include exploring the efforts of such initiatives as the Toronto Public Housing’s use of the participatory budget model.

**Final Remarks:**

Simply stated, I learned about three things while writing this thesis: myself; my research subject; and the process of doing research. More than anything, focusing on the process and paying attention to what exists within that process was the most important aspect for me. It was especially interesting at the later stages of completing this thesis how I began to look at many aspects of my life in terms of process and learning. It was at this point that I started to enjoy my thesis work as a tool for reflecting on larger questions in life. Although ever eager to stop paying tuition, this helped me to let go (a bit) of my anxiousness to be complete, and instead focus on the pleasure of learning.


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