

# **The interACT model: Considering rape prevention from a performance activism and social justice perspective**

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## **Abstract**

Although a number of rape prevention programs exist, the interACT Troupe is distinguished by their commitment to social justice pedagogy and proactive performance. Influenced by critical pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed, interACT uses embodied techniques aligned with feminist pedagogies to raise awareness, promote empathic responses, challenge (hyper)masculinity and encourage bystander interventions.

## **Keywords**

masculinity, performance, rape prevention, social justice

The interACT performance troupe produces participatory shows on sociopolitical issues of concern to college students. I created it in 2000, shortly after accepting an academic position at an urban university near Los Angeles. I solicited students by mentioning the troupe in my courses, and posting audition notices around campus. The first year we had approximately 12 students from a variety of academic disciplines, and we met on campus each Sunday night to talk about issues that were meaningful to the students and begin the process of creating scenes. The issue that was most pressing for the majority of students was sexual assault, and our first year was spent developing the scenes that would eventually comprise our prevention program. Although interACT also produces shows on racism and homophobia,

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our sexual assault performance remains the most requested program on campus, in the community and throughout the USA. Today, our show reaches approximately 2000 college students each year. In addition, we have assembled a research team with faculty and students who represent different disciplinary areas in order to consider the efficacy of the work. Although other prevention programs utilize theatrical approaches,<sup>1</sup> the interACT model is distinguished by our commitment to social justice pedagogy, proactive performance and activism.

When we first began working on sexual assault, I held a doctorate in Performance Studies and had trained in Theatre of the Oppressed, Psychodrama and Drama Therapy. However, I was not particularly well informed about prevention education. While my ignorance was a liability in some ways, it did enable me to develop a model that was not influenced by prevailing thoughts in rape prevention. My goal in this article is to consider the implications of using an activist approach to rape prevention. First, I frame the interACT program within the context of performance activism and social justice pedagogy. Second, I outline our opening scene in order to discuss masculinity and targeting men. Third, the interACT approach to building empathy will be considered. In the final section I discuss the relationship between a scene and bystander interventions.

## Framing the work

The interACT program is guided by social justice pedagogy and performance activism. It poses a series of complex problems based on gender roles and violence against women and challenges students to take an active stance against rape. Paulo Freire, author of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1997), used the term 'banking education' to critique traditional pedagogical approaches:

Knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those who they consider to know nothing... [this] negates education and knowledge as a process of inquiry. (1997: 52)

The banking model of education renders students as passive recipients of didactic lectures. Conversely, Freire (1997) argues that teachers should use problem-posing techniques to consider issues that are linked to the experiences of students. By creating a dynamic learning environment with active students and critical engagement, the classroom becomes a site for interrogating social issues and considering oppressive practices. When complex problems with real-life consequences are posed to students, they can potentially become active participants in the learning process, develop critical consciousness about structural oppression and work collaboratively to transform society (Freire, 1997).

Augusto Boal's book *The Theatre of the Oppressed* (1985) is a natural extension of Freire's work. Boal (1985) argues that theatre has historically been used as a tool of the elite class to separate the actor from the spectator, and purge the audience of their collective desire to facilitate social change. In Boal's Theatre of

the Oppressed (TO) arsenal, the people use the theatre for their own emancipation, and the scenes they create become a 'rehearsal for revolution': 'the barrier between actors and spectators is destroyed: all must act, all must be protagonists in the necessary transformations of society' (Boal, 1985: x). For Freire and Boal, the classroom and the theatre are ideal locations for developing consciousness about oppressive practices, and learning the skills needed for emancipation. In addition, their approaches to theatre and education are aligned with prevention educators who argue that participatory models are more efficacious than standard lectures (Heppner et al., 1995).

With an emphasis on collaboration, social justice and embodied pedagogy, it is perhaps not surprising that feminist scholars have made important contributions to our understanding of Boal and Friere's work. bell hooks, for example, writes critically and passionately about her relationship with Friere's scholarship: 'it was educators like Friere who affirmed the difficulties I had with the banking system of education, with an education that in no way addressed my social reality' (1993: 150). Feminist scholars such as Jackson (1997) and Hughes (1998) consider how critical pedagogues like Friere inform feminism, and also how feminist teaching and scholarship extend the Pedagogy of the Oppressed.

Feminists rightly critique the Cartesian body/mind split so common in academia, and argue that the body is crucial for considering conflict and identity (Armstrong, 2006). TO places a heavy emphasis on embodied praxis, and most techniques use images and frozen sculptures to move beyond verbal language. Feminists note that TO links theory to action, facilitates cooperation and uses the body to invite new, non-verbal responses to oppression (Fisher, 1994). TO practitioners and feminists such as Cohen-Cruz and Schutzman (1990) and Armstrong (2006) have discussed Boal's work in relationship to women's issues and gender oppression. Regarding the relationship between TO and feminism, Armstrong concludes, 'Implicit within TO and feminism is the understanding that oppression can be transformed and that victimhood is not inevitable' (2006: 179). interACT is thus informed by the work of Freire and Boal and aligned with feminist pedagogy because our model privileges dialogic exchanges, embodied learning and the disruption of patriarchy. In the next section, an interACT scene is discussed in order to illustrate our approach to engaging college men.

## Targeting men

When I first began creating a scene on sexual assault prevention, I did not know that men frequently respond in a defensive manner, believe they are being unfairly targeted as potential rapists, and/or don't see the relevance of rape education to their own lives (Bachar and Koss, 2001; Foubert and Marriot, 1996; Katz, 2006). Although violent crimes are overwhelmingly committed by men (Funk, 1993; Hong, 2000), some universities focus on strategies such as adding additional campus lighting or teaching women how to be safe rather than directly addressing college males. From a social justice and performance activism perspective, it was

important that men were a focal point of the interACT program, and I set out to create a performance that would appeal to their sensibilities. From this viewpoint, it was critical to have an opening scene that could gain the audience's attention and set the tone for the remainder of the show.

Our program has been utilized with audiences in a variety of contexts. When performing on our campus, we are usually invited to classes that focus on gender or interpersonal violence. In these cases, the audience is a mixed-sex group of college students enrolled in the course. When we are invited to colleges throughout the USA, our program is usually part of a campus initiative to curb domestic violence and/or sexual assault. On some occasions we have been asked to perform specifically for fraternities and sororities or athletes. For example, a recent performance was part of a mandatory training program for male and female college athletes. We also perform in community settings such as juvenile detention centers, housing projects, and drug and alcohol rehabilitation centers. Typically these organizations will advertise our program in formal (posters, flyers) and informal (word of mouth) ways to generate interest about the show. We have performed for as few as seven people in a cramped room at a drug and alcohol rehabilitation center, and as many as 1200 on a large stage at a college campus.

Our show opens with an explosion of energy as three college men are depicted in an apartment celebrating the night they enjoyed at a local bar. The two primary characters in the scene are the boyfriend (KJ) and his chauvinistic, antagonistic best friend (JaCarri). The men demonstrate the dance moves they used to attract women, and engage in one-upmanship about their conquests at the club. The opening highlights hypermasculinity, and it resonates with men and women in the audience. This semi-scripted scene changes each year in order to incorporate contemporary vernacular and popular cultural events. For example, current news topics or lyrics from popular songs are frequently incorporated into the scene. Our opening typically generates vocal responses from the audience, such as laughing at the antics of the men or verbally disagreeing with the objectification of women. The opening few minutes are relatively light, and designed to entice audience members to get involved in the show.

As the scene progresses and the alcohol and testosterone flows (so to speak), JaCarri asks pointed questions about KJ's girlfriend (Jessica). Where is she at such a late hour? Why does she go out in such skimpy clothes? Maybe she 'tripped and fell into the back seat of some guy's car!' JaCarri insinuates that she is hanging around with promiscuous friends and making KJ look like a fool. KJ laughs off the comments at first, but becomes increasingly agitated when JaCarri suggests that Jessica is cheating on KJ and treating him like a doormat. Character three (Jordan) attempts to intervene several times, but he is ultimately overwhelmed by JaCarri's force and decides to remain silent.

The audience becomes viscerally and verbally involved as the jokes escalate and KJ's manhood is called into question. JaCarri is relentless, and the scene intensifies as he raises the stakes and demeans KJ. 'Ooohs' and 'ahhhs' can be heard as KJ grows increasingly agitated, and finally asserts that he will take care of business

when his girlfriend comes home. When Jessica appears at the apartment with her friends, all of whom appear to be intoxicated, KJ throws everyone out of the room, forcefully grabs his girlfriend, and exclaims, 'This will never happen again!' We do not demonstrate any further physical or sexual violence to avoid potentially retraumatizing survivors in the audience. However, the audience understands that an assault took place during the next scene when Jessica tells her friends that KJ 'forced himself' on her.

After performing our show for several years I felt that the aesthetic and sociopolitical goals I had set for the opening were being met. From a performance perspective, it appeared audience members were engaged by the scene, related to the characters and were drawn in by the novelty of the performance (versus a traditional lecture). At the core of TO is an oppressed protagonist, and the girlfriend assumes this role in our show. From a theatrical perspective, the protagonist is the central character in a play. Typically s/he faces major obstacles that are usually employed by an antagonist. Once the audience sympathizes with the girlfriend, they will potentially be motivated to act on her behalf.

Considering the lack of support for many women following an assault, we use specific strategies to compel audience members to get involved in the scene. The audience witnesses the boyfriend verbally degrading the protagonist on stage, forcing her to sit down, and grabbing her arm in a threatening manner. When the protagonist discloses the assault to her close friends during another scene, they respond in unhelpful and unhealthy ways. For example, one of her friends implies that Jessica invited the assault by failing to call KJ after staying late at the bar, and her other friend panics and demands that Jessica go to the hospital and call the police immediately. Jessica can barely get in a word as the friends argue back and forth about what to do and completely ignore her needs. Once the audience has witnessed the oppression of the girlfriend, the facilitator asks the audience if they believe the protagonist was treated well in the first two scenes. Audience members will typically respond with a resounding 'no'. The facilitator then asks if the audience would like to change things for the protagonist so that she has a better outcome. Audience members consistently respond in the affirmative, which sets the stage for interventions.

Although our show is frequently presented to mixed-sex audiences, I want to consider how the opening scene is used to reduce defensiveness and enroll men as active participants in the performance. Although several strategies have been noted for reducing male defensiveness, there has been little discussion about the benefits of using humor and mirroring hypermasculinity in order to connect with men. Our opening scene is a strategic way to get college males to laugh at themselves, and we are able to introduce the topic of sexual assault without triggering a defensive response. While it is true that not all men act in such problematic ways, most audience members can identify with the three characters, and enjoy seeing hypermasculinity portrayed on stage. Instead of lecturing men on how they should act, we offer them opportunities to view how some college males actually behave in a

way that provides a gentle and somewhat humorous critique of masculine performances of gender.

Although we do not want to essentialize men and imply that they all rape women, we believe that most male students can recognize the hypermasculine behaviors in themselves or their peer groups. College men who are required to attend a program because they are enrolled in a particular course or participate in college sports are usually drawn into the action as it unfolds on stage. Although using humor with a subject as serious and sensitive as sexual assault may seem counterintuitive from a prevention perspective, laughter is commonly invoked in theatrical presentations that focus on life and death issues. The humorous opening provides a nice counterbalance to later scenes, and invites audience members to participate in the experience that unfolds, which we hope will be provocative and educational.

Our approach to creating believable, multidimensional male characters is consistent with performance theory and practice. Our actor-educators spend a minimum of one semester training for these roles (75–100 hours), and many of the performers have been with interACT for three or more years. Each year we read numerous essays on sexual assault and gender, invite experts in sexual assault to guest lecture, and have visits from campus counselors who work with survivors. In addition to learning about patriarchy and violence against women, the actor-educators spend considerable time developing the characters during an intensive rehearsal process. We offer an authentic, sometimes brutal, portrayal of a typical night out among college men. The male characters in the opening scene are likeable and complicated, and they perform masculine behaviors in ways that are typically rewarded in all-male spaces. After the opening scene, we ask the audience to discuss their feelings about the characters, and there is frequently confusion about whether they are protagonists or antagonists (these roles become clearer as the show progresses). This confusion speaks to the complexities of the characters and masculinity, and also allows us to get a sense of how audience members understand violence against women after the opening scene.

It is important to note that we do not use the opening to deliver a simplistic message, offer statistics, or portray sexual assault as a black and white issue. Although our primary goal is preventing violence against women, we attempt to do so in a performative and sophisticated way that poses critical questions rather than supplying easy answers. In contrast, some peer education programs are really 'sneaky teaching', didactic lectures disguised as theatrical skits. Campbell notes that these models are synonymous with 'an illustrated lecture of the drugs are bad so don't touch them variety [or]... the last minute appearance of a lurking moral produced in a soothing afterglow of self-righteousness' (1994: 53). In these programs performance is used primarily as a tool to deliver or 'bank' information (Freire, 1997).

There is a difference between using short skits or simplistic role-plays to convey that rape is wrong, and offering a developed performance with complex characters that poses critical questions and invites reflection and action. It takes

months, not hours, to create realistic characters and a storyline that will appeal to audiences. When theatrical interventions are designed and implemented by people with little or no performance training, and actors with minimal practice are placed on stage, it calls the model into question from a performative and ethical perspective.

Performance methods – like other qualitative and quantitative methods – require sound training and experience. Prevention educators who use performative approaches should at the very least understand the process of creating and staging scenes, character development, and the ethics of interactive theatre. Poorly trained and educated actors may unknowingly perpetuate the very rape myths they are trying to challenge. I have viewed sociopolitical performances where it became obvious that the performers did not understand the very issues they were addressing on stage. For example, I attended a performance by white students who used personal narratives to explore racism. However, much of the show could be read as victim stories and/or patronizing toward people of color. When the actors were challenged to consider critical race issues during the discussion following the show, they were unable to justify their choices or situate the stories within the larger framework of structural racism. Unfortunately, good intentions may not suffice when it comes to social justice.

By offering an authentic depiction of college life and men, we are able to gain the trust of audience members and invite them to be active participants in our program. Men are usually able to identify with at least one of the characters, and therefore less able to distance themselves from ‘those rapists’ who attack women in dark alleys. As Funk explained:

Men identified as rapists are generally portrayed as some kind of monster. Men certainly don’t want to see ourselves or the men we know as a ‘monster,’ so go through all kinds of mental gymnastics to distance ourselves from ‘those’ men (1993: 58).

If the regular, ‘fun’ college guys on stage rape women, perpetuate rape or fail to intervene, it raises serious questions for the male audience members about their own culpability in a rape supportive culture. Our performance holds up a mirror for men, and they are often surprised by the reflection. For Freire (1997), dominant group members must become conscious of their oppressive practices and structural benefits. Although male audience members usually laugh during the opening, there is a marked silence when the scene moves toward a violent conclusion and college males are able to realize how hypermasculine behaviors may lead to violence. As two males in a focus group noted after viewing the interACT performance:

How easily this guy [the boyfriend] went from having fun to being a rapist. How easily things can lead to abuse. How easily it could get out of hand.

... everything could be fun and then one second later, poof. I thought it was a real eye opener (Rich et al., 2009: 416).



These responses are consistent with the informal feedback and evaluations we have received from many college men who have participated in the interACT program.

## **Empathy and the constellation of images**

Many prevention educators use strategies to induce empathy for survivors. According to Schewe:

The idea behind [empathy] interventions is that students who understand the horrible experiences of rape would never inflict that type of pain on anyone and would be more likely to help and believe a person who reports that he or she has been raped. (2002: 109)

As the media and popular culture continue to perpetuate messages that objectify women and blame them for their own victimization, programs that can induce empathy for rape survivors are needed. A performance activism and social justice perspective to inducing empathy is significantly different from approaches used in some models.

A key component of TO is building empathy for the protagonist. For Boal (1985), empathy has historically been used in a manipulative manner to facilitate catharsis and purge audience members of their desire to change the status quo. In TO, however, participants empathize with the protagonist and have an opportunity to intervene on her/his behalf. During a typical TO performance, a scene is offered in which one or more characters oppress a protagonist. If the scene resonates with the audience, Boal believes they will have empathy for her/his plight and want to respond in a proactive manner. That is, audience members will literally come on stage, replace the protagonist during some part of the scene and challenge the antagonist(s). Many of us have a visceral and empathic response when we believe that an injustice has been committed against an undeserving person.

From a sociopolitical perspective, it is critical to build empathy for the girlfriend, and I adapted a specific TO technique to do so. Boal's earliest work in the poorest areas of Brazil focused on external antagonists, usually 'cops' who enforced the oppressive laws of the ruling class. However, after being jailed and tortured for his activist theatre, Boal was eventually exiled to Europe where he discovered people were suffering due to internal 'cops': 'The cops are in our heads, but their headquarters... must be on the outside. The task was to discover how these "cops" got into our heads, and to invent ways of dislodging them' (Boal, 1995: 8). Boal developed a series of psychosocial techniques to give internal cops a body and voice, and address them individually or collectively. Many of these techniques are discussed in detail in Boal's (1995) *The Rainbow of Desire*. Although more commonly utilized in workshop or therapeutic settings, I implemented a version of cops into the performance in order to induce empathy for the survivor. After witnessing the girlfriend's poor treatment, the audience is provided with an



opportunity to explore how she might be feeling on a more internal level by externalizing and embodying common statements that survivors say to themselves, and overhear from friends, family, police, and so on.

The scene begins when the facilitator explains that 'residual antagonists'<sup>2</sup> are the internal voices that are detrimental to the protagonist, and asks audience members to identify these antagonists in the girlfriend's head. Once 10–12 residual antagonists are identified, audience members, or 'spect-actors',<sup>3</sup> are invited on stage to embody these voices. The facilitator asks each spect-actor to create a frozen image or statue that is representative of the residual antagonist, and then state one representative line. For example, an audience member might point sternly at the girlfriend and say, 'This is all your fault!' Once the spect-actors have a line and image, they are asked to put themselves in proximity to the girlfriend depending on how loud they believe their voice is in her head. If a spect-actor believes s/he is representing a very loud antagonist, s/he stands quite close to the girlfriend. A constellation of these frozen images is formed around the girlfriend.

In contrast to the energetic opening scene, the facilitator requests silence in order to help the spect-actors concentrate on their roles and insure that the audience focuses on the survivor. The facilitator refers to the girlfriend and explains:

This could be your sister, or mother, or significant other. This could be your aunt or best female friend. As we do the next scene, please think of this character as a close woman in your own life.<sup>4</sup>

The facilitator uses this rhetorical strategy to close the distance between the protagonist on stage and the male and female audience members present in the room. Up until to this point, the protagonist was possibly seen as a more general character. Here, we ask college students to view the protagonist as a woman in their own lives. We have found that this shift changes the energy in the room, and helps the spect-actors on stage have a clear focus during the scene. When we first implemented our program years ago, we sometimes had audience members giggle during this scene because they were watching their peers on stage in a performative scene. Once we decided to have audience members view the protagonist in a more intimate way, the laughter all but disappeared. The facilitator asks each spect-actor to create her/his image and repeat their line over and over directed at the girlfriend. This is a powerful scene, as audience members are able to see how multiple antagonistic voices bombard and confuse a survivor. The girlfriend physically and non-verbally responds to multiple voices coming from all directions, and is clearly troubled by the residual antagonists in her head. Following this scene the facilitator asks the audience to explain the girlfriend's feelings. Audience responses include 'confused', 'traumatized', 'lost', 'devastated', 'alone' and 'sad.'

With the overwhelming number of rapes perpetuated by men against women, it seemed important from a performance and sociopolitical perspective to mirror this reality. Hence, I was surprised to learn that some educators induce empathy by

depicting male-on-male stranger rapes. In fact, researchers Foubert and Perry have argued that 'recounting a male survivor experience seems necessary to develop the empathy leading to a lower likelihood of raping and attitudinal improvement' (2007: 73). Others scholars have concluded that prevention programs with male audiences should include a scenario in which a male is raped by a heterosexual man (Schewe, 2002). In one such program, college men are shown a video in which a male police officer describes a stranger rape against another male officer. Although a stranger rape of a male authority figure is not improbable, this scenario is certainly not common. I do not want to discount the results achieved from these approaches; however, I believe it is useful to consider the implications from a sociopolitical perspective.

Having facilitated hundreds of TO performances on a variety of issues, I have discovered that majority group members frequently try to derail scenes about structural oppression by claiming victim status. If the topic is racism, for example, white audience members will attempt to change the scene to illustrate 'reverse-racism'. A scene on homophobia will generate responses from heterosexuals who believe that the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) community is 'taking over' and threatening 'traditional families'. In the hands of an inexperienced facilitator, Theatre of the Oppressed disintegrates into Theatre of the Oppressor, and historically underrepresented groups are further marginalized as the dominant group highlights their perceived victimization.

Because mental health care specialists are often well acquainted with victim narratives, and TO is inherently interactive, there exists an opportunity for those with expertise in psychology to intervene when dominant group members claim marginalized status. On many occasions we have had psychologists participate during an interactive scene to challenge patriarchy, or share their expertise during the discussion component that often follows our program. Whenever we travel to a community organization or university, we request that a mental health care professional attends the show. I frequently meet with mental health care workers before the show to explain our process, and invite them to assume an appropriate role during the performance or speak to the audience following the show.

If given the opportunity, I'm certain that some college men would change our scenes to show a man being assaulted by a woman. I base this theory on my experiences as a facilitator, and research indicating that despite the fact that men benefit from patriarchy, 'they often feel victimized, deprived, put down, disposable and trapped' (Johnson, 2005: 171). From a social justice perspective, I'm concerned with approaches that inadvertently reinforce structural oppression and essentially let majority group members off the hook. Men who watch a rape scenario about a male-on-male rape may have an empathic response toward women, but have they been challenged to see their own role in a patriarchal and rape-supportive culture? Has the empathic response been directly linked to preventing violence against women? In addition, are these scenarios relying on fear and homophobia to induce empathy? Finally, do college men believe they

can be raped, or are they using this as a rhetorical strategy to avoid responsibility? According to Scheel:

Young college men are unlikely to respond to male rape as a reality in their own lives, but they may be likely to use it to dismiss women's experiences with rape with the misleading comeback 'men are raped too'. (2001: 263)

Researchers have also noted that it is problematic to leave women out of rape scenarios because men, masculinity and patriarchy are re-centered while women are made to seem invisible (Davis, 1999; Scarce, 1999). The vast majority of rapes are committed by men against women. When educators focus primarily on male-on-male stranger rapes, issues related to women may no longer take center stage.

We certainly want men to be engaged during prevention programs, but do educators need to bend over backwards to elicit their participation? Moreover, is the perception of men so low that we now believe that they cannot have empathy for female survivors without first being introduced to male-on-male rapes? As I review the literature on prevention, I note many instances in which educators try to appease men in order to reduce defensiveness and reduce conflict. While I understand the impulse, viewed from a sociopolitical perspective conflict can be embraced as a crucial element of transformation. In reality, women will stop being raped when men stop committing these crimes, and this point should be acknowledged during prevention programs. When dominant group members are asked to recognize their privilege and acknowledge how they benefit on a personal and structural level, feelings such as anger, frustration, defensiveness and guilt are inevitable. It is normal for internal and group conflict to be a part of this process.

Each year, male members of interACT experience intense anger, frustration and conflict as the roots of patriarchy are pulled up and examined. I have had men in the group explode, become defensive, shut down, discount the experiences of women in the troupe (including survivors) and direct anger toward me. These responses are from college men who willingly joined a sociopolitical group to combat sexual assault! The discussions can be challenging and painful, but also a necessary component in the development of college men. We don't put men on stage until they have grappled with patriarchy and gender oppression, and closely examined their own performances of masculinity.

When men in our troupe are worn out or ready to move on, I remind them that male privilege is what will allow them to walk away from the struggle and that the women in the class do not have that luxury. When conflict reaches a boiling point between troupe members I utilize multiple approaches to keep the dialogue open and challenge men to work through their anger, pain, guilt and sadness. Sometimes this means encouraging men to create images of their feelings, or have them listen for an entire class period while women share their feelings with the group. Sometimes I directly confront male troupe members who are unwilling or unable to truly hear the women's experiences. We have also held male-only meetings with male facilitators that meet outside of troupe. In these meetings we can focus

entirely on masculinity and male privilege, and allow men to disclose feelings and beliefs that may not be shared in a mixed-sex space. I frequently remind the men of Che Guevara's words, 'Solidarity means running the same risks', in order to highlight that we cannot ask male audience members to do something that we are unable or unwilling to do ourselves.

Men can potentially become allies for women once they have critically examined patriarchy, and the ways in which they support violence against women. For Friere (1997), individuals must experience conscientization, or a consciousness of their roles as oppressed, or oppressors. Once these roles are illuminated, the transformation of society can begin. Conversely, when dominant group members are allowed to deflect discussions of oppression, blame marginalized groups for their own victimization, and/or fail to acknowledge their privileged position, the cycles of patriarchy and violence against women will continue.

## **Bystander**

In addition to debunking rape myths, changing attitudes and inducing empathy for survivors, college students should understand the significance of bystander interventions and come to a collective understanding of shared responsibility. Although a relatively small number of men rape women, college men and women may consciously or unwittingly fail to intervene when a sexual assault episode is unfolding. Although the literature is ripe with examples of explaining how bystanders might react in a variety of situations, there have been fewer studies that focus on bystander interventions and sexual assault prevention. (Banyard et al., 2004). Successful bystander interventions with a physical assault or child abduction may be significantly different than what is required to prevent sexual assault. Hence, bystander interventions should be specific 'to the type of situation in which they [bystanders] may be called upon to act (Banyard et al., 2004: 68).

Boal's earliest work focused on sociopolitical oppression, and he believed that theatre should be placed in the hands of the people for their own liberation. As Boal developed his theories into practice, the core of TO became the Forum Theatre. Even today, Forum plays a central role in the TO arsenal. During a Forum, a scene in which a protagonist is oppressed is run in its entirety. The Forum is replayed numerous times with spect-actors having the opportunity to get on stage and challenge antagonists in an improvisational manner. Spect-actors attempt to break the oppression while the antagonists try to insure the same outcome of the initial scene. Rooted in Boal and Freire's philosophy of problem-posing and dialogic exchanges, the goal of the Forum is to elicit numerous interventions and foster debate rather than arrive at simplistic solutions. Questions are more important than answers, disequilibrium valued over stability.

During interACT's opening scenes, the audience witnesses the poor treatment of the protagonist by her boyfriend and friends. In the next scene, they are induced to feel empathy after viewing the 'cop in the head' scene. The Forum begins when the facilitator brings all the male characters on stage and the audience is asked to

describe character three (the friend who attempts to intervene but fails to do so). The audience consistently describes him as a weak protagonist who should have done more to intervene. The facilitator asks the audience what they would have done differently, and then invites them on stage to enact their strategies.

Before the improvisations begin, the facilitator explains that we do not enact violence on stage, and reminds the spect-actors not to use physical force when intervening. This directive is especially important for male audience members who may believe that the best and only way to get involved is with aggression. When a spect-actor assumes the third character's role, s/he decides where in the scene they want to enter, and the facilitator begins the improvisation. This is a very exciting part of the show for several sociopolitical and theatrical reasons. From a social justice perspective, audience members move from passive recipients of information to active agents of change. TO is utilized so that spect-actors can rehearse assertive communication strategies in a safe environment, and then potentially utilize them later in real-life settings. Freire (1997) believed educational practices are potentially transformative when students are engaged in a critical and democratic process of discovery, reflection and action. The moment an audience member leaves her/his seat and takes the stage, a transformation from spectator to spect-actor occurs. The choice to intervene may be as important as the intervention itself.

From a performance perspective, the Forum is one of the most engaging aspects of our program. Audience members are excited to see their peers on stage, and the unpredictable nature of improvisation makes for evocative theatre. We spend many months in rehearsal working on improvisational techniques that are unique to TO. If the antagonists are too weak, the Forum ends quickly and it will appear easy to intervene during a potentially violent episode. However, if the antagonists are too overbearing and never yield, it can lead to audience frustration and even paralysis. We spend considerable time in rehearsals developing antagonists who can raise the stakes during interventions without overwhelming the audience members. I want to emphasize how important it is to have complicated, well-trained antagonists in these scenes. When Forum is most effective, it is like watching chess matches between the antagonists and the spect-actors. Spect-actors are cheered for their inventive strategies, and groans and jeers are aimed at the antagonists. There is usually a great deal of laughter during these scenes as the spect-actors are pushed to become increasingly assertive in order to deal with the boyfriend and his antagonistic friend. When a spect-actor uses an especially creative strategy and matches wits with the antagonists, thunderous applause erupts from the audience. Although the Forum model shares some similarities with role-plays that may be used in other programs, the heightened theatricality and addition of trained antagonists distinguish this technique.

The interACT Program utilizes the Forum method because it empowers audience members to come on stage and intervene in their own way. Conversely, other interactive programs are more closely aligned with an earlier Boalian technique called Simultaneous Dramaturgy (SD) (see Heppner et al., 1995). In SD, a scene is stopped at the highest point of conflict, and audience members are asked what the

protagonist could do to break the oppression. The actors then implement the audience suggestions on stage. Although this method is more interactive than a didactic lecture, Boal came to understand the shortcomings of this technique when an audience member became dissatisfied with an actor's interpretation of her strategy. In a moment of exasperation, Boal invited the audience member on stage to enact her intervention. In that moment, Boal realized that an actor could never accurately capture an audience member's intention, and Forum was born:

when the spectator herself comes on stage and carries out the action she has in mind, she does it in a manner which is personal, unique and non-transferable, as she alone can do it, as no artist can do it in her place. (Boal, 1995: 7)

In my experience, the intervention that an audience member offers from the safety of the audience is often radically altered when s/he actually faces a challenging antagonist on stage. Watching a strategy attempted by a trained performer is significantly different than an audience member enacting her/his own intervention, and feeling with her/his own body what it is like to challenge an antagonist. Moreover, prevention educators have argued that male audience members should be encouraged to move from a passive to an active stance when they witness women being treated inappropriately (Berkowitz, 2003). One of the benefits of the Forum method is that male and female spect-actors frequently come on stage and challenge the sexist attitudes of the boyfriend and main antagonist. Depending on the length of the show, five–ten audience members come on stage one by one to attempt their intervention. However, we have had shows where audience members come up in pairs or groups, and performances where we have had between 15 and 20 interventions.<sup>5</sup> Hence, audience members potentially come to understand that the behaviors enacted by the boyfriend and his close friend are rooted in larger patriarchal structures and performances of hypermasculinity.<sup>6</sup> The interACT model provides bystanders with an opportunity to intervene in a specific situation related to college sexual assault, and it is our hope that they leave the performance having experienced (personally or vicariously) an array of intervention strategies.

## **Conclusion**

The interACT model, informed by TO and social justice pedagogy, has shown some early promise in helping students better understand the impact of college rape, increasing their comforting and empathic responses to survivors and offering opportunities to practice bystander interventions (Rich and Rodriguez, 2007; Rich et al, 2009; Rodriguez et al., 2006). We also hope that audience members feel a sense of responsibility to intervene when they can to prevent violence against women. Still, our team is in the early stages of measuring the efficacy of this approach to prevention education.

Prior to our research efforts, there had never been a published, quantitative evaluation of TO. Hence, we felt it was necessary to develop scales that would



tap into the goals of proactive performance rather than using scales designed specifically for rape prevention. As we were moving students from a passive to active stance, challenging masculinity and trying to measure actual and vicarious experiences, it would not have been pragmatic to use a rape-myths scale to assess interACT. However, our research team recognizes the importance of using traditional measures of the interACT program's impact so that it might be compared to other contemporary models. To achieve this goal we are conducting a longitudinal study of interACT using measurement tools such as the Bystander Willingness to Help Scale and traditional empathy and rape-myths scales that are consistent with the aims of prevention education. Experts in psychology and sexual assault/trauma have played a pivotal role in the development of our scenes, and the measurement of our program. They have provided invaluable feedback about our program, helped the actors to better understand sexual assault and assisted with research designs.

In nearly 10 years of doing this work, I have come to appreciate the challenges of using proactive performance as a mode to prevent campus rapes. First, there is an extraordinary amount of training involved in proactive performance programs. We need students who are willing to learn about the complexities of violence against women and possess the talent to be evocative stage performers. Second, it is challenging to offer a sociopolitical performance without falling into the trappings of 'sneaky teaching'. Our goal is to let the performance challenge violence against women and patriarchy, and trust that the semi-scripted scenes and audience interventions will get at these core issues. I want to insure that we do not use performance simply to deliver information. This approach does run the risk, however, that audience members may be engaged by the performance but not come to a deeper understanding of sexual assault. We often face time constraints that limit our ability to meet all of our objectives, and institutional hierarchies combined with budgetary shortfalls make it challenging to secure ongoing support. Finally, in a context where the working-class students and overworked faculty on our campus are taxed by home and work commitments, it is an ongoing challenge to recruit students and to carve out time to collaborate with colleagues.

Researchers have noted that despite our best efforts to reduce assaults against women, rape is still prevalent in society (Roze and Koss, 2001). Proactive performance models such as Boal's TO and social justice education as defined by Freire, bell hooks and others may offer new directions for deconstructing patriarchy, fighting oppressive practices and empowering college students to take an active role in the reduction of violence against women. Although I came to this work with extensive training in proactive performance techniques and qualitative methods, I had a great deal to learn (and am still learning) about sexual assault, prevention efforts and quantitative analysis. Hence, I reached out to colleagues in psychology and interpersonal communication who were interested in forming partnerships to prevent campus rapes. Sexual assault on campus is a multifaceted problem, and the fruits of our more interdisciplinary approach have resulted in a stronger prevention program. It is my hope that those of us in the social sciences and performing arts



will continue working together to incorporate the best of psychology and health education as well as feminist scholarship and proactive performance. As Augusto Boal was fond of saying in his workshops: 'Let's try.'<sup>7</sup>

### **Acknowledgements**

The author would like to thank Nicola Gavey and the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on this manuscript. He also thanks the interACT troupe for their passion and commitment to social justice.

### **Notes**

1. It is not my intent to argue that proactive performance is the most efficacious form of prevention, or that interACT is the only theatre-based program in use. A number of theatrical programs exist; however, most are didactic or interactive rather than proactive. According to Pelias and VanOosting (1987), there is a continuum for inactive to proactive audience responses: 'At the far end of the continuum, audience might be identified as "proactive". Given this maximum participation, status of performer is conferred on all participants' (1987: 227). interACT facilitates the highest level of audience involvement, the program is informed by activism, and our research team has been able to measure the efficacy of a proactive performance approach. For a full discussion of the distinction between didactic, interactive and proactive performance models, see Rodriguez et al. (2006).
2. We use the term 'residual antagonists' rather than 'cop in the head' because we have already established the terms protagonists and antagonists with the audience by this part of the program. Hence, the audience can easily understand that there are external antagonists, and residual or internal antagonists.
3. According to Jackson: 'Spect-actor' is a Boal coinage to describe a member of the audience who takes part in the action in any way: the spect-actor is an active spectator, as opposed to the passivity normally associated with the role of the audience member' (1992: xxiv).
4. We do not intentionally say to the audience members 'this could be you' during the scene as we recognize that there are likely survivors in the audience.
5. When we are working under time constraints and have numerous audience members who want to enact interventions, we use a Boalian technique known as 'lightning forum'. With this technique the facilitator gives each spect-actor a short time – less than a minute – to enact their intervention. This is a useful strategy for generating multiple bystander intervention strategies in a limited time period.
6. Our hope is that the semi-scripted scenes and interventions organically allow audience members to come to a better understanding of the structural nature of patriarchy and violence against women. We want audience members to understand that the behavior of the boyfriend and the main antagonist are deeply rooted in cultural practices that marginalize women. However, we are wary of raising these issues in a didactic or forced way during an improvisational scene. Hence, in recent years we have added a Microsoft® PowerPoint® presentation and question and answer session following the program. During this portion of the program, the facilitator can revisit moments of the show when patriarchal structures/attitudes were revealed, or lead a discussion with the audience if the performance did not adequately illuminate these topics.

7. Augusto Boal passed away on 2 May 2009. I feel very fortunate that I had multiple opportunities to work with Boal during his extraordinary life. His philosophy continues to guide our work.

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