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**“NOR ARE WE JUST PASSING THROUGH”: MURIEL NAESSENS,
POLITICAL CONSISTENCY, AND FEMINIST THEATRE OF THE
OPPRESSED**

We must be as clear as possible about what we are defending. *We are not, in fact, neutral, nor are we just passing through.*

—Muriel Naessens¹

Muriel Naessens, feminist militant and Theatre of the Oppressed practitioner, died in France in February 2016, at the age of 67. After training with Theatre of the Oppressed founder Augusto Boal in his early days in France, Naessens founded the organization Féminisme-Enjeux, which “acts to prevent the oppression of women.”² A feminist activist for over forty years, Naessens used Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) as one of her primary methods. She was a longtime activist with the French Family Planning Movement (MFPF), in many ways the French equivalent of the US organization Planned Parenthood. “As a member of Augusto’s TO group in Paris and at the same time a militant in the Family Planning Organization,” wrote Naessens in 2006, “I was able to develop the use of TO on a regular but punctual basis within the MFPF, where it quickly found its rightful place on a national level.”³

As described by Naessens, “Féminisme-Enjeux uses Forum Theatre to work with youth and adults on issues of sexism and violence against women.”⁴ As most readers likely know, in Forum Theatre, spectators become what Augusto Boal called “spect-actors,” who step onstage and rehearse ways to struggle against the oppressions depicted. Though Naessens worked most often in Forum Theatre, she used other Theatre of the Oppressed techniques as well, including but not limited to Image Theatre, Invisible Theatre, and Legislative Theatre. Friends and colleagues recall how she approached these techniques with engaging energy and laser-sharp feminist dramaturgy.⁵ “She was able to spot in a moment any

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antifeminist flaw in a play,” recalls longtime friend and past collaborator Julian Boal, who reports that Naessens was instrumental in his own education in feminism.⁶ Montse Forcadas and Jordi Forcadas, of the Barcelona TO group *Forn de teatre Pa'tothom*, which collaborated with Naessens on several occasions, add, “Muriel Naessens is the person who, for us, knew how to get to the bottom of a question, knew how to distinguish immediately the cause from the effect.”⁷

I began this short essay a few weeks after Naessens’s passing. In some ways, I am a strange author for this piece. I am not an expert on her work. We did not know each other well; rather, I am an admirer and fellow feminist who is very grateful that my world overlapped with hers. Mostly we communicated through (translated) writing. Julian Boal and I coedited an essay Naessens wrote for *Theatre of the Oppressed in Actions* (2015), about the early proliferation of TO in Europe,⁸ and I conversed with her by e-mail over a few years. Although I have watched footage of her TO practice, I saw her theatrical work live only once, in a Forum Theatre play she and collaborators shared at *Óprima: Encontro de Teatro do Oprimido e Ativismo* (A Gathering of Theatre of the Oppressed and Activism) in Porto, Portugal, in April 2015. She was every bit as fierce and compelling in person as dear friends and colleagues had long described her to be. Sadly, however, the majority of my encounters with Naessens happened in the subjunctive only. In 2014, I invited her to be a keynote guest at “From Moments to Movements,” the annual Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed (PTO) Conference, in Chicago in June 2015. She happily accepted the invitation but ultimately could not attend. Also in 2015, coeditors Julian Boal, José Soeiro, and I invited her to submit several essays for a new TO anthology, but of course any new essays will now exist only in the hypothetical.

Initially, Naessens was not the sole focus of this essay; that happened later, when I could not stop thinking about the conversations I was having about her with friends. In response to Harvey Young and Dasia Posner’s generous invitation to talk about theatre for social change that we admire, I had begun a broader think piece on how the activist theatre that most inspires me grows out of larger activist movements or specific political desires more than it grows out of the desire to do theatre itself. Even if the artist-activists in question love their methods, the methods are not the goals in and of themselves. In the original essay, Naessens was going to be one example among others. After all, she had spent decades doing TO for feminist politics specifically. As Margy Nelson, who worked with Naessens in the TO group CEDITADE in France in the 1980s, put it, “From the very beginning, Muriel came to Theatre of the Oppressed *because* it was a tool for feminism. . . . For her to have been able to get funding through [MFPP] year after year to spend her time, full time, developing and performing Forum Theatre on feminism throughout France, it’s just astonishing.”⁹

Despite her extraordinary influence on some of the other TO practitioners I have met, Naessens was not among the most well-known figures in the international field of Theatre of the Oppressed. I had studied TO in depth for several years before I heard of her, but I am indebted to her because she taught friends who have in turn taught me so much. She is unquestionably a pivotal figure in the genealogies of TO. Although she was well known in feminist activist circles in

France and beyond, at least in the context of international TO, Naessens worked largely outside the spotlight. Several of her colleagues and friends have noted possible reasons for that reality: the unfortunate dominance of the English language at some international meetings, the fact that she was a woman, the fact that she worked specifically on issues directly relevant to women, and so forth. Forcadas and Forcadas gestured to the latter two reasons in a recent e-mail to other TO practitioners: “Muriel lived with the difficulties of someone who fights [using] feminism. But with the dignity of 40 years of well done work. A work that she shared without egoism to those [who] wanted to listen.”¹⁰ While no feminist historian would be surprised by the sexed and gendered nature of the politics determining whose activism draws more or less attention, our Pa’tothom colleagues also eloquently alluded to other dynamics in play here: the international TO “market” operates such that freelance facilitators who will conduct workshops on a wider array of topics are typically those whose work becomes well known on an international scale. Such a market is not as well suited to someone committed to a specific set of political movements like feminism(s).¹¹

Indeed, one of the most common threads in conversation about Naessens is admiration for the political consistency of her practice. This thread interests me especially because of its implications for how we think about TO practice and theatre for social change in general. “She was fierce, with no time to flatter the people she disagreed with,” writes Julian Boal. “Her consistency in the feminist struggle made her raw, provocative, straight to the point.”¹² Naessens had clear ideas about the world she hoped to achieve: a world without oppression of women. She was not willing to use Theatre of the Oppressed for simply any cause; she was determined that her TO practice would serve feminist ends. If you have worked in the world of Theatre of the Oppressed long enough, you know that such a practitioner is not necessarily the norm. Arguably more common is the approach of someone who has specific political commitments or struggles with which they feel most affiliated but who uses the techniques to address a wide variety of concerns. José Soeiro—a sociologist, TO practitioner, and member of the Portuguese Parliament—reflects on why it might be that people talk so often of Naessens’s political consistency:

Her positions were very clear and very sustained. She was open to other opinions, and she was open to learn, but she had very strong points of view, and when I say strong, I don’t mean closed. I mean sustained. . . . And as we know, sometimes in the world of theatre and of Theatre of the Oppressed, people undervalue or don’t give such an importance [to] this part of the work. So many times people prefer someone that is very good in the theatrical techniques rather than someone who has a good analysis of the problems.¹³

Like Naessens, many practitioners excel at both political analysis and theatrical techniques; of course they are related, and one does not have to choose. I also hope that this piece will not reinforce any simplistic binaries between those who are “for real” and those who “sell out.” TO practitioners work within the same concrete material constraints in which many other people work. They must eat, go to

the doctor, and have a place to sleep. (What’s more, from the material stability of a full-time position in neoliberal academe, I am in no position to label people as “sell-outs” or activist “real deals.” If such a binary were to exist, I know all too well on which side of it I would fall.) Naessens herself concretely analyzed the material circumstances in which people act. Forcadas and Forcadas appreciate that her work reflected keen awareness of the relationship between patriarchy and capitalism.¹⁴ Julian Boal adds that she strengthened his own materialist analysis and taught him not to have knee-jerk suspicion of TO projects with significant funding attached. “She always tried to have a team that was extremely well paid, for them to do work that was not [typically] paid work,” Boal recalls.¹⁵

Nelson notes that, even as very close friends, she and Naessens were not necessarily always in complete agreement about when and the extent to which TO practitioners should assert their own political commitments. As Nelson pointed out, many TO practitioners work across a variety of topics and struggles not because they are bracketing their strong political desires but because they believe in the value of facilitating an experience in which participants express their *own* political desires.¹⁶ Some of the most politically astute practitioners I know work freelance or sometimes downplay their own political commitments for the same reasons Nelson mentions. For me the point here is not *at all* to disparage such work. My point is that we need to remain vigilant about whose work might be less widely known because of a practitioner’s decision to anchor it to a specific set of activist struggles. We also must analyze and dismantle the neoliberal capitalist structures that inform and amplify the precariousness of TO labor. As Julian Boal wrote to fellow practitioners, Naessens was “one of the few of us who didn’t think it was necessary to turn herself into a commodity, into a brand, in order to, in a second moment, fight against oppression.”¹⁷

Since Naessens’s death, my brain has traced many times over her words below, which appeared in a 2006 article in which she insists on maintaining a feminist lens when considering invitations to do TO:

This all implies that we reflect on the pertinence of the request for a forum, and that we intervene only if we can bring a positive response from the feminist point of view; this demands vigilance so we are not “used”—the patriarchy is everywhere, all the time, the system of domination and the unequal, sexist social relationships are deeply ingrained in our society. We must be as clear as possible about what we are defending. *We are not, in fact, neutral, nor are we just passing through.*¹⁸

I love this rejection of neutrality in a world where consistent, ferocious political commitment is often constructed as a lack of nuance or a narrowness of focus. In my own context—the aggressively neoliberal United States—many social justice activists and facilitators (not unlike many academics) face daily economic pressure to let their political teeth fall right out of their mouths in favor of more neutral, salable language. Let’s “dialogue” on “issues” and “create transformation.” Here Naessens reminds us that to fetishize neutrality is often to preserve patriarchy. I hope to hold her words close, repeating them often as I do

now: “*We are not, in fact, neutral, nor are we just passing through.*” Actually, I feel like I have no choice *but* to repeat these words, operating—as most of us do—inside markets that will pay us to forget them.

ENDNOTES

1. Muriel Naessens, “Feminism and Its Relationship with Theatre of the Oppressed,” trans. Margy Nelson, *Under Pressure: Theatre of the Oppressed International Newsletter* 7.25 (2006), 11–16, at 16; emphasis hers. Online at www.salto-youth.net/downloads/toolbox_tool_download-file-653/newsletter_ITO_women.pdf, accessed 11 February 2016.
2. Muriel Naessens, “Boal’s Early Days in Europe,” trans. Margy Nelson, in *Theatre of the Oppressed in Actions: An Audio-Visual Introduction to Boal’s Forum Theatre*, ed. Julian Boal, Kelly Howe, and Scot McElvany (booklet accompanying DVD) (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, Chapman & Hall, 2015): 17–22, at 17. The biography heading this article—quoted here—was written by Naessens in French and translated into English by coeditor Julian Boal.
3. Naessens, “Feminism,” 12.
4. Naessens, “Boal’s Early Days in Europe,” 17. It is the biography heading this article that is again quoted here (see note 2).
5. Abigail Boucher, phone conversation with the author, 9 May 2016, and Marion Lary, e-mail to the author, translation from French certified by Straker Translations, 1 May 2016. Other individuals quoted elsewhere here also emphasized these characteristics.
6. Julian Boal, e-mail to fellow Theatre of the Oppressed practitioners, 11 February 2016.
7. Montse Forcadas and Jordi Forcadas, e-mail conversation with the author, translation from Spanish by Martín Zimmerman, 29 April 2016.
8. Naessens, “Boal’s Early Days in Europe.”
9. Margy Nelson, telephone conversation with the author, 5 March 2016. CEDITADE (Centre d’Étude et de Diffusion des Techniques Actives d’Expression), cofounded in Paris by Augusto Boal in March 1979, later became the Centre du Théâtre de l’Opprimé.
10. Montse Forcadas and Jordi Forcadas, e-mail to fellow Theatre of the Oppressed practitioners, 10 February 2016.
11. Ibid.
12. Boal, e-mail to fellow TO practitioners, 11 February 2016.
13. José Soeiro, Skype conversation with the author, 29 February 2016.
14. Forcadas and Forcadas, e-mail conversation with the author, trans. Zimmerman, 29 April 2016.
15. Julian Boal, Skype conversation with the author, 23 February 2016.
16. Margy Nelson, e-mail to the author, 2 March 2016.
17. Boal, e-mail to fellow TO practitioners, 11 February 2016.
18. Naessens, “Feminism,” 16; emphasis hers.