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Shaking the Belly:
Laughter as ‘Good Medicine’ in Anti-Oppressive Work

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Introduction

This article is organized as dialogue between the two authors, each of us telling some stories about our experiences working together on a popular theatre project, as well as some stories from other creative research and teaching activities. The focus of our reflections is on a particular quality within the work we have done using popular theatre activities and approaches; we want to highlight the importance of creating space for being playful, having fun, for laughter, and for celebration when undertaking work for social
justice. We argue that bringing play, celebration and laughter to the hard work of social justice brings oxygenation to the process. Indeed, 'having a laugh' is, we suggest, counter-hegemonic; it is a way to access one's power, to engage in transgressions and take a leap away from the ties that bind the oppressed to the oppressor. We begin our discussion with some musings about the notion of repair.

**Dialogue**

**Shauna:** Hi Jan, it's been awhile since we've collaborated on some writing. I'm hoping you'll be interested in joining me on yet another venture. If it's anything like our past experiences of collaborative research and writing, it should take us to some deeper understandings about our work. There is a special issue of Educational Insights that will focus on 'Performing Repair' - where the editors have invited submissions from researchers who have used theatre and other performative practices and activities in their anti-oppressive research, pedagogy and activism. The title 'performing repair' is sure intriguing, what do you think?

**Jan:** Hi Shauna, good to hear from you. Love collaborating with you! – Combining our different fields of scholarship and practice, you from adult education and me from theatre and drama, I always learn a lot – I see my work in new ways. But I must say that I stumble a bit on the word 'repair' – it seems to suggest a process that involves restoring something that was formerly 'OK'. I don't think that is how things are. I don't think that ‘development’ or ‘social change’ is about returning to something; it is about becoming something more egalitarian and democratic than has yet been discovered. It’s about addressing long standing issues so we can move forward to a new position. My sense is that any process that is addressing oppression and survivors' experiences of abuses of power is a process, often a long one. ‘Repair’ suggests there's a moment when things are 'fixed up' and 'back to normal'.

**Shauna:** Jan, I like the way you've troubled this notion of ‘repair’ and the sense of fixing something or returning it to its former state. For me, repair can also refer to moving towards wholeness and in anti-oppression work; I can certainly see how oppression can diminish people and deny their full humanity. I am curious about the performing element of this notion of 'performing repair'. I like it because it seems much more active than some discussions or approaches to anti-oppressive pedagogies. What comes to mind when you consider the notion of 'performance'?

**Jan:** Two things are central, the action (the verb to perform) and that ‘performance’ assumes there is an audience, a communication between ‘performer’ and ‘listener/respondent’. In popular theatre the notion of rehearsal for action is at the core of its power – we seek ways to use theatre as a process for investigating our lives and defining, testing and taking actions. We do this by telling stories, analyzing what those say about our living conditions as we create drama, and 'playing' with interventions that can address the problems that emerge – and all this from the perspective of the community, not the view of outsiders. When we choose to perform, using theatre structures, we select and heighten key events and moments that express a condition and action. We can take on characters and roles that are based in story and autobiography, but are fictionalized. In that communally-created location, we can know and see more easily what's to be done, than if we were just trying to think through the issues on our own. Using the structure of popular theatre brings a deliberate, thoughtful and very active attention to problems. I've witnessed how taking on roles and characters and acting out certain problems and struggles can create a space for courage that might not be present otherwise.
Shauna: I remember how I was initially drawn to popular theatre events, like those events offered by Headlines Theatre in Vancouver and Puentes Theatre out of Victoria, because I could see people telling their stories in such a way that moved them from the personal and private space to the public space where a kind of witnessing can happen. Not a passive view but a sense of engagement. Then when I myself got involved with some popular theatre workshops, I had that experience of watching how my own story, when it became part of a performance, allowed me to see it differently. I entered a kind of objective space where I could stand back and kind of watch myself. And what was really exciting was that each time my story or others' stories were told, different perspectives and understandings were generated. It's certainly not a static process, rather, it's never complete. Perhaps the 'repair' could be thought of as a kind of reconnecting of parts of self that have been disconnected.

Jan: Parts of self, and self to others.

Shauna: In theatre there is a kind of double consciousness that can emerge - you see yourself or others in their struggles and how diminishing oppressive forces can be, you move about the world, not being able to be fully human. Theatre and performance is a space where you can start to play with being whole again and play with different stories and endings.

Jan: Your thoughts about reconnecting reminds me of our popular theatre project *Transforming Dangerous Spaces*, where we worked with a group of 12 other women using theatre to explore our experiences of feminist coalition politics, particularly some of the more painful moments of conflict. It was really interesting to hear several participants make it clear that they wanted to have some fun, and be playful, because they were feeling tired and burnt out from the hard work of fighting for equality– they weren't feeling whole. They didn't want another heavy discussion of the issues, they wanted a kind of 'time out' from processes that had been for them really serious, hard work. At the same time, these same women wanted us to always be ‘going deeper’ as they said, to analyze deeply. The two ideas of play and work were not dichotomous. Maybe that's something we could focus on for this collaborative piece - the playfulness, the laughter…. Can we talk about this in relation to anti-oppression work? Would it seem a sacrilege, a kind of diminishment of the depth and brutality of the struggles?

Shauna: You're reminding me of the many times in our project when there was a lot of laughter, often these were times when someone said the 'unsayable' or when the performance was really edgy. I recall one time when we were using monologues as a form for telling stories. Someone was sitting in a chair and we were experimenting with having two people stand behind her doing a kind of mime – making gestures to match some of the emotions in her story. It was a very serious story being told about a personal moment of pain. There was a moment that cracked everyone up – the people behind were making gestures and then the person presenting the monologue turned her head slightly to observe these mime figures. It was the look on her face that said so much, something like ‘what the hell are you doing here?’ Everyone was laughing so hard, we had tears running down our faces. It was a huge release of energies – we’d been working really really hard on these stories and the monologue format was very challenging because these were our stories we were telling. We talk a lot about popular theatre being about embodiment, about being in touch with feelings and with our bodies – bodies carry in them knowledge and pain. Laughing, shaking our bellies, our faces tired from the laughing, tears in our eyes – they were really important moments – they seem to bring life and oxygen to the project.
**Jan:** One of the most wonderful moments of temporary ‘repair’ that I recall from my years of using theatre as a tool in and with communities happened in a residential program for those recovering from addictions. I was there for several sessions, introducing staff and clients to uses of theatre within various aspects of their programs. One afternoon I was to join a women’s therapy group that met every afternoon of the three week program. In the planning session, one of the therapists said that the group had been dealing with very tough stuff from tough lives – there had been a lot of tears, a lot of anger, a lot of unhappiness, a lot of personal revelations from women who had lived with violence and daily terrors and could we please have some fun with this theatre stuff. (I took my work very seriously at that time – perhaps because so many saw theatre as ‘fluff’ and I wanted to be taken seriously by people who were doing serious things in communities.) So this request stopped me for a moment. Positive. Restorative. Fun. Joy.

**Shauna:** Repair?

**Jan:** Maybe…but I hope to add into that idea that one is not the same again. Maybe ‘repair’ plus ‘growth’. Maybe ‘building’ rather than ‘repair’. That afternoon I introduced “Snap Shot Story” to the group of women. At its base, this exercise tells a story from beginning to end in a series of frozen tableaux; I find that 5 snapshots work best in most situations. This basic exercise can be adjusted in many directions, depending upon the purpose and the needs of a group. One of the most powerful uses is to tell a story which leaves someone “like the group” in a crisis, with a problem or dilemma; in this case, step two is to analyze the story for intervention points – when and how could an action be taken that makes the story turn out differently, more positively. But this day, deep assessment of long term problems was not what was called for. A story which ends with a crisis was not the structure needed. Instead, I asked the women to create snap shot stories entitled “Great Moments in a Woman’s Life”. My thought was about celebration, but more than that occurred. Not only did women share stories of their successes (that would have been powerful and restorative in and of itself), but something wonderfully unexpected happened.

Many of the stories that women wanted to tell were about standing up to a man in some way. The stories were wonderful – familiar and strange. Stories about standing up for oneself. But what sticks with me to this day is the laughter. We were an all-female group. It was the solutions women came up with for portraying the male characters that led to the laughter. Cigarette packages in rolled up ‘t-shirt’ sleeves. Hitching up. The walks. Socks down pants. We laughed. And laughed. Till tears rolled, stomachs ached. Together.

I like to think that taking on roles, performing these characters, and portraying moments of overcoming oppressive acts was transformative, that it was more than ‘performing repair’. At least in the short term. I like to think that it allowed for reconnecting (repair) with strength, self assertion and self efficacy and moved us forward to new ways to look at current pain and oppressions– those faced in the present and possibly to be faced and in the futures.

I believe the discovery of laughter within stories of taking charge of one’s life in the moment is linked to claiming power. These two elements – stories of ‘great moments’ and the discovery of laughter– together build a memory intense with pleasure, felt deeply, remembered in the bones, in the body. I believe the laughter and the power that grew from laughing together – finding pleasure in overcoming tough moments– was as important as making the reconnection with moments of strength. “Great Moments in a Woman’s Life” led to a new Great Moment – shared laughter and pleasure in community. There was a lot
of power in those moments. It felt transgressive and freeing. That's not to say that lives were transformed for all time, or that the structures that maintain violence against women had disappeared. But laughing at oppressors felt like a place from which to take a leap and become a different person in relation to abusers, past, present and future.

**Shauna:** Your story reminds me of a weekend workshop where I was invited to lead a group of women who were HIV positive through some theatre exercises. I was advised by the organizers to keep it light as the women had been working at the retreat on difficult issues and needed a break. I recall that we had about 10 women who volunteered to join in and about 5 or so sat on the sidelines watching. Pretty soon the women were howling with laughter, including those watching. Many commented when they were finished how enjoyable it had been, how much lighter they felt and that the images of their friends performing particular kinds of scenes and characters would stay with them for quite some time. It makes me think about this idea of embodied knowledge - perhaps for this group of women, they could return to this kind of embodied memory of this workshop, think about the playfulness and the laughter.

**Jan:** It is very easy for us – as educators and activists – to undervalue, or forget, to take the time to play. Play, humour, enjoyment, these sensations can reconnect (repair, sew, glue, reach, link) ourselves with our creative selves as well as with those around us. To take pleasure together is a powerful ‘tool’ for building cohesion, cooperation, a sense of pleasure in being together – surely some of the necessary components to a cooperative effort of any kind. It is all too easy to ‘stay in work mode’ because we are ‘serious about what we do’ or ‘busy and ambitious to get the job done’. Sometimes following a winding and apparently indirect path towards the ‘job at hand’ gets us there faster. Or more deeply. More creatively.

**Shauna:** This notion of taking the time to play reminds me of an event I helped to organize at a departmental research conference in 2006. I was co-chairing the day with Erin Graham, the graduate student peer advisor, and we were wondering what kind of plenary we could organize to close the day which was often experienced by grad students, many making their first conference presentations, as quite challenging and very serious. Before moving on to the conference dinner we thought we might have a plenary session that was fun. We had both just begun to play the accordion and had both delighted in being at the very beginning of a steep learning curve; learning to play a new instrument got us out of our heads and into our bodies. That experience made me think a lot about how many graduate students feel like novices, even imposters, when they first enter their studies. We decided to take some well known songs and write some new lyrics that focused on the often challenging and serious process of writing a thesis and working with a graduate advisor. As we introduced the session we emphasized that we were also on a learning journey in relation to accordion playing (after we played the first song, we were told to not give up our day jobs!). Our songs brought a fair amount of laughter from the audience which relieved our worries about how this was going to be received.

We then invited the assembled students (and a few faculty) to work in small groups and take a few minutes to talk about the graduate student-supervisor relationship and from that discussion write one new stanza to the tune of “You Are My Sunshine” that somehow reflected their discussions. These lyrics were written on transparencies which we placed on the overhead for a large group sing-along. We had anticipated a fair amount of resistance to this more participatory part of the 'plenary', but much to our delight, all the small groups insisted that their lyrics be sung. It was a wonderful moment of collective laughter and shaking of bellies with faces so sore we needed to massage them.
The one stanza that got the most engagement was basically the statement "I'm not my thesis" sung over and over again, indeed, the group did not want to stop singing… we would being to fade away thinking we were done, then suddenly a group from the back stood up and with raised voices and fists sang the lyrics again - this brought huge applause and laughter. This simple phrase had captured something in the students' experiences of being consumed by their graduate studies and brought attention to the need for students (and their advisors) to bring more balance to their lives. There was something about singing it too that shifted energies. Both faculty and students saw themselves in that phrase and came together in mutual understanding of how easy it is to lose parts of yourself in the academic culture. This became the theme of the chat at dinner and the pub that followed. There was a strong sense of a large group having shared a moment and collectively contributed to that experience. It was so important to laugh, to get rid of the tensions that had developed as students worried about how their presentations had been received. Several also commented to us that they really appreciated us showing how we too were novice learners.

**Jan:** This sense of collective experience reminds me about the power of building strong groups, and how laughter (and play) consolidates groups. It is worth investing our time and energy in moving a group (including ourselves) to re-discovering how pleasurable it is to be together. The group is stronger, more ready to work and more ready, potentially, to take some risks together to work on tough moments and issues. Some of this sense of community through play is engendered in theatre workshops via warm up games. But as with all recipes, it is important to blend and fuse – play and humour and pleasure can be part of many stages of a popular theatre workshop – we can enjoy our work, play our work together.

**Shauna:** When we started focusing on this notion of humour and playfulness I remembered the thesis *Making Sense with the Sense of Humor* of a PhD student, Elaine Decker[1], who focused on humour and its role in education for her research. She noted how psychologists have regarded humour as key to human development (e.g. Rogers, 1984,), and how the "attainment of a humorous attitude" (Critchley, 2002) is key to making meaning and to our imagination. "The ability to see the humor in things, to create comic tales and rituals, is among the most profound and imaginative of human achievements" (Hyers, 1981, p. 11). And laugh and humour can stimulate our imaginations and "stimulate creativity of thought by encouraging more flexible thinking" (Chapman & Foot, 1996, p. xxviii) which is key to finding solutions to social injustice. Her review of the educational literature about humour reminded me of Maxine Greene who writes about the importance of critical, reflective, and imaginative encounters with the arts and how they invite new possibilities for understanding. As she notes, "the extent to which we grasp another’s world depends on our existing ability to make poetic use of our imagination" (Greene, 1995, p. 4).

**Jan:** This conversation also stimulated me to see what others say about the use of humour[2]. Kym Bird and Ed Nyman (1993) discuss the use of humour in two performed popular theatre events and observe that humour created “a safe space where people could come together in a community that embraces difference and where they could share their experiences in a way that validated their pain and yet was life-affirming” (p. 8). I think this fits with some of our experiences. A piece which summarizes findings of many studies of humour in a variety of settings underlines some important aspects of the use of humour in our processes of ‘repair’. Rather unsurprisingly, McRoberts and Larson-Casselton (2006) find, among other things, that : “Appropriate humor relaxes an audience making them feel
more at ease and breaks down barriers to increase receptivity to a speaker’s ideas” (p. 26). There is an assumption here of a ‘performer’ or ‘speaker’ and an ‘audience.’

Shauna: Jan, given that we're talking about humour, can I tell you a joke I used to share in my introduction to adult education class? It's pretty bad, but I usually get a laugh. How many adult educators does it take to change a light bulb? Well at least five: one to undertake a needs assessment, one to assess power relations (does the light bulb really need changing and who says?), one to develop a program to teach others how to change a light bulb (based on Freirian notions of each one teach one), one to deliver the program, and finally one to evaluate its effectiveness (based on qualitative, arts-based research that uses theatre, song, painting and poetry to explore the lived experience of participants and the light bulbs...).

Jan: My father who is an adult educator would appreciate that joke. And I bet you get your ‘audience’ going….

These days I am working quite a bit with a participatory play called Are We There Yet?[3] The audience is teens. Humour is used a great deal, as a way to break the ice on a difficult subject (sex) and as a way to connect with audience. There is much to say about this project, which uses a participatory theatrical form to assist teens to develop strategies and self efficacy when it comes to making healthy, personalized and safe choices about sexual relationships. Humour is absolutely vital to the success of this project. Teen audiences arrive in the school gym rightfully suspicious of what a play on sex education will be like. Dry? Preachy? Lame? Right off the top the actors demonstrate two things – that they will talk about anything to do with sexuality that the teens bring up and that it will be fun. They ask for the audience to throw out “some of the feelings people get when they hear the word ‘sex’”?“[4] Then they play a game with the audience, called “Just a Minute” – each actor is given one of the words or phrases the audience came up with and they must improvise (simultaneously) on that ‘feeling’ for one minute, without pause, without repeats, with full eye contact with the audience. Actors improvise on everything from ‘embarrassed’ to ‘horny’ to ‘hot’ to ‘scared’ to ‘I don’t know’. The actors are brave, they take anything on. The audience can’t believe it; it is funny, it is bold, it is brash. The ice is broken. They are ready to go on, they have started to trust the actors.

Shauna: This process of having actors being the ones to take the risks, to model imagination through improvisation is really important to setting the scene or context. The audience, as you say, starts to build trust because they’ve now witnessed what's involved, and more particularly, they have found that their involvement is treated with respect. In this case, any comment they throw out is taken up by the actors as you say 'without pause and with full eye contact with the audience'. In the matter of sex education, creating a space where talk is encouraged about a 'taboo' subject can be quite transformative.

Jan: The play uses humour in a number of ways. The playwright, Jane Heather, says “It uses the metaphor of learning to drive to discuss sexual decision-making, makes people laugh, release tension and feel safe, and allows them to talk about the situations on stage and by proxy, in their lives.” Here is an excerpt of the script that has the mid-teen audience laughing hard.

**INSTRUCTOR**

*Lesson One: know your vehicle. What you need to know before you start the car. Mechanics and Equipment*

*ACTORS hold up two cartoon diagrams of the human body, one male*
and one female. INSTRUCTOR uses a pointer to point to different parts of the body through the demonstration.

The engine (points to head): the control centre, everything is routed through here including the gas pedal and the brake pedal.

Signal lights (mouth): to signal to others when you want to slow down, stop or change direction.

The windows and mirrors (ears and eyes): must be kept clear to hear and see incoming messages and signals.

Other standard equipment includes headlights (breasts), gearshift lever (boy parts), glove compartment (girl parts), and various other knobs, buttons, dials, gauges, etc. scattered through the vehicle (whole body sweep). Drivers should be thoroughly familiar with their own equipment before starting the car. Drivers should also become familiar with the equipment of other models.

Shauna: What's brilliant about this is that particular metaphor and how it draws attention to particular aspects of sex – other metaphors would emphasize other things. I had to chuckle when I read this, remembering times when I taught sex education to grade seven boys and girls; at the time they were of course separated. I recall when teaching the girls that I was to use some gross plastic model of female anatomy. It makes me think of how humour can free us from being tied to being too literal, that everything has to be 'real' and 'authentic' in its representation, but what is real and authentic means different things to different people. I abandoned that plastic model and started my class with the girls by asking for a list of tips on how to buy sanitary napkins at the local drugs store when the boy you had a crush on has just come into the store. I do remember a lot of laughter when someone stood up and put a paper bag over their head as a strategy to avoid embarrassment. We did end up having a pretty 'serious' discussion about sex but there was laughter in that as well. They understood it was OK to laugh about these things.

Jan: We’ve read this piece to adult audiences and they laugh too. People seem to enjoy the metaphor, and especially catching on to the metaphor. By this point in the play, teens are ready to trust the production; they know this will not be another lecture “about fallopian tubes”. They are ready to start digging in to the complexities of building relationships, talking about ‘embarrassing stuff’, and creating boundaries and telling them to others. The play moves on to presenting recognizable, difficult situations that teens (or adults) can find themselves in; characters ask for help, the audience proposes ways to move forward to the characters, who try each suggestion. Strategies are tested, revised and retested. The males hear the females’ points of view, and vice versa. Humour and honesty have laid the groundwork for open, productive, collaborative learning about something that is vital to their health, and to the respect they show to self and others.

Shauna: Sometimes we are working on very divisive issues. Sometimes a lot of deconstruction is required before ‘performing repair’ may be appropriate. There is a video called Lights, Camera, Attitude that features artists who are disabled performing comedy, dance, theatre, etc. One of the sketches was by comedian Alan Shain who has cerebral palsy. He tells a story about the discrimination he faced at a job interview. He recounts how he was asked if there was anything physical that made him completely different from other people, and his response was to say “well, I am very good looking”. His humor was so precise, it was like a laser beam that went to the heart of how our society considers those with disabilities as ‘other’. This is a very difficult subject to discuss and can be quite divisive. I use that video in a course I teach on community where I often struggle to have students understand how communities can be oppressive and exclusionary.
I show that video and the class always laughs, often with whoops of appreciation at the outrageous commentary. This artist created a moment where we were laughing with him, at ourselves, collectively bearing witness to the reality of his experiences and celebrating his comedic talent. Then the discussion opened up – a space was created that wasn’t there before.

Some of our work, together and apart, has taken us into issues of women and violence, women and poverty, racism.

Jan: Yes. And ‘humour’ and ‘play’ can be part of the serious business of this work. It can continue the thread of community in the midst of demolition. “Comedy is deconstructive and subversive, it tears down. But humour is also ameliorative. It salves hurts and divisions; it brings people together and it builds community” (Bird & Nyland, 1993, p.10).

References


[2] Cortney Lohnes, a University of Alberta graduate student in Drama, assisted with a related lit review.

[3] Are We There Yet? is an interactive play by Jane Heather. See www.ualberta.ca/awty for more information about the script and the SSHRC CURA funded project, which is adapting the play for several different cultural and social settings as well as assessing its impact.

[4] All quotes are from the script which can be accessed by contacting awty@ualberta.ca

[5] Lights, Camera, Attitude is a video available through the School of Disability Studies at Ryerson University, Toronto. http://www.ryerson.ca/ds/Contact.htm
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