



Legislative theatre can create a space for learning, dialogue, and active citizenship. But so far in Vancouver, it has had little real political impact. Maybe that can still change. **BY BEVERLEY PITMAN**

## ‘Practicing Democracy’ Revisited

IN SPRING 2004, the community outreach coordinator for Headlines Theatre, Jennifer Girard, introduced the readers of *SPARC BC News* to the concept of ‘forum theatre’—in which social conflicts are staged for audience members to resolve—and to Headlines’ production of *Practicing Democracy*, a ‘legislative theatre’<sup>1</sup> piece about the impacts of welfare cuts on British Columbians.<sup>2</sup>

A year earlier, in February 2003, Vancouver City Council had unanimously supported the theatre company’s request for a cultural grant to use its community-based theatre as “a tool for social change” (the phrase is UNESCO’s). Headlines Theatre and Larry Campbell’s municipal government both saw the value of creating a civic debate about the new provincial govern-

ment’s cuts to public-sector jobs, social assistance and public services, and the erosion of labour standards, and to hear from those whose lives were affected most—poor people, the homeless, seniors, single parents and recent immigrants. Forum theatre was regarded as a vehicle for exploring the individual and social impacts of the neo-liberal agenda at the local level and, as a community, imagining an alternative to the future it envisioned. As legislative theatre, it also offered a lawyer’s skills for translating these ideas into new municipal laws.

In January 2005, the better part of a year after the successful, six-person play had toured the community halls, gathered input from audiences for a long list of responses to the welfare cuts, and submitted a formal report to City Council,<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> ‘Forum theatre’ is basically where the audience is invited on stage to solve the conflicts that make up a play’s storyline. These are not personal but *social* conflicts and relate to a community story of some kind (here, the tale of how welfare cuts affect the citizens of BC). Importantly, in forum theatre the play is performed twice, once showing a series of conflicts. Then, the second time round, the audience is invited to replace characters in the play to propose solutions. A ‘joker’ mediates the interactive process.

‘Legislative theatre’ takes the solutions that the audience arrives at in social drama further. A legal expert, acting as scribe throughout the performance or series of performances, records and shapes the solutions into recommendations for legislative change in the real world.

<sup>2</sup> See Klein, S. & Long, A. (2003). *A Bad Time to Be Poor: An Analysis of British Columbia’s New Welfare Policies*. Co-published by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives and SPARC BC, available at <[www.policyalternatives.bc.ca](http://www.policyalternatives.bc.ca)>.

<sup>3</sup> D. Diamond, *Practicing Democracy Final Report*, available at <[www.headlinestheatre.com](http://www.headlinestheatre.com)>.

the administration issued a standard, bureaucratic report on the Headlines Theatre project.<sup>4</sup> With a conservative Council newly installed in office, the *Practicing Democracy* project was officially laid to rest.

Recently, however, an interesting assessment of *Practicing Democracy* has appeared. Headlines Theatre, its authors state, was “searching for some means—beyond anecdote—of assessing its impact.”<sup>5</sup> The

explanations that Pratt and Johnston, two UBC-based researchers, offer for *Practicing Democracy*’s “disappointing” or limited success in bringing about social change are worth considering, as are the other comments they make—for several reasons.

For one thing, the interactive form of theatre developed by Brazil’s Augusto Boal in the late 1960s (the ‘Theatre of the Oppressed’ it was originally called) continues to evolve in ways that are attracting increasing interest around the



Lillian Carlson in Headlines Theatre’s *Practicing Democracy*.

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world.<sup>6</sup> In Canada, since the 1980s, Toronto’s Mixed Company, Calgary’s Stage Left and Vancouver’s Headlines Theatre have all used Boalian techniques in a variety of contexts.<sup>7</sup> It is also fair to say that *Practicing Democracy* is representative of the new, performing arts-based forms of community development and planning that are currently entering the field. Further, Pratt and Johnston’s assessment of this experimental play contains many insights, about the

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4 City of Vancouver. (2005). “Administrative report: City of Vancouver initiatives related to the recommendations in *Practicing Democracy*: a legislative theatre report, January 27, 2005.” RTS No. 04517.

5 Pratt, G. & Johnston, C. (2007). “Turning theatre into law, and other spaces of politics.” *Cultural Geographies* 14, 92–113.

6 Boal has created an International Theatre of the Oppressed Organization to facilitate the development of TO Centres around the world.

7 Their websites are <[www.mixedcompany.com](http://www.mixedcompany.com)>, <[www.stage-left.org](http://www.stage-left.org)> and <[www.headlinestheatre.com](http://www.headlinestheatre.com)> respectively.

# CONFLICT & CONCILIATION

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PHOTO DAVID COOPER

James Mickelson in Headlines Theatre's *Practicing Democracy*.

translation of ideas from one social arena to another, for instance, that apply to other projects for social change.

*Practicing Democracy's* ten scenes articulated conflicts around such themes as scarcity of food, affordable housing, services for seniors, and people in poverty. It toured for three weeks in March 2003, played in three community halls (including one on the city's prosperous west side) and was seen by a total of 1296 people, including six Council members (the rest were sent videos).<sup>8</sup> Another 5000 people or so watched the play on SHAW Community TV. Such attendance figures and the 193 recommendations for City Council's consideration and action that were generated at the forums give some idea of its success. So does the enthusiastic reception the play received from

its audiences. But of course the failure of the lawyer's report to command the same response at City Hall and result in the desired municipal legislation cannot be ignored.

Pratt and Johnston's assessment of the report's failure to inspire local politicians to action is instructive. They point out, for instance, that an essential characteristic of forum theatre is that the distinction between expert and amateur is dissolved.

When the rule that some people speak and act (experts) while others passively look on (amateurs, non-actors, the audience) is dismantled everyone becomes what Boal calls a 'spect-actor.' This creates a space of active citizenship. Everyone is at least potentially capable of an 'intervention' in the play—i.e. step into a character's place on the stage to change some element of the story. In this way, those who are "living the issue" can help create solutions to the problem. In contrast, at City Hall, the distinction between expert and amateur is constantly being reinstated by the politicians and planners, in various ways, all of which serve to "undermine the credibility of public input" and, simultaneously, shore up that of the municipal experts.

Two ways expertise found expression in the

<sup>8</sup> Details are from D. Diamond, *Practising Democracy*.

case of the *Practicing Democracy* report were in the processes of classification and abstraction. Pratt and Johnston show, for example, that the recommendations submitted to Council were sorted into six categories (outside city jurisdiction, requires further clarification, etc.), and on this basis, dispersed to various departments, committees and task forces for attention, where they were subsequently lost—at least to the project of creating municipal laws. Here it should be noted that Pratt and Johnston allow that Headlines' report "may have supported other local initiatives."<sup>9</sup>

It is not difficult to see that the emotional impact of a full-blown theatrical performance, which focuses on people's experiences of dumpster-diving, living on the streets, and even sleeping in dumpsters, would be radically reduced in the translation to a 27-page legal document. Of course, it is precisely this "productivity" of performance spaces that is actively cultivated in arts-based community development projects for creative solutions to social conflict.

Finally, Pratt and Johnston very helpfully underline Woolgar's point that an idea's value is

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not intrinsic to the idea itself, "but emerges within and is often a response to the expectations and existing structures of authority and expertise." So, for example, because no committee on services for seniors was in place at City Hall, the play's "eye-opening" and "heart-opening" messages and the report's important recommendations on this subject were lost.

In this light, we can benefit from reconsidering the current fuss over best practices. Take legislative theatre itself as an example. Boal's success with legislative theatre in Rio de Janeiro, where he lived for many years, established his global reputation as an innovative theatre director. He also held political office from 1992 to 1996, where he famously introduced 30 and got 13 new laws passed in Rio during those years. His success needs to be understood in context—or, better, within the "existing structures of authority and expertise." The strong tradition of forum theatre Boal's work had already been established in Brazil and the network of theatre companies he had funded throughout Rio's neighbourhoods as a politician meant that many people were already practicing democracy. In Vancouver, this is not the case.<sup>10</sup> Yet. ■

<sup>9</sup> For example, the other action City Council took upon receiving the administration's report (i.e. besides dispersing its recommendations) was to explore the feasibility of creating an advocate position for sex workers and the homeless.

<sup>10</sup> Pratt and Johnson actually found a surprising degree of familiarity with Boal's techniques amongst Larry Campbell's city councillors (one had even worked with the theatre director for four years, for example).