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Turning theatre into law, and other spaces of politics

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We assess Practicing Democracy, a play created by Headlines Theatre in Vancouver, Canada, which was the first attempt to deploy Augusto Boal’s legislative theatre in North America. The goal of this project was to use forum theatre to generate creative solutions to the dangers created by provincial government cuts to social welfare, and to work with local government to turn some of these recommendations into new local government laws. This goal was not attained, although the report produced by Headlines Theatre may have supported other local initiatives. We examine the ways in which local politicians and planners maintained the distinction between expert and amateur, so as to undermine the credibility of public input. A bureaucratic process of classification and abstraction also inhibited the recommendations from being turned into law, and reinstated the expertise of politicians and bureaucrats. We balance this assessment with a reading of spaces that are excessive to this rational calculation: the city as a concrete site of embodied, creative spatial disruptions; and theatre as a pedagogical public sphere.

Keywords: Augusto Boal • Canada • legislative theatre • spatial disruptions

FIGURE 1 Celebrating Practicing Democracy at Vancouver City Hall
What have we here? Six Vancouver citizens occupying Vancouver City Council Chambers, one standing on the Mayor’s desk, another on the table where the mace is usually located (see Figure 1). They are all dancing, and waving their arms in a celebratory, invitational way. All of these people are living issues of poverty, and they are demanding that local government address them. Even more surprising, they have been invited into Council Chambers by an Executive Assistant to the Mayor to celebrate these demands. These six people are actors in a play, called *Practicing Democracy*, which was an experiment staged by Headlines Theatre in 2004, to ‘use theatre to make law’. It was the first adaptation of Augusto Boal’s Legislative Theatre in North America.

There is another story to tell about this publicity photograph. When the corporate communications staff member at City Hall, who was in the room during the entire photo shoot, received the photograph, he asked Headlines Theatre not to use it. One of the executive assistants to the Mayor followed up with an email stating, ‘Do as [the communication staff member] asks. I agree with him.’ Asking for a fuller explanation, the Director of Headlines received a terse email reply: ‘You know how I feel about this.’ Receiving no further clarification, Headlines Theatre released the photograph. In the view of the Director of Headlines Theatre, they were treating Council Chambers as ‘sacred space somehow. But, you know, it's not. It's the people’s space.’

The need to reclaim a people’s space for democratic politics is pressing in most places; so too in British Columbia. Since the Liberal Party came to power at the provincial level of government in 2001, there have been massive cuts to public-sector jobs, social assistance and public services, and labour standards have been eroded. In March 2003, the United Nations condemned the BC government for the impact of state policy on women’s lives. The speed, scale and scope of the changes were possible because opposition within provincial government had effectively collapsed (from 2001 to 2005, only two seats were held by opposition members, which is an insufficient number to qualify for official party status and the research budget that goes along with it). As the Director of Headlines Theatre put it: ‘Why is *Practicing Democracy* important? Because democratic principles are collapsing all around us.’ The goal of *Practicing Democracy* was to construct creative responses to the fallout of neo-liberal economics within the city of Vancouver. Although social welfare is not strictly speaking a local government responsibility, the project emerged from the understanding that the dangers created by the social welfare cuts are felt locally. The left-leaning City Council of the time was interested in exploring creative possibilities for local action to alleviate some of them.

Headlines Theatre agreed to cooperate with us (as researchers) because of the novelty of the project of Legislative Theatre. They were searching for some means – beyond anecdote – of assessing its impact. This paper is our effort to do this, and what we describe is the ambivalent and indeterminate way in which Headlines Theatre was able to occupy the space of City Hall. In our analysis, we stay within the dynamic of the controversy over the photo shoot, particularly the tension and contrast between the terse one-line emails from City Hall and Headlines’ unruly response: ‘Nothing came back [by way of explanation from City Hall], so we released the photo.’ We trace three spatialities. One describes the translation of a rich theatrical public sphere into a policy
document, with somewhat disappointing results. But much exceeded this process of translation, and we want to examine this as well. Thrift has noted that ‘there is a messy kind of purity that is being produced’ through contemporary processes of rationalization and abstraction, and that it is ‘hard work’ to keep this purity in place. We want to emphasize the work that remains undone, and that which exceeds processes of calculability and abstraction, to examine the spaces for politics that both allowed for and were created by *Practicing Democracy*.

**Boal’s legislative theatre**

Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed dates from the 1960s, and was directly influenced by Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, and especially Freire’s ‘idea that the teacher is one who learns’. Boal recounts a pivotal moment in the development of the Theatre of the Oppressed. The company was touring an agitation theatre production in the northeast of Brazil, performing a play that advocated armed uprising. The play ended with cast members taking up arms, singing revolutionary songs and inciting *campanheiros* to violently claim their rights to the land. After the performance a peasant, deeply moved by the production, invited the company of actors to join the community in armed insurrection. Boal declined the invitation, but the encounter led to his realization that ‘when we, the genuine artists, talked of giving our blood for a cause, in fact we were talking about *their* blood, [that of] the peasant farmers’. Boal returned to São Paulo intent on devising a new theatrical form, one in which actors would stage conflicts but, rather than prescribe solutions, improvise them with audiences. Forum theatre creates the space in which spectators (reframed as spect-actors) can physically enter the theatrical ‘fiction’ to devise political options.

Boal argues that the potential of forum theatre resides in its ability to create space where it is possible for citizens to ‘transgress, to break conventions, to enter into the mirror of theatrical fiction, to rehearse forms of struggle and then return to reality with the images of their desires . . . [providing] an uneasy sense of incompleteness that seeks fulfillment through real action’. This encapsulates Boal’s desire to transform the nature of spectatorship, and to revolutionize what he perceives to be the cathartic relationship between actor and spectator in conventional drama. In forum theatre, audience members give no power to dramatic characters to think, feel or act on their behalf. Rather, spect-actors come onto the stage and assume the protagonist’s role, empowered to enter into and open up the dramatic action. The main objective of forum theatre is to transform people from “spectators”, passive beings in the theatrical phenomenon – into subjects, into actors, transformers of the dramatic action.

Legislative Theatre is a more recent development that emerged when Boal, running as a member of the Workers’ Party (PT), was elected in 1992 as one of 42 city councillors in Rio de Janeiro. As city councillor, Boal secured the funding for 5 full-time and 10 part-time forum theatre practitioners, who established 19 permanent (along with 31 temporary) Theatre of the Oppressed companies around the city of Rio with a variety of community groups. Each group had a ‘joker’ (what Boal refers to as a ‘cultural
animator’) who led the company in forum techniques and facilitated interventions during public performances.

Based on the public interventions that emerged during these community forum collaborations, lawyers working with Boal drafted legislation that articulated community desires. The idea of this legislative forum theatre model was to turn the public’s desires into municipal law, and in doing so contribute to the greater democratization of the political decision making process. During his time in office (1992–6; he ran a second time for public office unsuccessfully), Boal carried 30 laws into what he later referred to as the ‘bloody arena of the Chamber of Deputies’, 13 of which were passed. These covered a variety of initiatives, including mandating that all municipal hospitals employ doctors specializing in geriatric medicine, banning all treatments for mental illness that produce irreversible effects, establishing legal privileges for the Casa das Palmeiras (a mental health facility), legislating that motels in Rio could not discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation, and securing a comprehensive witness protection programme (the first in Brazil). Reminiscing about this remarkable process, Boal suggests: ‘It was theatre, fiction. Even so, it showed possible paths: by means of theatre, law can be made. Theatre as politics, not just political theatre.’

After 1996, the municipal funding for the Center for the Theatre of the Oppressed was lost, and Boal recreated the Center as a non-governmental organization, which continues to produce ‘Legislative Theatre without the Legislator’. Of the future of the form, Boal says:

Next time … where? When? Of course, in Brazil where we intensely believe in this method, and intensely work for it to happen. But this should not be a Brazilian experience. It should spread out into other countries. We want democracy; theatre can help in this process – why not? When I started the Theatre of the Oppressed movement, many people used to say: ‘Yes, it is very nice for Latin America, but in other countries it will not work …’

Resituating legislative theatre in Vancouver

The effort to bring Legislative Theatre to Vancouver began formally with a weeklong workshop in January 2004. The 31 workshop participants had all applied to Headlines Theatre by explaining how the welfare and social service cuts had affected them personally. The workshop cast was diverse. Participants were selected to represent a ‘diversity of voices’ which included ‘people living in poverty, in and off welfare, the homeless, advocates, welfare workers, people doing studies, youth, [and] the elderly’. Six actors were selected from this group and a 20-minute, 10-scene play was produced, which articulated conflicts around key themes that emerged in the workshop: scarcity of food, affordable housing and services for seniors, and the extreme vulnerability of particular people living in poverty (especially women living in particular circumstances: as seniors, sex trade workers and public-sector workers).

The play was performed in three different venues over a three-week period in March 2004 to a total audience of 1296 people. The venues were community halls, located in different parts of the city in an effort to draw diverse audiences. An additional estimated
5000 viewers saw a televised version of the production (which invited call-in participation) on SHAW Community TV. Within the tradition of Augusto Boal’s forum theatre, at each performance the short play was performed and then re-performed. In the second performance, any member of the ‘audience’ could call ‘Stop!’ if they had an idea to change the action or outcome. They entered the play by replacing one of the characters to try out their idea, and the non-professional actors improvised around it, drawing upon their intimate familiarity with the issues. The entire forum was then opened for a discussion of the intervention, during which other ideas often came forward.

As already noted, the ambition of this project went far beyond these performances of forum theatre. In February 2003 the Vancouver City Council voted unanimously to endorse the project, and to receive a report written from the forum theatre. Headlines Theatre hired a lawyer, Carrie Gallant, to attend every performance and to draft a legislative report that summarized the many suggestions that came forward. Although this project was, strictly speaking, an instance of Legislative Theatre without the Legislator (given that the Director of Headlines Theatre was not an elected official), the director had close allies on City Council, and hopes ran high.

Translation: from theatre to planning document

There has been a good deal of scholarly interest in the translations that render our worlds knowable and produce them as objects for administration. Latour makes visible and strange the translation by scientists of a small patch in the Amazon rainforest into measurable units that can be studied in laboratories throughout the world. Key to this
process is producing nature as an object that can be abstracted from its context, transported across distances, and studied and acted upon from afar. These translations allow the centralization, localization and hierarchization of knowledge production and are key to the creation and authorization of experts. These processes apply to social life, no less than nature. Although the explicit objective of forum theatre is to disrupt conventions that authorize the expert in social and political life, and to create the opportunity for ‘non-experts’ who are living the issue to devise solutions to their problems, it proved difficult to dislodge established patterns of authority as the play moved from small intimate community venues into City Hall and through the bureaucracy.

Neither the planners nor most politicians rethought their authority as experts, and in their reactions to the report they repeatedly restated the distinction between expert and amateur, which is filtered through the contrasting terms of rationality and emotions. For instance, a head planner, who was very supportive of the project, nonetheless made sense of the recommendations in this way:

I think there were some things that were different and we can obviously put some thoughts into it. There are things that are kind of like, not really, how do you say, not reasonable in a sense. I remember there was one comment about, since there are buildings that are in bad shape, maybe the city needs to tell the landlord if they don’t fix it up and they have left the building in bad shape for a number of years, for X number of years, and the landlord doesn’t fix it up, then the city should confiscate the building and make homeless shelters for people. I mean, we don’t have the right to do that. So sometimes some of these suggestions were a little bit too simplistic in the sense that, I can see that on the spur of the moment you can say ‘hey, if this building no one is using, why aren’t we using that!’ I mean, [I experienced] the same thing. I went to LA and I went to the downtown centre core. They have so many buildings that are empty. And yet you look around and there are so many people on the streets. You just kind of think, why can’t they change some of these buildings and put people inside them? So you can see the emotional reaction but of course...
when you have to implement it there’s a whole bunch of implications there. So there are a few of those: people not understanding the mandate issues, the rights, and the power that you have.24

Or as one city councillor, who appeared less supportive of the project than other councillors, observed:

So if you look at all the recommendations, you’ll see that a whole bunch of them, we’re already doing. Or there are reasons like the ones I’ve just described around the squat idea, that we can’t do it, or we’ve chosen not to do it because we don’t think it’s a good idea.

In his opinion, if new ideas were to come from the legislative forum, this would indicate that they had failed at their job.

If we’re doing our jobs, there won’t be anything, because we’re out there talking. I mean yesterday I was out there doing the homeless count. I mean, we’re talking to the people who are under the bridges and stuff. We’re – our staff – are dealing with them everyday down at the community, Carnegie Community Centre, whatever place, the community police offices. And you’re seeing this all, you’re experiencing this all yourself. It’s not like you need a theatre project to bring it to your attention. Because, if that’s the case, we’re really out to lunch. And the staff particularly, they’re in the front lines. That’s their jobs to know all this stuff. So if the project thinks it’s going to tell us something that we haven’t already thought of, it’s pretty unlikely. Because people go to conferences all around the world and hear all the best practices people are doing, and bring them home and try them out, and bounce them off people and do pilot projects and all that.25

This type of reaction thus reinforced – rather than dissolved – a dichotomy between technical, rational, multidimensional, objective expertise and emotional, partial, and somewhat superficial community input.

The city councillor quoted above also sketched a spatiality of this expert knowledge, one of highly mobile experts attending conferences and collecting ‘best practices’ which then can be – in the language of science – tested through pilot projects. This is a familiar geography: the city as laboratory, a site of empirical investigation, amenable to social administration;26 a centralization of knowledge and authority though norms and practices of rational and technical calculation; and the interchangeability and mobility of such knowledge through nodes and networks of experts.

But along with these displays of cosmopolitan expertise, we are intrigued by the rather odd, subtle translations of ideas that occurred as they passed from theatrical intervention into a report and then through the classificatory schema of the planning bureaucracy.27 Rich theatrical events that left many in the audience in tears were of necessity stripped, decontextualized, and abstracted from these moments in order to produce a legislative report with concrete recommendations. The lawyer hired by Headlines Theatre herself expressed her discomfort with this process: ‘There’s definitely something about doing it live or seeing it live, and feeling that energy. It’s much different than the energy that gets picked up on 8½ and 11 paper. You know, black, Times Roman font.’ ‘I could have’, she quipped, ‘picked a more exciting font, I guess.’28 It is interesting to listen to her earnest efforts to attempt an accurate translation that recorded the full range of interventions: ‘I tried as much as possible to record [the interventions] verbatim . . . I tried as much not to change anything that was there.’ She also contextualized the interventions in three ways in her 27-page legislative report: by describing the scene that typically evoked the intervention, identifying the desire that

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the intervention seemed to express, and linking the concrete recommendation to existing governmental and community initiatives (in Vancouver and elsewhere). The report already concedes the pragmatic need to extract the recommendations from these contexts, however, and it begins with an executive summary that lists 193 recommendations in bullet form (the report can be accessed at headlinestheatre.com).29

The legislative report was received by City Council in May 2004; Council followed the recommendations of the Standing Committee on Planning and Environment to refer it to the City Manager for follow up and a ‘full accounting’ within one year. The first response from city planners came in September 2004, a second in February 2005 (both available at headlinestheatre.com). The planner who coordinated these responses to the legislative report across 11 departments, estimates that 305–320 hours of staff time were spent on this endeavour.30 The February report ends with a note of finality: ‘A detailed analysis of the current status and feasibility of each recommendation in the Practicing Democracy report has been completed. Any further work based on the project’s recommendations will have to be undertaken at the direction of City Council.31 Given the changed composition of City Council, which is no longer comprised of mostly left-leaning councillors, this seems highly unlikely. At the February 2005 meeting at which this report from the City Manager was presented, City Council took two actions: one was to disperse a number of Practicing Democracy recommendations to four different existing committees or task forces; a second was to ask the City Manager to report back on the feasibility of creating a Homeless and Sex Trade Worker Advocate position. This last recommendation emerged, not explicitly from the legislator’s report, but from consultation between one city councillor and the Director of Headlines Theatre. The city councillor ‘didn’t actually think it would go through . . . but agreed to risk trying’.32

We preface our conclusions about the fate of the Practicing Democracy report by noting a number of structural constraints that have limited local government response. First, as previously noted, social welfare is not a local government responsibility; it is an issue that is felt locally and was chosen through a democratic selection process (see note 3). Issues that are more directly and simply under local government jurisdiction might have produced faster and more satisfying responses. Further, a comparison with Boal’s successes in Brazil using forum theatre to create laws is unwise because Boal himself was in elected office, and the process took place over a period of four years. Finally, in an effort to be responsible to the process, the report included a formidable number of recommendations, all given equal value. As one city councillor noted:

We sent it off to our staff. But, you know, our staff are bureaucrats. And well intentioned as they are – [and] they are knowledgeable – I’d like to know the priorities from people directly involved. Some of that [our staff] will do . . . our staff will ask people, and they are contacting groups. You know, you always get more and more remote with each one of those processes.33

Faced with this gargantuan challenge, planners managed the task of responding to the Practicing Democracy recommendations in part through the activities of classification and coordination, as well as through two inherently spatial processes: boundary
maintenance and dispersal. In the words of the planner responsible for coordinating this task,

You've seen the report... I mean the only way – because they were so big, I think there were 195 recommendations all together, and they were so big, touching on a variety of different fronts. So we categorized them, put them into similar areas. Plus putting them as 'already in progress'... We had a category: 'council can consider it'. If council wants to do more work in this area, you can consider. And then there are areas out of jurisdiction, you know, not in the line of our mandate. Or things that are, you know, more to be championed by the community.

[G:] So a lot of your work has been to organize, like categorize, the ...

[Planner:] And bring together departments to work on it. Because it is a joint interdepartmental initiative. Because it's not focusing on any one particular department in isolation.34

In the detailed accounting prepared in the February 2005 report to Council, each of the 193 recommendations was classified in terms of one or more of six categories (Table 1), and this typology both reflected and seemed to offer a self-evident rationale for distinguishing workable ideas from those that should be discarded (at least for the moment). The typology is actually quite unruly because a number of the categories are hybrid mixtures of present circumstances and future possibilities, and different types of concerns (e.g. in current work programme or under consideration; contradicts policy or surpasses resource availability; inappropriate or requires further development by city champion), but this classification scheme substantially and seemingly self-evidently narrowed the field of actionable items to those ranked as C1 or C2: 'The analysis therefore clarifies whether or not the City could reasonably consider undertaking any particular Practicing Democracy recommendation for further exploration.'35

Boundary maintenance between categories was not inflexible, although attempts at flexibility were contained within the grid of the classificatory schema (by assigning recommendations to multiple categories) and within existing institutional arrangements. As shown in Table 2, classification as C4 (outside local government jurisdiction), for instance, did not lead to the automatic dismissal of the recommendation. But continued consideration of a recommendation classified as C4 depended on the linkages and partnerships that local government had already established (as evidenced by being linked typically to a C1 classification or to the existing Housing Action Plan). No new extra-jurisdictional initiatives were imagined or recognized. By classifying the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1 Classificatory schema</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C4</td>
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<tr>
<td>C5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: City of Vancouver, 2005.)
recommendations in this way, the planning department narrowed the field of ‘new ideas’ to 41 (Table 3). In what was dubbed a ‘housekeeping’ motion Council unanimously voted to send many of these C2 recommendations to appropriate working committees (Table 4), a process of dispersal that is difficult to evaluate.

But several things are clear. Not all of the C2 recommendations were put forward to appropriate committees; instead, only the C2 recommendations for which there were appropriate committees were put forward. This exemplifies Woolgar’s point that the worth of an idea is not intrinsic to the idea, but emerges within and is often a response to the expectations and existing structures of authority and expertise.  

C2 recommendations for which there was no appropriate committee will likely be lost and others will possibly fade from view because they were directed to an inappropriate committee. These are the dual fates of most of the recommendations for seniors. Only two recommendations directed towards seniors were forwarded: one to create a volunteer organization with a mandate to visit and connect seniors, another to create a link between youth and seniors programmes. Both were directed to the City’s Child and Youth Advocate. The fate of the recommendations for seniors is particularly unfortunate given the assessment of the planner who coordinated the City Manager’s response to the Practicing Democracy report that the most innovative ideas in the report pertained to peer support for seniors.

[G:] But were there a few [ideas] that maybe you hadn’t thought of? Can you think of any of those?
[Planner:] There were some that were quite good in terms of peer support of seniors. Like how do you help

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 2 Distribution of C2 classifications</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of recommendations classified as:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C2 only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C1 + C2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C1 + C2 + C4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C2 + C4*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C1 + C2 + C5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C2 + C3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C2 + C5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C2 + C6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The majority of these are actually C1 + C2 + C4 insofar as they reference the Housing Action Plan, an existing initiative involving collaboration across governmental jurisdictions. (Source: City of Vancouver, 2005.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 3 Focus of ‘C2 only’ recommendations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Food</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seniors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lobbying higher levels of government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety of sex trade workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repeal anti-panhandling law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free voicemail access numbers for low-income residents without telephone</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: City of Vancouver, 2005.)
TABLE 4  Dispersal of C2 classified recommendations*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recommendation</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Forwarded to Housing Action Plan Committee</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forwarded to Food Policy Council</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forwarded to City’s Youth and Child Advocate</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referred to Women’s Task Force</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Motion to forward recommendations to committees etc. passed unanimously by City Council 15 Feb. 2005.  
(Source: City of Vancouver, 2005.)

My favourite recommendation in the whole thing is the last one: Practicing Democracy should be a regular production, a forum for discussion, continuing perpetual dialogue with the community. That’s my favourite one. When you asked the earlier question about the most creative one, I think that was it. It’s kind of off the wall. It doesn’t solve an immediate problem, but it was very creative.

Unfortunately, this recommendation was clumped within the theme of community safety and was assessed by the Vancouver Police Department (VPD). The VPD classified it as a C4 and made the accompanying comment: ‘This recommendation is outside the jurisdiction of the VPD. The VPD does participate in several other avenues of community dialogue.’ Whilst the VPD used the C4 classification to signal that the recommendation lies outside VPD jurisdiction, the category was taken to have a wider application (to the city as a whole) and the idea was discarded. A seemingly rational and discriminating process actually involved a series of undetected misclassifications and boundary errors.

The city planners’ strategy of classification was an understandable means of rationalizing an overwhelming number of recommendations. But this process of administering ideas from the community tended to reinforce rather than disrupt the expertise of those at City Hall. The first report back from the City Manager in September 2004 was simply an accounting of what the local government was already doing to address the recommendations. In the second report, a good number of the C2 designations were also listed as C1, which reinforces the impression that much that emerged from Practicing Democracy was already known at City Hall. These classifications reflected rather than disrupted existing habits of thought and lines of authority.

**Embodiment and Crisscrossing Connections**

There is a long tradition of urban theorizing that suggests that the abstraction of practices for the purpose of administration is only part of the truth of urban life. This is also the case for Practicing Democracy. We return to the publicity photograph of an unruly celebration in the very space of local government, where the seats of power
(literally) lie vacant. De Certeau argued that the administration of urban life by planners through rational organization and quantification is never complete, and that a range of spatial practices – other spatialities – eludes this discipline: ‘I shall try to locate the practices that are foreign to the “geometrical” or “geographical” space of visual, panoptic, or theoretical constructions.’ He develops this argument through a series of dichotomies – spatial system/pedestrian speech acts; place/space; strategy/tactics; concept city/spatial practices; stability/mobility – to make the case that the administration of urban life is incomplete: ‘A migrational, or metaphorical, city thus slips into the clear text of the planned and readable city.' In the publicity shot in Council Chambers, the actors had slipped into the space of rational administration. But it is also important to note that *Practicing Democracy* attempted to disrupt the type of binary thinking exemplified by de Certeau, and purposefully to blur the distinction between grassroots tactics and governmental strategy. We have argued that they did this with limited success, because planners and politicians continuously reasserted their expertise and authority, and an uncompromising process of bureaucratic classification organized innovations within existing schemas, or simply shuffled them off-stage/page.

And yet the city councillors have a ghostly presence at this celebration: their permission has been given and their chairs hold a place for their participation. We found that the city councillors and planners – as people – were implicated in *Practicing Democracy* in many different ways. Examining their personal involvement underlines recent feminist geographical theorization of the embodied nature of state practices. Mountz, for instance, has revealed the significance of embodiment for the implementation of Canadian immigration policy. She demonstrates that the personal biographies of state employees create points of sympathy for and identification with (as well as discrimination against and dis-identification from) prospective refugee claimants, in ways that influence their implementation of state policy. The state is both embodied and works through the intimate spaces of bodies. There is no rational, bureaucratic, disembodied state that stands above or against the affective spaces of everyday life.  

We want to frame such embodiment within the concern of de Certeau to emphasize the contingency and open-endedness of urban life, and a vitality that comes through the workings of urban space. In an effort to theorize this quality of urban space, Doreen Massey has lamented the fact that, in explanations of social change, causal agency is typically placed on the side of time (or history). Space is often theorized as static, as the container for action. She draws our attention to the agency of space that comes about through the coincidental crisscrossing of different lives in a shared material space, often a city. She calls these ‘spatial disruptions’. New opportunities are created through these chance encounters. When people’s lives cross through space, new ideas, projects and possibilities emerge. As we interviewed city councillors and planners, we became more and more intrigued by the coincidence of their intersecting life histories, which collectively led to an appetite for disrupting existing patterns of authority, even if the outcome was not achieved.

*Practicing Democracy* was the outcome of a history in a specific place, and the meetings of different individuals at particular moments in Vancouver. When we began
this project, we knew that David Diamond had a long history of doing forum theatre in Vancouver. And it was not surprising that he found allies in the leftist city council elected to government in November 2002.

And so . . . when the civic election happened and the city council changed dramatically, all of a sudden there were all kinds of old friends on city council. And so I went to council and said 'Here's this idea. Do you want to do this?' We didn't even know what the subject matter would be yet, just a legislative theatre experiment. And council voted unanimously to do that, although I understand now that they had no idea of what they were agreeing to do.

We were more surprised by the degree of familiarity with Boal's theatrical tradition among local politicians and 'bureaucrats'. One councillor knew of Boal from 'a guy I worked with', who turned out to be Paolo Freire. This councillor worked with Freire in Geneva for four and a half years, helping him to set up the Institute for Cultural Action. He then went to Tanzania with Freire, where he stayed for another four and a half years designing literacy projects.

All of them started with a code, be it a play, a picture, a song, some form of representation that allows the community to take an objective distance and begin to describe what's happening in the situation and how to change that reality. It's very similar. It's just that Boal has used the theatrical form and theatre to make that work.

Another councillor's familiarity with forum theatre came through her interest in local government initiatives in participatory planning in Brazil: 'This is a left-wing council. So those are the kinds of things that interest us. And people have been very familiar with Brazil and Paulo Freire, and the Workers' Party, and what they've done there. So, I mean, it's pretty logical.'

It was merely 'logical' in the context of her social networks, which include being married to an academic community planner who has been involved in a number of projects in Brazil, and working with the head City of Vancouver planner who has gone 'back and forth' between Vancouver and Brazil over the years. We knocked on the door of a 'bureaucrat' and heard:

It has been used a lot. And because I worked with Headlines since a long time ago – David Diamond – and he used to take me along [with him to work] with racism issues in the schools. [There's] a lot of youth violence and issues in the school . . . So, the last thing for young people they want is an adult coming in and telling them what they should and what they should not do. But by having them involved, they actually understand the dynamics, understand some of the impacts and actually feel how it feels being discriminated [against] . . . And they also contribute to the solutions. So I've always believed that was a useful way of engaging people.

The importance of tracing these personal connections to legislative and forum theatre is that they also trace a distinctive spatiality, along with an open future. City Council no doubt supported Practicing Democracy because of its general commitment to participatory grassroots politics. But North America's first experiment in legislative theatre also took place because of very specific relationships of trust that had developed over time in Vancouver and elsewhere, and because of overlapping but distinctive relationships with Boal and with the ideas of forum theatre. This may seem a banal point, but this relational schema describes a notion of spatiality that is neither
entirely open nor closed. It describes a network, but one that is multiple and diffuse rather than unitary and coherent, constructed from specific life histories that crisscross and come together in a particular time at a specific place. All spaces, writes Massey, are, at least a little, accidental, and all have an element of heterotopia. This is the instability and potential of the spatial, or at least how we might in these space–times most productively imagine it. (50) Something unexpected can happen when lives – concrete lives on variable trajectories – collide in space. Such a notion holds the future open to further experiments that might end in other ways.

Theatrical space

One of the city councillors who was known to be among the most sceptical about Practicing Democracy began his interview with us by likening forum theatre to a focus group, as one among a number of useful methodologies for recording citizen input. As he spoke about the play, he developed a more subtle analysis of what a theatre audience takes from and not just brings – to the experience. The theatre is a place where relatively affluent Vancouverites can come close to poverty and drug addicts from a safe distance but simultaneously feel the issues directly.

[Councillor:] You’re never going to look at a homeless person the same after hearing that person’s story, or a drug addicted kid or something like that. Because I can remember the previous time I saw [David Diamond present a video of a production], one of the people who was in it came and gave a talk to the group. A young woman who was a heroin addict in her teens. And I’ll always remember her, and I guess she’ll be somewhere in my thoughts as I’m thinking about these policy issues. But when you turn it into a pile of recommendations on a piece of paper, suddenly it’s just another policy report . . . Because I do talk to my business pals who decide they want to do something in the community, who start to plug in. And they just go, ‘oh, I just had no idea these things were going on in my city.’ If there were that kind of eye-opening, that heart-opening, that came out of it, then it would be more tangible. And they [his business pals] have gone on to dump money into things, get involved themselves in organizations that are dealing with these questions. But the council? You’re singing to the choir, preaching to the choir.

[G:] So if one was to make recommendations for how to redo the process, maybe the recommendation would be to actually think about prolonging the play, and showing it to different kinds of audiences, to have that kind of impact?

[C:] Well, I think the advantage of the play would be, you don’t have to get up at four thirty in the morning and have a sort of guided, go down and walk the back allies of the Downtown Eastside on your own to find out what’s going on. It’s a sort of safe place to address these issues, but still in a fairly direct way.

[G:] It’s pretty raw, yeah.

[C:] So you still get the impact, but it’s packaged in a particular way, to get into your . . . You can show up without having to, I don’t know, pick up dirty needles as you walk into the theatre. I don’t know, just a way to get you closer to the issues. (51)

In the same way, another councillor described being very ‘moved’ by the performance of Practicing Democracy that she attended, and the way that the play cut through a tendency to abstract individuals as categories and ‘difficult problems’ to be solved:
Clearly some of the people there lived, had been homeless or lived very close to it, or knew people. I mean this was stuff they were, like very close to, and obviously engaged with. And I think any time you can use art, or a play like this, somehow you get past the way we protect ourselves, the way we abstract, the way we intellectualize, the way we remove ourselves... [It’s] a really powerful thing to cut through, and make it very real. That these are real people, with very real day-to-day lives, and choices they’re making and that, like all of us, they make choices the best way anybody can to get through day-by-day. And so I think that’s the powerful thing. Like even to describe people as homeless. ‘The homeless.’ Just makes them remote. Like it’s threatening, and it’s scary, and it’s kind of difficult. Like what does one do to solve some of the problems?

Despite these councillors’ insistence on the importance empathetic identification, the ambition of forum theatre goes beyond this. It aims profoundly to disrupt existing authority structures, in the first instance by disrupting the space of conventional theatre. ‘Theatre as most of us know it... is a reflection of our society – a few people acting out a pre-determined story in the full blaze of lights while the majority sit passively in the dark and watch whatever happens. What better way to learn to challenge society than by challenging this same theatrical model?’ In forum theatre, audience members claim the authority of actors and scriptwriters. With multiple actors improvising within the same role, the grip of the original script is loosened and a world of multiplicity and possibility is enacted.

As one aspect of this intersubjective space, a type of citizenship and public sphere was modelled and created in the space of the theatre. At the most mundane, the forum was simply a site for exchanging information. At one performance, a man who intervened in one of the food scenes spoke of an ‘underground’ service in one of the more affluent downtown neighbourhoods, which involves street people using shopping carts to distribute recycled food from restaurants among themselves. None of the cast, who lived in poorer parts of the downtown, had heard of this. In another forum, a woman in need of childcare intervened to take a homeless woman home with her to learn childcare, so that they could help each other. This generated a discussion because many in the audience found this an unrealistic intervention. But when the director asked audience members whether any in the room had taken a homeless person home, several had and could speak about this experience. The forums were opportunities to learn about models and moments of active citizenship.

This was a challenging public sphere because the issues raised were difficult ones. Headlines Theatre has moved away from Boal’s original Theatre of the Oppressed model insofar as its plays do not script clear oppressors and oppressed. Each figure embodies elements of both, and the scenarios offer no clear solutions. The scenes cannot only be played differently but each scene is open to different interpretations. In Practicing Democracy, when the character of Karla, a sex worker, was shaken down on the street by a police officer, who takes the 15 dollars that she has just earnt and desperately needs, one reading is that this is a show of brute, sadistic power. But to the director: ‘In his own twisted way, that I disagree with, he’s trying to help her. He’s saying to her: “If I make your life miserable enough, you’re going to finally get it, and get off the street. Because I don’t know what to do with you anymore, I’m going to do this.”’ The complexity of the scenarios generates ‘the hard conversations’: ‘It’s the
reason that theatre is so powerful, and this kind of theatre in particular, because you freeze in the moment, and you go, “Okay, we’re not in the whole play, we’re in this two seconds now. This two seconds is the world. And you get to have the hard conversation.”

These are hard conversations because the solutions are not obvious or palatable. They do not feel good. One of the responses to the character in *Practicing Democracy* who lived in a dumpster was to leave him alone. The knowledge that he would likely die within six months was weighed against honouring his capacity to make his own choices.

And we don’t have a right to haul him out of there against his will. I don’t know, do we? I don’t have an answer to that. I don’t have an answer to that. That’s what I mean about the most powerful forum is when you don’t have the answer. And I think it takes far more courage on everybody’s part to ask the questions that we don’t have answers to, because we also might get answers that we don’t want to hear, about ourselves.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of forum theatre is that it creates an agonistic public sphere, in which people who are situated in different class and other social positions, and who experience issues very differently, engage each other directly in the space of the theatre. If properly participating in forum theatre, councillors’ business pals would not only be sitting in the audience; they would be on stage in a face-to-face dialogue with a homeless person or a ‘drug-addicted kid’. In the director’s view, one of the most powerful interventions in *Practicing Democracy* occurred when it was performed on the affluent west side of Vancouver. A woman ‘wearing more money than I earn in a month’ intervened in a scene when Karla is panhandling on the street. She told Karla that she would give her the money only if she came with her for a half-hour for a coffee to discuss making some long-term plans. The exchange escalated. The middle-class
woman persisted. Karla, homeless and desperate for money in the play and life, grew angrier and angrier, eventually telling the woman to just give her the fucking money. By this point in time, the middle-class woman was visibly shaken and turned to the director to say that she wished that she had not come up on the stage to intervene. ‘Now this woman is not evil. She is actually trying to do, from her perspective, a really positive thing. She understands that Karla needs twenty bucks right now, and she also understands that there’s a larger problem, and we have to find a way to fix it. She, however, has no idea what it is to be Karla. But isn’t that the conversation that we need to have?’ The Director’s job was to re-establish the safety of this public sphere by insisting — rightly or wrongly — that Karla was merely acting, and by reassuring the middle-class woman that her intervention was not intentionally disrespectful of Karla and also immensely productive.

It is the playfulness and safety of theatrical space that allowed the intensity of this real-life conflict to be played out. The importance of the ludic quality of theatrical space is often commented upon. The distinctive aspect of forum theatre is that the spectators join the play and the outcome of the improvisations is open-ended. This creates a profound opportunity to practise (and not simply imagine) non-violent, fully agonistic politics, surely one of the most pressing challenges for practising democracy today.

**Dialogue across spaces**

The productivity of this space of *Practicing Democracy* is precisely what got lost when the recommendation to create more opportunities for forum theatre was forwarded to (and classified as ‘C4’ by) the Vancouver Police Department. Further, we were told — off the record — that the Social Planning department recommended in spring 2005 a
‘termination grant’ to Headlines Theatre because it no longer fits the criteria devised for such funding (no doubt receiving through this process a rational ranking of a C4 or its equivalent). But the lines of communication were such that our informant knew that David ‘just went ballistic. David is like, “how could you do this?”’ We find some room for hope in the fact that the lines of communication between the Director of Headlines Theatre and City Hall allow for the recognition of this reaction, because this too is real agonistic politics.

We have written about spaces of disruption and intimate conflict as an effort to write into our social and political worlds spaces that lie beyond rational calculation. Rather than evincing a romantic yearning for life beyond bureaucratic rationality, we understand this response to be based in the decidedly non-romantic recognition that the reception of an idea decides its worth, and not vice versa. We create an audit culture as we write our world as if it were one.

Practicing Democracy was doing politics at different moments in different spaces. Its aim of making theatre into law was possibly the least successful component. This was in large part because it was a one-off event to which some members of Council had a limited commitment. As one councillor told us, it was when the project began to demand substantial financial resources in the form of staff time that Council members became divided in their support. We refuse, however, to evaluate Practicing Democracy only in terms of the goals that it set for itself: to use forum theatre to make law. We reach instead for politics that lie beyond this objective, especially the agonistic politics built into the forum theatre experience.

Legislative theatre poses the challenge of linking these moments and spaces through a vibrant civic culture. The councillors most sympathetic to Practicing Democracy nurtured this challenge by imagining staging legislative theatre right in the space of Council Chambers. In contrast to the publicity photograph, which displayed the actors at play in the emptied Council Chambers, these councillors imagined performances in which they too would be present. Closer to the experience in Rio de Janeiro, they also envisioned legislative theatre as an ongoing, iterative process, used to deepen citizen participation and dialogue. In other words, practising democracy would be lived rather than reported upon.

Boal describes a four-day workshop that he conducted on legislative theatre in Munich in 1997. He stressed to the participants that all they could construct would be a ‘pale and symbolic event, a hint of what might be that theatre form in the future, in the city of Munich or elsewhere’. On the fifth day, they performed what they had created at the Munich city hall. Among those who attended was an older woman, who relied on a cane to move around. Boal recognized her from the public lecture that he had given at the beginning of the workshop. On her way out she was among the first to come and the last to leave. She approached Boal and said,

I know that this is just a symbolic action. But it was very important for me; you have shown that this is possible. And it never crossed my mind to imagine that people, common people, people like us, could get together, make theatre about our own problems, discuss them on the stage, and then sit down and propose a new law.
Practicing Democracy was certainly more than a symbolic event; it produced many concrete recommendations for improving the lives of Vancouverites living in poverty. Though none of these recommendations were immediately taken up, it is still no small accomplishment if it put the idea of practising democracy differently into the minds of those who participated in it.

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Notes

1 Interview with David Diamond, 1 June 2004.
3 The list is very long. Employment legislation has been rewritten so that minimum wage rates have been substantially reduced for first-time workers, the minimum workday has been reduced from 4 to 2 hours, and the regulation of child labour substantially weakened. Single parents are deemed employable when their youngest child turns 3 (as opposed to 7, as in the
past), welfare rates have been reduced, and eligibility for childcare subsidies restricted. Food programmes and counselling services for inner-city schools have been drastically cut back or cancelled. Funds for social housing projects were frozen, and the Ministry for Women’s Equality was eliminated, as was core funding for women’s centres.


14 Ibid., p. 336.

15 Schechner et al., ‘Boal, city councillor’, p. 80.

16 Of course, the process began long before the workshop. The decision to explore how the city could respond to the danger being created in peoples’ day-to-day lives as a result of provincial cuts to social service programmes was made by soliciting community input. With the participation of Vancouver City Council, Headlines constructed a short list of topics and, using their community networks and media, polled 144 individuals for their first and second choices. The impacts of welfare cuts emerged as the most popular of the four possibilities. Other topics included the relationship between youth and police; the ward electoral system; and seniors and the city. Headlines Theatre raised approximately $120,000 over a 10-month period prior to the workshop, and this involved writing numerous grants to funding agencies and soliciting various community sponsors. This was necessitated in part because of Headlines’ commitment to paying workshop participants and actors a fair wage, and providing a range of social service supports to participants, some of whom were homeless and marginalized in a variety of ways.

17 Caleb Johnston was a full participant in this weeklong workshop. Subsequently, we have interviewed 7 of the other workshop participants, 3 of whom were also actors in the play, 2 members of Headlines Theatre, the ‘legislator’, 3 members of city council and one social planner.
For a detailed description of the workshop see Diamond, *Practicing Democracy*.  
Ibid.  
Ibid.


This is one moment in a series of translations. For a discussion of earlier moments of translation, including selecting stories at the workshop, and using image theatre methods to enable participants to translate their personal stories into collective ones, see Pratt and Johnston, ‘Putting play to work’.

Interview with Carrie Gallant, 30 Apr. 2004.

The large number of recommendations reflects the concern of the legislator and Headlines Theatre to deliver the full range of recommendations from the forum theatre experiences. The director of Headlines Theatre now recognizes this to be a strategic error: ‘We should have boiled it down to no more than a dozen, (in retrospect), but didn’t feel this was our role – Headlines being a conduit – not a creator. So – kathunk – this huge thing arrived. What should have happened [then] is one or two councillors should have taken it on. It required vision to sift through it all and make recommendations. This is the role of the politicians, not staff. Instead, it went to staff … who got caught in between a project that [council] voted unanimously to [support] and also, I believe, something she recognized the value of, and her own job description, which does not include initiating policy recommendations. A vacuum got created in the process’ (email communication with director of Headlines Theatre, 17 July 2005).


Email communication with the director of Headlines Theatre, 17 July 2005.


City of Vancouver, ‘Administrative report’, p. 3.


Interview with Carrie Gallant, 30 Apr. 2004.


That the fate of ongoing productions of *Practicing Democracy* should be put in the hands of the Vancouver Police Department is particularly odd, given that past productions of Headlines Theatre (e.g. *Through a clear lens*, 2001) have dealt critically with some of the practices of the VPD.

42 de Certeau, *Practice of everyday life*, p. 93; original emphasis.
46 Interview with David Diamond, 1 June 2004.
49 Interview, 11 Mar. 2005. Further, at the council meeting in May 2004 when the *Practicing Democracy* report was presented, the presentation was momentarily derailed when Councillor Ellen Woodward made an appeal for contributions to Augusto Boal’s hospital bill, accrued after he fell ill during a visit to the United States. Although this intervention was at cross-purposes with the objectives of *Practicing Democracy*, Councillor Woodward was displaying her own networks to Boal.
54 Both are examples cited in Diamond, *Practicing Democracy*.
55 Interview with David Diamond, 1 June 2004.
56 *Ibid*.
57 *Ibid*.
59 Interview with David Diamond, 1 June 2004.
61 Woolgar, ‘Marketing ideas’.
62 Schechner *et al*., *Boal, city councillor*, p. 86.