

Article 3: Forum Theatre De-mystified

At the risk of the wrath of the theatre community, I thought I would try and de-mystify Forum Theatre for you. It's certainly a key technique that we use, and something our clients ask us about. So here goes.

Forum Theatre is a term often used as a generic way of describing theatre based training or theatre in education. Invented by Augusto Boal, it is a specific form of theatre which, (for those of us who aren't theatre practitioners!) is most often used as part of a training or educational experience.

It has numerous and applications and many variations. But at its heart is its ability to hand the director's hat over to the audience. Why is this important? Well, we would argue that a brilliant theatre piece for either adults or young people is only a job half done. What makes any learning experience is for the learner to actively;

- Consider and share the issues raised
- Develop new behaviours / strategies relevant to real life
- Try them out

Forum Theatre can do all of the above. We most often use it whereby the audience re-visits a critical moment or scene from the performance and considers in detail...

- What the character(s) decided to do
- What happened as a result
- What other choices they had
- What motivated them to make that choice
- The part played by other characters / factors / emotions in influencing their choice
- What better choices could have been made
- How they could have gone about making that choice

The idea is essentially for the audience in groups to discuss these points in facilitated activity, and then for the advice to be given to the actors who then try out alternative choices / behaviours. Here people see their new / improved advice changing the outcome for the main character. It is about embedding new behaviours with the audience, driven by them. It is also, a fun, and safe way of trying out different ways of dealing with a challenging situation.

In the context of our work, we might use Forum Theatre to help students change a scene where someone gives in to peer pressure (and suffers the consequences) to when someone resists it and stays safe and well. In a training context, it can be used to share and develop practice for dealing with a difficult customer or running an appraisal. Its applications are many.

What are the benefits? Firstly, the audience feels in control of designing new ways of doing things and we are using their many years of experience combined to develop solutions. Secondly, everyone can participate, and does participate. Giving the audience control of the action ensures that even the most sceptical learner can't help but lose themselves and make a suggestion! Thirdly, it is safe. Whenever you mention role play,

most adults cringe at a memory of the embarrassment of having to stand up yourself in front of others and 'act' out your way of doing things. In this simple version of Forum Theatre, actors implement the ideas of the audience, so people know they can make a suggestion without getting up and doing it themselves. Of course, this doesn't rule out members of the audience standing up and taking the place of the actors, and when it isn't imposed, you'd be amazed how many times it happens!

As I said, it is something we use regularly, and I hope this description helps de-mystify the term for those of you who have heard it but not experienced it. At Collingwood we know how well it works as a learning tool. But if you want to know more, I suggest you read Augusto Boal's *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*. It's his idea, after all.