

The Interaction between Theatre and Modern Power with an Examination of Sexuality Study in Schooling

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ABSTRACT

The application of theatre is usually considered as powerful and special. It makes people move, embody, and reflect. But what indeed makes theatre a different tool to liberate oppression and change reality? Why does it have to be theatre? As an alternative to the studies that try to seek for the answers from theatre itself, Michel Foucault's modern power theory sheds light on a new possibility to disclose the essence and function of theatre when it is applied to solving real human issues. Qualitative research by a contemporary sociologist C. J. Pascoe about students' sexuality in a high school bridges Foucault's modern power and theatre as she defined school performances an exception in the hyper-masculine environment, which exemplified both Foucault's power theory and theatre's particularity. Hence, grounded on Pascoe's research, this article attempts to describe theatre's specialty in dismantling the ubiquitous modern power that operates in the masculine culture of a high school, with a

hope that more practitioners in education and theatre will develop awareness for bigger changes.

In 2007, C. J. Pascoe published her sociological research about hypermasculinity culture in the schooling system as the book, *Dude, You're a Fag*. Through the lens of the research site, River High, Pascoe (2007) studied how hypermasculinity was produced and reproduced among the students, faculty, and administrators. She argued that the sexuality she studied, in fact, was a public discourse that could be examined by the power relation that Foucault theorized, rather than a personal narrative (Pascoe, 2011, p. 21). This modern power relation was producing and then reproducing the hypermasculine and oppressive cultures at the school. However, Pascoe (2007) identified theatre as a means to escape from the relentless compulsive masculinity. She noted: "After watching what boys endured daily at River High, I found this dramatic performance a space of liberation and relaxation" (Pascoe, 2007, p. 81). Therefore, inspired by Pascoe's empirical research and Foucault's power theory, I argue that theatre may have the ability to make modern power operate differently. Since I agree that this modern power is everywhere and cannot be exteriorized (Foucault, 1990, p. 93), I have no intention to prove that theatre is capable of breaking down modern power and changing the world through that. Rather, I intend to go deeper into the nature of theatre to capture the different ways that it interacts with modern power, and to analyze how these interactions open the door for a certain amount of liberation from the oppression that modern power produces. In the face of the increasing discourse about engaging sexuality in schools and the performing arts world, this examination may offer some insights for the conversation and promote actual change.

This article draws from studies of both sociology and theatre disciplines. Foucault's theories regarding modern power from both *The History of Sexuality* and *Discipline and Punish* serve as the theoretical base for this article. Among his various ideas of power relations, I will focus on the concept of power fluidity, normalization, and the "technology of the body." Pascoe's empirical research on sexuality in schooling is a practical connection between modern power and

theatre. Furthermore, this article also looks into theatre-related theories and practices, covering Victor Turner's study, Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, empirical research of drama in education, as well as my personal experiences to explain theatre's capacity to utilize or dismantle the mechanism of modern power that operates in hypermasculinity.

To begin with, it is necessary to first understand the three ways modern power penetrates the hypermasculinity culture that Pascoe investigated. On the one hand, there were the non-binary and fluid power relation existing in the "fag" epithet. According to Pascoe (2007), the "fag" discourse was a way that most boys practiced to manifest their masculinity. By calling other boys "fags," they assured their own identity as being masculine and powerful (p. 60). Thus, there was no pre-determined hierarchy among the practitioners of the "fag" discourse. Anyone involved in the discourse could be labeled as "fag" at one point when they were called out; and be seen as a normal, masculine boy, if they initiated the discourse and turned someone else into "fag." The constant shifting between the subject and the object of the discourse can be explained by Foucault's (1990) theorization on power's fluidity, which breaks through the duality between the dominant and the dominated (Foucault, 1990, p. 94), and allows power to flow through all its participants.

On the other hand, it is also very clear that students at River High were pushed by the hypermasculine discourse to walk towards the norms of masculinity. Pascoe (2011) sees gender norms permeating at River High, which is presented by the "getting girls" ritual, a ritual where boys relentlessly talk, act, and compete to have sexual intercourse with girls. This ritual is believed by many boys to be an affirmation of their masculinity and mastery, and is homogenized and normalized as a part of their lives (Pascoe, 2011, p. 73). Pascoe (2011) also discovered that this process of normalization, thereafter, "reaffirmed a sexualized inequality central to the gender order at River High" (p. 73). This discovery exemplifies Foucault's (1995) depiction of normalization as an "instrument of power" (p. 184).

Consequently, the normalization transforms the students who participate in the masculinity culture into the "docile bodies" that Foucault pictured. Here comes Foucault's "micro-physics," the "technology of the body" theory, which assures that controlled bodies regulate themselves to observe the norms. According to Foucault

(1995), "Power has its principle not so much in a person as in a certain concerted distribution of bodies, surfaces, lights, gazes; in an arrangement whose internal mechanisms produce the relation in which individuals are caught up" (p. 202). This "micro-physics" mechanism can be detected from the behaviors of both boys and girls at River High. For instance, Rebeca, a lesbian student, always denied her feminine body features and claimed her masculinity. She also interacted with other girls in the way which most boys would do, such as treating a girl's outfit in a sexual way and imitating sex moves in front of a crowd (Pascoe, 2011, p. 96). Pascoe (2011) interpreted Rebeca's behavior as a means for her to win popularity and social power because she positioned and voiced her physique as part of the dominant masculine power (p. 97). In short, the realizations of power fluidity, normalization, and "micro-physics" in the schooling at River High will later serve as examples for my argument about theatre and modern power.

In the conclusion of her book, Pascoe (2007) wrote that, "Play, in this sense, is not just about fun but is a way of constructing the social world" (p. 163). Though she used the word "play" instead of "theatre," I find this quote a good starting point to examine modern power in theatre, since it is because of the playful elements that theatre matters. Admittedly, there is a broad vocabulary associated with what I just described: play, drama, performance, and each of them stands for an independent but interrelated concept. To fulfill the goal of this paper and to make it concise, I chose to go with the vocabulary "theatre" because it expresses a stronger sense of space and formation, and it comprises many essential elements from play, drama, and performance. Moreover, since I will also take theatre classes and theatre education practices into consideration in this paper, the word "theatre" is broader in the sense that it is not confined within merely a staged performance. Building on the vocabulary clarification, the following passage attempts to illustrate that theatre, including both staged performance and dramatic practices, can help its practitioners to identify the process of normalization, to challenge the mechanism of "micro-physics", and to pursue equality and liberation.

To begin with, to examine how theatre works to impact modern power, I contend that theatre needs to be seen as a form of discourse. When thinking about theatre, we probably would imagine a special space with a stage and an auditorium facing the stage. In this space,

the actors performing on stage tell a story with verbal communications, physical movements, and external aids like sets, props, and light/sound effects. On the other hand, the spectators are confined in their seats, watching, feeling, and experiencing the performance simultaneously. In this sense, it falls under the definition of a form of discourse that Foucault (1995) described as “the vehicle of a kind of incessant back-and-forth movement of forms of subjugation and schemas of knowledge” (p. 98). Apparently, theatre is a way to deliver knowledge and some truth. In the meantime, it does contain a back-and-forth movement of power, which is the power fluidity in the actor-spectator relation. Only if we see theatre as a form of discourse can we continue the discussion about the interplay between theatre and power, as Foucault (1990) noted, “Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it” (p. 101). When Pascoe (2007) was describing how shocked she was during the school musical performance, she mentioned several times that theatre was where the “fag” discourse disappeared (Pascoe, 2007, p. 78). Her observation and feeling at that night of drama proved that theatre was a form of discourse where a reality was uncovered and retold, and this form influenced the way through which modern power operated.

What makes the discourse special in theatre is that it can simultaneously exhibit the truth of life on stage and implicate the knowledge beneath the coat of “playfulness.” On the one hand, theatre is an art of mimicking reality and revealing truth. Marjorie Boulton noted that theatre is a “literature that walks and talks before our eyes, meant to be performed, ‘acted’ we might say, rather than seen as marks on paper and sights, sounds, and action in our heads” (as cited in Turner, 1982, p. 105). In this sense, theatre depicts a reality with the liveliest method—with actors embodying characters to relive events, with specific set design to represent the circumstances, and with some aesthetic choices to evoke spectators’ emotions. It is a form of discourse that invites us to open our senses and imagination to relive a story, an experience, or an emotion. Under the collaboration of all these elements, the truth or knowledge delivered by theatre can be more tangible and acceptable. On the other hand, theatre is play, in the sense of being a serious game—moving real life to an artificially crafted space, and having actors take on roles to become someone else. Far from being fake, theatre actually plays with truth from a

distance, which creates an illusion yet a mirror for the spectators to reflect on the social reality being told on stage. Turner (1982) claimed that this playfulness of theatre “fantasized reality even while it realizes fantasy. It also allows the spectator his human dignity, his right to treat all he sees in an as-if, subjunctive way” (p. 121). Therefore, the lively representation of truth and the playfulness inherited in the art form makes theatre a special place of discourse to manifest power relations.

The first way that theatre makes a difference in modern power's operation is that it cleverly makes use of power fluidity to realize an effective power exchange between the actor and the spectator. This power fluidity was described by Foucault (1990) that:

Power comes from below; that is, there is no binary and all-encompassing opposition between rulers and ruled at the root of power relations, and serving as a general matrix—no such duality extending from the top down and reacting on more and more limited groups to the very depths of the social body. (p. 94)

Moreover, Foucault (1995) also argued that beside the non-binary power relation, power could be exercised among a group of people with no exact order and be passed down from one to another (Foucault, 1995, p. 202). In theatre, similarly, if we can notice that actors and spectators are exercising power upon each other—whether it is about actors delivering knowledge to their spectators, or spectators demanding the actors to entertain them – we can then detect that there is power exercising in this relation. However, because theatre has the ability to mimic reality and evoke emotions, the power relation between the two sides becomes more complicated, and therefore sheds light on potential changes. To make it clear, it is necessary to introduce Turner's (1982) “reflexivity” theory. According to Turner (1982), reflexivity is “the ways in which a group tries to scrutinize, portray, understand, and then act on itself” (p. 75). In other words, reflexivity penetrates the barrier between the staged reality and the living reality, between the objective world that people see on stage and their subjective selves. This inherent shifting between actor and spectator, as well as the shifting between the staged performance and the reality it shadows can be viewed as a way to understand the fluidity in power relation. To describe the people under the surveillance of Panopticon system, Foucault (1995) wrote that “He is seen, but he does not see;

he is the object of information, never a subject in communication” (p. 200). Whereas in theatre, “To be reflexive is to be at once one’s own subject and direct object” (Turner, 1982, p. 100). Loacker (2013) concluded in her empirical study about Foucault’s power structure and performers’ subjectivity that performers were trained to saturate themselves in their subjective being, which resulted in their tendency to develop independency and self-governance apart from the external demands that was normalized by modern power (p. 36). In theatre, one’s subjective and objective worlds are combined together, because theatre provides a space for people to see. As a result of this possibility to see, communication and transformation outside of the discourse can be realized.

Therefore, the power fluidity that is embedded in theatre is leading to liberation and change, instead of the reproduction of oppression. If we take a look at the boys at River High who were manipulated by the hypermasculinity culture, a theatrical performance about the “fag” epithet may make a difference because it would allow the boys to see their own reality. For instance, the *Mr. Cougar* performance at River High was a contest to award the senior boys who performed the most popular skits, which usually were parodies about other school boys (Pascoe, 2007, p. 16). In a possible alternative scenario of the *Mr. Cougar*, a participant could see his life on stage, and live in his subjectivity. Thus, he might obtain different perspective to see his life, and transfer this realization from the stage to his reality. In this sense, the “fag” epithet might fall apart as the performers reach the realization and decide to claim their independence to challenge that norm.

This fluidity of power further ensures the continuous operation of power’s mechanisms. Besides recognizing that theatre invites power fluidity to realize change, it is equally helpful to recognize the role that theatre plays in resisting the mechanisms produced and sustained by modern power. According to Foucault (1995), there are three components that can be found in the mechanisms of modern power—normalization, homogeneity, and hierarchy (Foucault, 1995, p. 184). Whereas in theatre, these mechanisms may fail since theatre practices enable people’s physical and cognitive realization of the power.

The process of normalization firstly imposes an invisible training of human bodies. “Place the bodies in a little world of signals to each of which is attached a single, obligatory response” (Foucault, 1995, p. 166). In the meantime, this training of bodies is invisible. According to

Foucault (1995), “Disciplinary power, on the other hand, is exercised through its invisibility, at the same time it imposes on those whom it subjects a principle of compulsory visibility” (p. 187). The first step theatre can do to realize change is to help its practitioners acquire the awareness to identify the micro-physics of norms imprinted on their bodies. Besides the “reflexive” nature of theatre, which enables spectators to see, the playful nature of theatre also provides a protection for spectators to recognize power’s invisibility. As Pascoe (2007) pointed out in her book, “Theater as a symbolic and metaphorical space is important in this sense. It is a place where it is okay and even required to try on different characters” (p. 165). This awareness of normalization then leads to the possibility of de-mechanizing the body.

In general, when actors prepare to get into their roles, they need to get rid of some of their habits in daily behaviors, in order to imagine and embody the roles’ movements and behaviors. They need to constantly identify the signals and de-mechanize their bodies. For instance, when I was playing the role of a 12-year old filthy orphan boy in a recent school production, I found it difficult because I am a female adult actress who has adapted a set of totally different and undetectable social norms through years of “body training.” But to play the role, I had to push myself to recognize the way in which my body usually functions to fit in the norms designed for females, and then adapt the behaviors which fit in the norms for orphan boys, such as frequently wiping his nose or scratching his head. These recognitions and strategies not only made the acting more convincing, but also made me realize how normalized I was in “performing” my gender role and social status. If it was not for acting out a boy in theatre, I would never be able to experience and realize how modern power operates through normalization.

Moreover, we always use theatrical games to warm up and prepare for theatre performances. For instance, the game invented by Augusto Boal, *Invasion of the Brain*, that asks participants to walk when they hear the direction “stop” and to stop when they hear the direction “walk” is an exercise for actors to detach from their habitual thinking and movement. According to Boal (2006):

Games help enable the de-mechanisation of the body and the mind alienated by the repetitive tasks of the day-to-day,

particularly those related to work and to the economic, environmental and social conditions of those who take part in them. The body in work as in play, as well as producing stimuli, responds to those it receives, creating, in itself, a muscular mask as strong as the mask of social behavior—both of which act directly on the thought and emotions which thus become stratified. (p. 5)

This quote corresponds with Foucault's (1995) self-sustainable mechanism where its subjects internalize the "gazes" and police themselves under the surveillance (Foucault, 1995, p. 177). These theatre practices and games actually are exercising the resistance to modern power.

In addition to helping recognize and de-mechanize micro-physics, theatre also connects people with empathy, which plays a key role in dismantling hierarchy in order to resist the modern power. This empathy is essential to Boal's (1979) theory of Theatre of the Oppressed. He used the following definition: "Empathy makes us feel as if we ourselves are experiencing what is actually happening to others" (p. 35). Here, he used the expression "as if" to suggest that there are no two people who could live the exact same life, just like the ruling class would not have a chance to really live a life of the ruled class. There are always differences between individuals, and therefore empathy comes into play when we try to understand one another. This ability is indispensable for theatre practice because only if the actors empathize their characters could they really live the characters; and only if the spectators empathize with the characters could they acquire the access to make change happen. Since ancient Greek tragedy, theatre has been working to evoke empathy. Boal (1979) interpreted Aristotle's theory in his book, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, arguing that empathy enables an emotional tie that makes the spectators gain the same emotions of the characters, and therefore there is a delegation of power produced through the process (Boal, 1979, p. 102). The application of theatre in education also demonstrates its advantage for empathy-building. In the current educational context where pro-social learning is emphasized, theatre-related teaching practices such as process drama help students think deeper and more actively, see beyond their own world, and connect with the bigger society (Neelands, 2009, p. 178). Styslinger (2000) specifically argued that

drama opens the door to multiple interpretation for students, which enables students to empathize more (p. 185). This empathy, though it sounds vague and only takes place on the emotional level, creates an access where students can realize true understanding. This understanding, therefore, can break the barriers between hierarchical differentiations. When I was in the cast of an interview theatre piece about LGBTQ+ youth, I learned about some coming out stories of the interviewees. Unsurprisingly, many of them took place in a performing space, like in a play or during a poem reading. It also turned out that the sexualities of many of them were accepted by their families. I cannot quantify how much empathy is produced in theatre and how much empathy is needed to move spectators to change the reality. But my experience in theatre told me that when facing the iron wall between different groups of people, empathy, though it sounds vague and frivolous, actually works its way through and achieves change.

In the last chapter of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault (1990) wrote, "Moreover, against this power that was still new in the nineteenth century, the forces that resisted relied for support on the very thing it invested, that is, on life and man as a living being" (p. 144). On the other hand, Boal (2006) made the following statement in *The Aesthetics of the Oppressed*:

In the act of organizing human actions, they (theatres) show where we have been, where we are, and where we are going; who we are, what we feel and what we desire. For this reason we must all do theatre, to discover who we are and find out who we could become. (p. 62)

If modern power can work its way through oppression and inequality in the society, theatre, on the flip side, will work to realize changes in the power relation because it enables social practitioners to recognize themselves and their reality, and therefore to make changes happen.

Pascoe (2007) ended her book by providing practical steps to disrupt the toxic hypermasculinity and to achieve gender equality in schooling systems. She hopes to see progress in legal protections, in school policies and curriculums, from teachers and administrators' actions, as well as in safe spaces, such as "drama performances" (p. 120-123). As gender and sexuality studies are progressing, education also attempts to develop better pro-social curriculums to reduce

relevant inequities. Under this social context, more people need to be involved to make a contribution, including theatre artists. Theatre communities may provide insightful data and findings to better entail the interaction between theatre and power, and to indicate future solutions for gender and sexuality inequality.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Niu, X. (2019). The interaction between theatre and modern power with an examination of sexuality study in schooling. *ArtsPraxis*, 6 (1), 1-12.

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