A Documentary on Theater of the Oppressed Workshops

By Alexandra Campanaro

Q: What is it?

A: Theater of the Oppressed, is a form of interactive theater, originated in the late 70’s in Brazil by director Augusto Boal. Participants are invited to share with one another their personal experiences of injustice as a way to empower them and raise public discourse on the marginalized group.

- Participants act out scenes that display their injustices. There is always a protagonist (the oppressed) and antagonist (the oppressor).
- After the scene is enacted, participants in the workshop are then invited to comment on what happened.
- If the protagonist did not get what he or she wanted, and another participant thinks there might be a more effective way of responding to the oppressor he/she is asked to demonstrate and the scene is replayed.
- Everyone is potentially a performer as well as an observer.

Q: Who participated?

A: Richard J. Piatt, a Lafayette alumni, and an Assistant Professor of Visual and Performing Arts at Merrimack College, facilitated the workshops with support from Professor Deborah Byrd. Participants included young low-income parents from the Easton Community and some Women and Gender Studies students enrolled in “Single Motherhood”.

Q: Why make a documentary?

A: Making a documentary is important for several reasons.

- It allows people to see how beneficial these workshops can be to an oppressed group of people like young low income parents. For example, one participant, after getting advice from the workshop, went out and got a job and figured out how to get child care while she was working.
- It demystifies the workshop for other young low income parents showcases its benefits, and hopefully inspires them to participate as well.
- The documentary will hopefully be shown to parents in the Easton High School as well as other schools in the area.

- Prewritten skits about problems young low-income parents face were acted out by participants.
- Discussions were then facilitated afterwards to see what worked, and what didn’t.
- If someone had another approach they would be asked to step in and replace the actor.

- As participants became more comfortable, they were asked to act out the most important issues they were facing.
- Money issues was voted the most important issue and each participant used other actors to put together their scene.

- Like the prewritten skits, a discussion occurred with the group and alternative methods to deal with the issues were tried.
- These workshops allowed an oppressed group of people try out different strategies in a safe environment before going and trying them in the real world.