

*“The Envelope” is an excerpt from “Poets, Politics and Lovers,” a memoir about my travels in Latin America. It is part of a paper I gave at Humboldt State University’s “Conference 2000: Latin American Travel” in Arcata, California, an excerpt from will appear in the University’s “Conference 2000” publication. TOLA, referred to in the following excerpt below, stands for Theatre of Latin America, Inc., the non-profit production organization I founded in late 1966. TOLA was established to foster exchange in the arts between Latin America and the United States, to present more accurate images of the cultures and peoples of our hemisphere.*

*J.P.*

**The Envelope ©**  
**(Fragment from a Memoir)**

by  
Joanne Pottlitzer

The envelope from São Paulo arrived with the morning mail. This was 1971. TOLA’s office was operating out of the fourth floor of the ANTA building in New York’s Broadway theater district, above the ANTA Theatre (since renamed the Virginia Theatre) on W. 52<sup>nd</sup> Street. The envelope had no return address. Inside was a tiny piece of paper that had been torn from a larger sheet with a note scrawled in pencil in hurried handwriting, “Dear Joanne, I’m in jail. Please tell Schechner, E. Stewart, ITI, O’Neill Foundation, Dramatists Guild, etc. Send formal invitation for me to direct Fair. Tape with music apprehended. Help! Love Boal” It was from Augusto Boal.

My heart leapt into my throat. I was scared. I didn’t know what to do. Do I get involved? Would it be dangerous for me? I was frightened of being directly implicated in such a volatile political situation. Brazil’s military government, which had overthrown democratically elected officials in 1964, had been replaced by an even harsher, more repressive regime in 1968.

I had brought Boal and his Arena Theatre of São Paulo to New York in 1969, and again in 1970. Their first production, a musical, *Arena Conta Zumbi*, was highly praised by the New York critics and played to sold out houses during its brief two-week run. Written and directed by Boal, *Zumbi* was based on a story from Brazilian history during the 17<sup>th</sup> century; but it was in fact a not-so-subtly masked parody of Brazil’s political situation in the 1960s. Edu Lobo’s music, interpreted by only three musicians on stage, captured the audiences that packed into St.

Clement's Episcopal Church on West 46<sup>th</sup> Street, one of New York's most charming theatre spaces, which maintains its religious function as well with the celebration of Sunday Masses by lowering a large crystal cross.

I put the note down and went on with my normal daily work. Late in the afternoon, after struggling all day with the decision of what to do, I knew I couldn't live with myself if I didn't take some action. So I looked for the note. It was nowhere to be found. The office was large with several desks, but I was alone that day so I knew that no one else could have picked it up. I looked everywhere, even went through the wastebaskets. No note. Again I looked on all the desks, under them, behind them, under piles of papers, on the floor. Nothing. Finally I went through the wastepaper once again. At the bottom of one of the baskets I found the note, crumpled into a little ball. I had no recollection whatsoever of having done that. My subconscious fear had been even stronger than my conscious feelings. I smoothed out the little piece of paper and began making a list of people to phone.

The following day I received a letter from the manager of Boal's theater in São Paulo, saying that he had been picked up on the street ten days before on his way to rehearsal. Enclosed was a plea for help from Boal's wife, Cecilia.

I called Eugene Monick, the vicar at St. Clement's, who suggested we write a letter to the editor of *The New York Times* demanding Boal's release and that we ask well known theater people to sign it. The letter defended the artist's right to free expression and protested Boal's arrest. I began by calling Richard Schechner, whom Boal had mentioned in his note. (In 1968, shortly after the military crackdown in Brazil, I had taken Richard, then a young avant-garde director whose landmark production of *Dionysus 69* had just opened to rave reviews at the Performing Garage in Soho, on a 3-month trip to Latin America to meet with theater people. We went to Mexico, Cuba, Argentina, Chile, and Brazil. In São Paulo, we attended a musical play in a theatre where a bomb had exploded the night before, after the performance, damaging the

premises and the lighting and sound equipment. Nonetheless, the group, Teatro Oficina, had decided to continue performing. We also accepted an invitation from Boal to have lunch at his home. Being a very practical guy, he was interested in learning about the possibilities of his group's performing in New York. Boal wife, Cecilia, an Argentine actress who worked in his company, was more forthright with her feelings toward us as Americans. She didn't open her mouth during the entire time we were there.)

I read the letter to about 15 people, all of whom agreed to sign it. Others who learned of Boal's arrest wrote letters directly to the Arena Theater, which in turn passed their letters on to the relevant authorities. Among those who signed *our* letter were Richard Schechner, Harold Prince, Joe Chaikin, Robert Anderson, Alan Schneider, and Arthur Miller. When I talked to Miller, he wanted to know what else he could do. At the time he was president of the International P.E.N. Club and suggested that P.E.N. could do something as well. He also suggested I get in touch with the New York office of Amnesty International to see if Amnesty could adopt Boal as one of its official political prisoners.

We waged a large campaign on Boal's behalf: theater people, academics, congressmen and women, the World Council of Churches, Amnesty International, all took part. Only five of the fifteen signatures on our letter appeared when the *Times* published the letter on April 24, almost three weeks after we submitted it: Robert Anderson, Arthur Miller, Joseph Papp, Harold Prince, and Richard Schechner. The following day, a paraphrased version of the letter appeared in Rio's leading newspaper, *O Jornal do Brasil*, with the headline "Arthur Miller Protests for Augusto Boal." As fate -- or coincidence, or providence -- would have it, it was the day before Boal's hearing. He was released two days later on "conditional liberty" but pending a trial at a later date. (Eventually Boal and five other prisoners were acquitted.)

Several months later, when he came to New York from Europe, Boal told me that a prison guard had put his scrawled note in an envelope and mailed it to me. He also said that a

large dossier filled with letters people had written on his behalf was present at his hearing. The judge had read them all and had seen the *Jornal do Brasil* article the previous day. Among his questions to Boal was, “Isn’t Arthur Miller the one who was married to Marilyn Monroe?”

During that conversation with Boal, I was alarmed that his short-term memory was not functioning properly. He didn’t remember something of consequence I had said to him an hour or so before. I brought it to his attention. He said it was because of the electric shocks he received during the ten days he was held in solitary when nobody knew where he was. He explained that you “disappear” during those first days, so that if you die from the torture, you simply disappear permanently. Attempts are made to prevent excesses by having doctors present throughout to test your level of physical resistance.

Boal began to describe the horrible experience. That was the first time I learned about the device called the Parrot’s Perch, a pole on which a person is hung upside down by the knees, naked and blindfolded. Boal told me that he remained in that position for so long that his fingers swelled up and turned blue. They place conductor clips on various parts of your body, throw a bucket of water over you, and as they interrogate you, they apply the electric current. They told Boal they were treating him with dignity because they did not apply the current to his testicles. The current applied to other parts of his body was so strong that all the fillings fell out of his teeth. He chronicled his torture sessions in the prologue to his play, *Torquemada*.

The story is not without its humor. His torturers asked him, for example, why he had dollars in his house, which had been ransacked by the police. Boal explained that he had been paid in dollars when he and his theatre company performed in the United States. They said he was lying and applied the current. For them, dollars were only a means of money exchange. He explained further that in the United States dollars are used as normal currency, that people even buy hamburgers with dollars. More current. At one point, Boal asked them why they were doing this to him. They said, “Because when you’re out of the country, you slander Brazil.”

“How do I slander Brazil?” Boal asked them. “You say that in Brazil there’s torture.” As he hung there naked on the Parrot’s Perch, Boal started to laugh. They raised the current to the maximum.

Boal was “disappeared” for ten days, then placed in solitary confinement for a month, before being transferred to a state prison where he shared a cell with about twenty-five other political prisoners.

He told me that when the prisoners in the cellblock next to his learned that he was there, they would sing to him – at night, after lights out – popular songs from his musicals.

I would hear similar accounts about music and about humor in the mid-1990s, when Chilean artists began to relate their stories to me of their experiences during the Pinochet years.

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