

PARtake: The Journal of Performance as Research
Volume 4, Issue 1 – August 2021
ISSN: 2472-0860



Book Review of Radical Doubt: The Joker System After Boal

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Mady Schutzman. *Radical Doubt: The Joker System, After Boal*. New York and London: Routledge, 2019. pp. i +193. \$44.95 Paperback, \$160 Hardback, \$40.45 e-book.

Mady Schutzman, a long-time Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) practitioner, whose works on the form have set the gold standard for teaching and understanding TO, breaks new ground in her latest text, *Radical Doubt: The Joker System, After Boal*.

Schutzman's focus throughout the book is the role of humor as a revolutionary tool of "nonoppositional resistance" (10). In order to *practice* this intervention of humor, the book is littered with non-sequitur jokes which interrupt the narrative and theoretical arguments to present readers with a chuckle, or sometimes just to keep them on their toes.

Schutzman accurately notes in her introduction that most TO practitioners focus on the role of the Joker in the facilitation of Forum Theatre or Rainbow of Desire, two of the most practiced forms within the TO cannon. Here, Schutzman offers readers a chance to revisit an often neglected form within TO practice, The Joker Play.

The book is broken into two main sections: The Joker system on the stage (including chapters one and two), and The Joker system off the stage (chapters three through six).

In the first chapter of the book, "What a riot!", Schutzman documents the process of creating an original Joker play with a group of Latinx students in East Los Angeles between 2005 and 2006. Wrestling with the realities of racialized police violence, the students, in partnership with Schutzman, created a play in which Rodney King and Claudette Colvin confront American racism in and around the carceral state.

The script of the resulting play, *UPSET!*, is reproduced in its entirety in chapter two and includes, as is customary in a Joker Play, the active and interpretive learning the students engaged in throughout the devising process. Breaking the fourth wall and mediating the relationship between the performers and the audience, the Joker posits questions and sparks contentious debates, as well as telling jokes which serve to annotate the play through a "pedagogy of humor" (11).

The second section of the book, "The Joker system off the stage," begins with chapter three, "Being approximate: the Ganser syndrome and beyond," which probes the role that humor played in nineteenth-century psychology, focusing on the role of "approximation" as both a tool for broad Vaudevillian comedy, as well as for patients in mental institutions to engage with

doctors. Schutzman argues that by approximating and resisting “getting to the point,” both patients and comics put into question the very nature of truth and reality.

In chapter four, “What we talk about when we talk about community,” Schutzman probes the field of “pataphysics,” a “science of imaginary solutions,” (97) as a tool for understanding the liminal spaces of community. Engaging with the literary and theoretic work of Alfred Jarry, René Dumas, Gérard de Nerval, and others, Schutzman argues that “imaginary solutions are endless. And that all (practicable) solutions begin as imaginary (impracticable) ones. To view community through a pataphysical lens invites us to view community as an ongoing, collective work of art” (97).

In chapter five, “Encyclopedia of Radical Doubt,” Schutzman includes thirty-three encyclopedic entries in the fields of performance studies, physics, mathematics, language studies, digital media, philosophy, biology, astrophysics, and more, written by scholars from each specific discipline. For Schutzman, each of these entries “refer to [...] ‘radical doubt’: self-implication, the questionable nature of knowledge, the necessity of rupture (or estrangement), and an ‘outlaw’s’ point of view” (14).

In chapter six, “The Joker never dies: the world ‘as if,’” Schutzman shifts gears once again, recalling a trip to a Humor Studies conference in Krakow, Poland where she not only confronts the nature and interpretation of humor, but also comes face-to-face with her family’s own history of the Nazi ghettos, the Holocaust, and the *schlemiel*, or fool, in Jewish culture. Jumping from present reflections to questions about what Boal meant when he told us in 2002 to “have the courage to be happy,” Schutzman asks us to ponder the role of catharsis, mockery, happiness, and humor as resistance.

Finally, in her conclusion, Schutzman rejects the traditional academic “conclusion” in favor of the “inconclusive,” as the Joker system demands. Offering readers a list of ten reasons why she cannot, or possibly *should not* conclude, Schutzman tells readers that “reflecting on endings is a bit like looking over one’s shoulder to a glimpse of where to go next” (183). Arguing on insistence and moving forward, rather than concluding and looking back.

Schutzman’s book has cracked open a new world of TO that demands both practice and attention that I am eager to more deeply explore as a TO practitioner myself. This book is a must-read for anyone who engages in TO work, as well as those interested in “playing” with Bakhtian humor as political resistance and as a liminal space to imagine, “what if?”