Muse or Medusa: Empowerment and Coercion in the History of Dramatic Activism

Live performance has a profound ability to influence social behavior. Recognizing this power, theoreticians and practitioners throughout the history of Western theatre have used drama as a means to reinforce societal norms (e.g., Aeschylus and Racine), question these norms (e.g., Euripides and Moliere), and promote social change (e.g., Brecht and Boal). Yet, whenever one person attempts to influence another, a thin line arises between empowerment (i.e., enabling a person to recognize that they have control over their life and in changing it) and coercion (i.e., controlling another person’s behavior through force, manipulation or deception).¹

Today, many activist, community-based² theatre ensembles are struggling with this concern. Linda Burnham, one of the foremost scholars/practitioners within this movement,³ refers to groups like the San Francisco Mime Troupe, who go into a community with an overt agenda of change, as “a little imperialistic” (qtd. in Cohen-Cruz, Introduction 15). Robert Leonard compares theatre for social change to a dysfunctional relationship doomed for disaster or the condescending paternalism of a Henry Higgins (Leonard and Kilkelly 73). Others do not

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¹ For an origin of these definitions, see “Power, Authority, and Leadership” in the Encyclopedia of Applied Psychology and “Coercion” in the World of Sociology.

² Community-based theatre (a.k.a., grassroots theatre) is a relatively new approach to theatre production. While its defining characteristics are still muddled, practitioners by and large agree that it is theatre that is of (i.e., about the community), by (i.e., produced through a “deep interaction” between artists and community members) and for (i.e., presented in the presence of and in support of this community by a theatre ensemble that serves the community outside of the theatre) the community with the goal of building-bridges between communities. For further information, see Cohen Cruz Local 2-3, Geer 29-31, Kuftinec, Staging 37, Leonard and Kilkelly 26-27.

³ In Staging America, Sonja Kuftinec lists Linda Burnham, Robert Leonard, Jan Cohen-Cruz and Dudley Cocke as some of the leading scholars/practitioners who have contributed literature to the field of community-based theatre (208).
agree. Dudley Cocke argues that grassroots theatre is synonymous with “progressive political activism,” empowering “those with the least power in society” (36; 13). Theatre researcher Eugene Van Erven compares grassroots theatre to the “counter-cultural, radical, anti- and post-colonial, educational, and liberational theatres of the 1960s and 1970s,” maintaining that the goal of community-based theatre is to lead to the “socio-cultural empowerment of its community participants” (1-3).

On both sides of this debate, theatre ensembles use words like “empowerment,” “radicalism,” “social change,” “social justice,” and “progressive political work” to clarify their activist intent; however, these concepts are never fully defined or dissected. The result is that the major questions remain unaddressed: What does it mean for a theatre ensemble to “empower” an audience? How does this empowerment differ from coercion, or is this distinction merely in the eye of the beholder? Answering these questions is essential if activist theatres want to have a unified, well-developed mission. However, these questions are also of much weightier import. America prides herself in being a free society; yet, if a society is to be free, people must, first and foremost, possess the freedom to think. If artistic freedom of expression trumps this essential freedom, we have to ask ourselves, at what cost?

This paper examines these questions, exploring the delineation between the disparate, yet closely related faces of activism. Using Paulo Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed, as a theoretical starting point, this research suggests a three-fold distinction between empowerment and coercion. It then applies this Freirian-based model to theatre history. An analysis of activism’s role on the late medieval stage of the Chambers of Rhetoric and in the American pageantry movement of the early 1900s illustrates activism’s dual nature—when it is an empowering muse and when it is a coercive Medusa. By exploring these theoretical and
historical distinctions, this research hopes to assist theatre practitioners in better understanding activism’s double-edged nature so that if they choose to use it, they can wield it wisely.

Paulo Freire was a Brazilian educator who became one of the most internationally recognized educational theorists of the twentieth century. His life’s focus was literacy education, but his published works offer much more than a practical guide to reading: they present a radical understanding of education, with implications that cut into the very nature of human relationships. In Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Freire argues that the dominant model of education has been one of oppression, but education can and should be used as a vehicle of liberation. In this research, Freire’s final conclusions have been modified and expanded to include three necessary conditions of individual empowerment: the promotion of critical thought, positive self-worth, and an environment that offers access to the free distribution of information. What underscores all three of these characteristics is Freire’s theory on the importance of autonomy of thought. By applying this theoretical paradigm to medieval and turn of the century American theatre history, this research hopes to illustrate how certain dramatic methods empower while others coerce their audience.

4 All of Freire’s works have been published internationally, and his most important work, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, has been translated into more than twenty languages. He has been influential in educational reforms throughout the world, and in 1993 he was recommended for the Nobel Peace Prize (Freire and Macedo 26-38).

5 Freire’s basic premise can be simply summarized: oppression causes the dehumanization of people, which defaces their identity and forces them to live in “fear of freedom.” Only through a conscious choice can people choose to liberate themselves. This personal decision is induced through the praxis of dialogue, reflection and action. Once this praxis occurs, all people can join in the fight, but it must be marked by true solidarity, not false paternalism (43-66).

6 Freire’s pedagogy of the oppressed hinges upon three factors: respect for an individual’s autonomy of thought, the social class of the leader/educator, and problem-posing education (44-81). For a detailed analysis on these factors and a rationale for modifying them, see Thompson 29-37.
A common misconception about medieval drama is that the Holy Roman Church
governed all theatre, manipulating it to apostatize and frighten the populace into submission.
This is a gross generalization. In many respects, the late medieval stage was a place for diverse
activism. Because the vast majority of the medieval European populace was illiterate, oral and
visual means of communication were major resources for the spreading of ideas. As medieval
historian Gary Waite explains, “Drama, therefore, with its visual splendor and comedic turns,
was potentially one of the most captivating of means to propagate ideas” (Reformers 207).
And there is no doubt that the late medieval stage developed this power to great effect. Medieval
drama had always been a place for at least some anti-clerical sentiment, but the Reformation of
1517 caused theatre to take a divisive turn. It became a battle-ground for various religious and
sociopolitical ideas. The most striking example of this occurrence is the drama of the Chambers
of Rhetoric. The rhetoricians’ Ghent competition of 1539 is one of the most unusual examples in
the history of community-based theatre of Freire’s praxis at work. Here, moralizing plays were a
medium for the free dissemination of diverse information, which resulted in critical thought,
reflection and a social uprising.

In The Low Countries of medieval Europe, the dramatic community consisted primarily
of the Chambers of Rhetoric or Rederijkerskamers (Muir 7). These chambers were amateur
acting and literary societies that wrote and performed songs, poems, farces and allegorical
drama. They consisted of a literary leader, the “factor,” who was the salaried poet, drama
teacher and director; a board of noblemen elders; and on average, twenty or so (size ranged from
ten-one hundred) male members from the artisan and merchant classes (Waite, “Vernacular”

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7 The Feast of Fools (originating in the twelfth century) was a riotous celebration that burlesqued the roles
of the clergy and sometimes city officials as well. The Holy Roman Church tried to shut this festival down as early
as 1207 but to no avail (Vince 131). By the fifteenth century, the festival’s “biting satire” had become demonstrably
evident and church leaders fought hard to suppress the event (Waite, Reformers 143).
Unique to these groups was the dramatic competition where chambers and craft guilds throughout the region would compete for prizes (Muir 7). These events were held based around a particular question (e.g., what is the greatest consolation of mankind in the hour of death?) in which all groups had to propose an answer (Ramakers 138).8

From their inception in the early fifteenth century, the Chambers of Rhetoric wanted their art “to influence and change life” (Strietman, “The Drama” 89). However, what they wanted to influence varied with the times. In the fifteenth century, rhetorical drama was closely tied to maintaining the standard beliefs of the Roman Catholic Church. Prevalent themes included “devotion to the Virgin Mary and the seven sacraments, along with the other typical aspects of late medieval lay piety.” In addition, city fathers also used the chambers to promote civic harmony, praise the glory of their city to the higher rulers and voice the needs of the city’s populace (Waite, “Vernacular” 189). This all changed in the early 1500s when the Reformation shook the medieval world. In the 1520s and 1530s, the Chambers of Rhetoric increasingly used the dramatic arts to disturb the status quo. They became critics of social injustice and clerical abuses and helped promote reform sentiment (Waite, “Vernacular” 190).

This divisiveness is clearly seen in rhetorician drama. The Chambers of Rhetoric wrote and produced works in a wide variety of Dutch theatrical genres, including zinnespel,9

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8 Surviving plays from these competitions include those written for the 1539 Ghent competition and the Antwerp festival of 1561. Some scholars also argue that Elckerlijc (Everyman) may have also been written for a dramatic competition (Ramakers 138).

9 Zinnespel is the prototypical allegorical drama/morality play: the central character, Mankind, is on a pilgrimage that is representative of his life on earth; a battle between vice and virtue ensues; and there is also a trial in heaven. De Wellustige Mensch (1550s) by Jan van den Berghe is an example of a typical play of this genre (Ramakers 134-135).
comparatives,\textsuperscript{10} esbatemen\textsuperscript{11} and questio-disputata.\textsuperscript{12} Their most popular form, and the one most common to the dramatic competitions, was the spleen van zinne (“plays of the mind”),\textsuperscript{13} which were usually composed to persuade urbanites to side with or against an activist message (Waite, Reformers xvi).

There are seventy-nine plays (mostly spleen van zinne) known to have been written between 1520 and 1556. Of these, twenty-three address purely social issues, the remaining fifty-six are religious in nature. These fifty-six represent a diversity of religious reform movements. Twenty are pro-Catholic (many of which are still anti-clerical; thirteen of these are by Cornelis Everaert), seventeen are pro-Lutheran, ten are pro-Protestant reformist, seven are pro-Spiritualist and two are independent (Waite, Reformers 104-106). Not only was there a wide variety of religious ideas being presented on the late medieval stage, but often, these plays would take the form of religious debates, some of which would go into acute, exegetical detail. Scholar Elsa Strietman offers the example of the Anti-Anabaptist play De Menschwedringer Christo, which debates whether Jesus was born “of” or “out of” Mary (“The Drama” 91).

\textsuperscript{10}Comparatives are comparison plays, which mostly consist of the works of Cornelis Everaert (c. 1480-1556). Many of these plays are dramatic eulogies to the Virgin Mary, comparing her to “the throne of Solomon, a ship, Jerusalem and the abstract concept of clarity” (Husken 112).

\textsuperscript{11}Esbatemen\textsuperscript{11} are short comic plays similar to the French farce. Common plot lines include verbal misunderstandings, marital strife, deception, and adultery (Husken 112).

\textsuperscript{12}Questio-disputata is an allegorical disputation drama. The earliest known Dutch allegorical play (1350s) falls in this category. In Of the Winter and of the Summer, Winter and Summer conduct a debate that is later judged by Venus (Ramakers 140). This genre is very similar to the Tafelspelen plays, which were debates between two to four characters that were intended to entertain during dinner (Husken 112; Ramakers 141).

\textsuperscript{13}Spleen van zinne come in two forms (Waite, Reformers xvi). Either, it is a dramatization of biblical/mythological stories that include allegorical characters performing a prologue and epilogue, or it is an explicative play where all characters are personifications that teach a central concept (Ramakers 138; Strietman, “A Tale” 135). The latter usually makes use of a Mankind character that struggles to answer some type of question and goes in search of the answer (Ramakers 138).
Many of these works also contain rabid anticlericalism. For example, in 1534 a basketmaker, Adriaen Jacobsz, commissioned artist Peter Rippenz to paint a mural for outside of his home. This painting “was a cause of great scandal,” depicting devils in monks attire fishing for money. This mural then served as the backdrop for a chamber performance in which the actors dressed in identical attire to the devils and performed a satire against the clergy (Waite, “Vernacular” 194-195).

Some of these plays also strongly condemn social abuses. Lauris Jansz, factor for one of Harrlem’s chambers, writes numerous plays attacking injustice. For example, *A Morality Concerning the Grain* (1565) confronts grain speculation and *Most People Clamour for Peace* (1559) condemns governmental war policies (Strietman, “The Drama” 93). Cornelius Everaert’s play *Unequal Coinage* was banned due to the playwright blaming “the central government for too lax an attitude towards foreign speculators” (Husken 117), and the *Allegorical Play of the Sick City* (1535) is an anonymous work that decries the suppression of the Reformation and rulers’ hoarding of grain during food shortages in the 1530s (Waite, “Vernacular” 197-99).

The Chambers of Rhetoric not only wrote activist drama; they produced it effectively, becoming “the most important performers of popular or vernacular drama in the Low Countries.” By the 1550s, almost every city and town of the Low Countries had at least one of these chambers (some had as many as six). In addition, “their popularity is attested to by a multitude of contemporary witnesses” (Waite, *Reformers* xvi). Because these chambers were so effective, they were also a threat to the established order and began being censored as early as the 1520s (Strietman, “The Drama” 89). However, this did not stop them from producing litigious works. The most notorious of which were the plays at the 1539 festival of Ghent. Here, moralizing
plays became a medium for the dissemination of diverse information, which resulted in critical thought, reflection and a social uprising.

What is the greatest consolation of mankind in the hour of death? This was the theme of Ghent’s 1539 dramatic competition. The standard, acceptable, Catholic answer was that man’s greatest consolation is “God’s mercy towards the sinner and the Kingdom of Heaven which is granted through the death of his Son and through the sinner’s own good works,” but this is not the answer that most of the chambers gave (Strietman, “The Drama” 92). Out of the nineteen chambers that competed, three espoused a Catholic response; nine gave a Lutheran answer, two offered a compromise between these two theologies, three gave a Spiritualistic, and two were independent (Waite, Reformers 148-156).

Many of the chambers at the festival offered their responses in the form of a basic morality motif (i.e., zinnespel). For example, In Tienen’s Catholic play the main character, the young Dying Man, is on a pilgrimage, helped by the Virtues, Scriptural Sense and Figurative Proof, who are dressed as monks. The Vices, also dressed as two monks, offer Dying Man salvation if he will give them his possessions. However, the two Virtues offer Dying Man a Lantern of the Light of Charity, which reveals a banner of the crucified Christ under which is a Staff of Faith and a Breastplate of Love. With these items, Dying Man is able to fight the devil and remain “steadfast” until his final deathbed scene where he receives the sacrament of extreme unction (Waite, Reformers 149).

Other chambers used the basic format of a spleen van zinne where Mankind has been posed with a question and must search out the answer. This was the dramatic structure of Antwerp’s Lutheran play, which won the competition. In this allegory, Dying Man learns through Reason and The Law that his good works will not buy him eternal life. Searching for an
answer to salvation, he meets the Preacher of the Word who tells him that while the law shows him his sins, the gospel offers him forgiveness. Dying Man then finds that his greatest hope is in “the resurrection of the body” (Waite, Reformers 150).

A third motif used at the festival was the second type of spleen van zinne, where allegorical characters perform a prologue and epilogue that are separate from the main action of the play. For example, in Menen’s Spiritualist work the main character, Scriptural Approbation, lists a variety of answers to the festival’s question, stating that these responses “merely testify that God has blessed humanity.” He then proposes his answer: only the Holy Spirit provides ultimate consolation. This response is followed by actors dramatizing two analogous illustrations (Waite, Reformers 154)\(^\text{14}\)

The final motif used was the basic “disputation” drama. In Brussels’ Lutheran work, the play opens with a dispute between two allegorical characters: Human Understanding and Spiritual Sense. Human Understanding believes his learned books will help him on his journey to Jerusalem. Spiritual Sense argues that “he is still leaning far too much on his staff, ‘many written book,’ composed by the foolish church theologians.” Instead, Spiritual Sense tells him that he must read the Bible to find the true way. After this “debate,” there is a play within a play that illustrates how Dying Man comes to receive grace. The Vices tell Dying Man to rely on the “established ecclesiastical customs,” but this strikes him with fear. He calls upon God for help and a series of eight tableau vivants illustrate how he finds peace (Waite, Reformers 151).\(^\text{15}\)

\(^{14}\) The first illustration: A Lawbreaker must appeal to the emperor for sentencing. The Lawbreaker’s friends assure him that the emperor will be lenient because of his previous services, but the Lawbreaker is not at peace. It is only when the Lawbreaker is assured in his heart that he feels reassured. An actor then explains how “the grace spoken of in the Bible provides each sinner who fears God’s judgment with perfect peace only when the Holy Spirit gives it directly to him” (Waite, Reformers 154).

\(^{15}\) These depictions are as follows: 1) Jesus as the Living Word, 2) The Garden of Eden with God damning the serpent and proclaiming the coming of the Christ, 3) God’s promise to Abraham, 4) Christ on the cross, 5) Christ
When comparing these various plays, the dramatic formulas of the late medieval rhetoricians become markedly apparent. None of the nineteen rhetorical plays presented at the Ghent festival actually offer an argument when proposing their answer. Instead, the performance is a means to merely illustrate their response: an allegorical character blatantly states the chambers position, which is then depicted through dramatization or a stunning *tableau vivant*. Historian Robert Potter notes that this general format is not only characteristic of the Ghent plays but of Dutch drama in general. He explains that the two major techniques of Dutch drama are the use of a “visually stunning tableau at the climax of the play, and a frame play which introduces the drama and afterwards explains it, making the main action a play-within-a-play” (252). It seems that while the chambers made use of many dramatic techniques, they heavily relied upon a few marked motifs.

The plays of the 1539 Ghent festival are also didactic. The rhetoricians considered themselves educators, wanting to “influence” the populace and often considering themselves religiously inspired. In the medieval world, the basic method of education, outside of visual depictions, was the highly allegorical sermon, which was geared to instill particular religious and cultural values into the populace (Wickham 109-110). The rhetoricians employed this educational tool to great effect. The plays of the 1539 Ghent festival are all visual and dramatic vignettes that are designed to, first and foremost, proselytize and preach morality.

break open hell and binding Satan, 6) Resurrected Christ chasing Death with his cross, 7) Dying Man “receiving the mantle of Christ as a new covering” and 8) Christ at God’s right hand with Dying Man appearing before him (Waite, *Reformers* 151).

A Bruges’ chamber writes in a poem that they christened themselves the “Company of the Holy Spirit” after a white dove came fluttering into their meeting on Maundy Thursday. From that time on, “the Holy Spirit was admittedly regarded as the source of inspiration” (Husken 110-111). This image was of great significance in a medieval world where only orthodox priests were allowed to interpret the Christian scriptures. By claiming religious inspiration, these chambers were forcefully declaring that they had the same authority as the Church (Waite, *Reformers* 203).
Didactic drama is not normally considered a likely conduit for independent thought. Nevertheless, the Ghent competition is an exception. The social and religious upheaval of the early sixteenth century resulted in diverse popular religious and socio-political view-points that could be easily expressed on the dramatic stage. Instead of one domineering ideology being preached, many views were heard, and it was left up to the audience to decide which chamber’s response they liked the best. In this manner, moralizing plays became a medium for the dissemination of diverse information.

None of the plays presented at this competition “openly or, as best as can be determined, covertly, advocated rebellion against the emperor” (Waite, Reformers 197). Nevertheless, three weeks after the competition, there was a tax rebellion in Ghent. An English merchant, Richard Clough, who was at the Ghent festival, notes how “those plays was one of the prynsypall occasions of the dystrouccyon of the towne of Gannt” (qtd. in Waite, “Vernacular” 190). It seems that, at the very least, “Ghent’s population saw in the rhetorician critique of Catholic tradition and open advocacy of reform or evangelical ideas an example of opposition to traditional authorities” (Waite, Reformers 158). Or, in Freire’s words: dialogue led to reflection, which resulted in action (Pedagogy 49). Following this competition, Charles V forbade Ghentenaars from holding any other competitions or celebratory gatherings. In addition, the competition’s nineteen plays were banned, placed on Charles V’s 1540 index of forbidden books (Waite, Reformers 147-59).

The Ghent dramatic competition of 1539 is a most unusual example in theatre history of Paulo Freire’s praxis at work. Here, moralizing plays were a medium for the free dissemination of diverse information, which resulted in critical thought, reflection, and a social uprising. In this sense, it is one of the few examples that can be cited in the history of dramatic activism.
where prescriptive, “preachy” theatre has actually been a means to empowerment. In contrast, sometimes the most “empowering theatre” is, coincidentally, the most prescriptive and coercive. The American pageantry movement of the early 1900s offers numerous examples of high-minded ideals that resulted in nothing more than a theatre full of marionettes.

The American pageantry movement of the early 1900s is a “vigorous but little known” dramatic movement in the history of American theatre. Its most vocal proponent was Percy MacKaye, a director, writer, visionary and “pageant-master extraordinary,” whose theories and plays make up the bulk of the pageantry literature (Nochlin 91-93). These pageants were civic-minded, community integrated “musicals” where massive visual spectacle was integrated with dramatic performance. MacKaye explains that these works should be capable “of combining the popular appeal of an Isadora Duncan-Damrosch concert, a Sorolla exhibition, and a Maude Adams-Barrie play” (Civil 176). These masques also incorporated entire communities in theatre-making (e.g., the St. Louis masque had 7,500 citizen actors), creating a dramatic form with the potential of reaching a large, diverse audience. As such, assorted groups have used the genre to push a variety of socio-political and religious agendas such as Christian morality, patriotic allegiance, socialist idealism, women’s rights and workers’ rights (Kuftinec, Staging 28; Nochlin 92; Paterson and Watkins 29-33). Though most all of these groups believed they were creating art to empower both participants and audience members alike, the end result was often a “coercive medium” (Kuftinec, Staging 28). John Reed’s the Paterson Pageant Strike (1913) and Percy MacKaye’s New Citizenship (1915) are two such examples. A Freirian-based analysis of these two works will show that while they are drastically different in intent, they are surprisingly

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17 Though barely mentioned in many of the standard histories of Western theatre, American pageantry was an established country-wide phenomenon that had its own association (i.e., the American Pageant Association), journal and educational program (Nochlin 91-93).
similar in outcome. Both of these writers had high-minded ideals that resulted in mind-numbing drama.

The Paterson Pageant Strike (1913) is a dramatization of the 1913 silk-workers’ strike in Paterson, New Jersey. It was originally staged by the young Robert Edmond Jones, produced by the Industrial Workers of the World (I.W.W.) and performed by 1,029 of the actual Paterson workers in hopes of gaining support, raising money and increasing strikers’ morale (New York Times, “Paterson” 2). Hence, this pageant is distinctive in that it is part of the actual history of the Paterson silk-workers’ conflict.

At the end of February 1913, 25,000 silk-workers from almost 300 mills in Paterson went on strike, protesting poor working conditions, low pay and long hours. In the next few months, over three thousand picketers were arrested, with charges of inciting to riot, unlawful assembly and disturbing the peace. Two people were also killed: one striker was shot in the picket line; another man, Valentino Modestino, was shot on the steps of his house as he sat with his child. This conflict was not only volatile, it was also long, and as the months dragged on, the strikers’ food supplies and morale waned (Kornbluh 199-200).

It was at this time that the idea of the pageant first took root. Far from the grounds of Paterson, its impetus began in the mind of the wealthy New York socialite and art patroness, Mabel Dodge Luhan. In her autobiography, Luhan notes that she first met I.W.W. leader “Big

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18 Bill Haywood, one of the major leaders of the I.W.W. and a major spokesperson in the Paterson strike, explains exactly what the workers’ conditions were: They wanted “an eight hour day, abolition of the three and four loom system inboard silks, abolition of the two loom system in ribbons, and the dyers want a minimum wage of $12 a week” (qtd. in Kornbluh 204).

19 In the editorial section of the May 29, 1913, issue of The Independent, a Paterson rabbi wrote the following about the so-called “rioting” of the Paterson strikers: “They have held in check and directed an army of 25,000 men and women. Had they been preaching anarchism and violence, there would have been anarchism and violence. But the record of this strike is a remarkable one. Between 1,200 and 1,300 strikers have been arrested and jailed. Not one had a weapon” (qtd. in Kornbluh 200).
Bill” Haywood in May 1913 when he was discussing how best to bring the news of the strike to New York, as the media had determined to keep it out of the newspapers. Luhan writes that the idea just came out of her to suggest that they “bring the strike to New York.” The young writer and Harvard graduate, John Reed, was there that night and offered to write the proposed script, insisting that his buddy from Harvard, Robert Edmond Jones, stage it (Luhan 131-134). Three weeks later, on June 7, 1913, the show was performed at the old Madison Square Garden to an audience of 15,000 people, 3,800 of which were other strike workers from all over New York (New York Times, “Paterson” 2).

Based on available reviews, the most striking feature of the June performance was the strong I.W.W. presence that infiltrated every element of the show from the visual emblems, to the music, to the spoken word. Ten foot high red electric lights blazed the letters “I.W.W.” from “each side of the Madison Square tower and could be seen from miles away” (Kornbluh 201). As one reporter notes, “There were red I.W.W. emblems everywhere” (New York Times, “Paterson” 2). The I.W.W. was also the main character in the script itself. In his program notes, Reed writes that the pageant is meant to be a clash of ideologies between the I.W.W. and capitalism, between “the working class and the capitalist class” (210). All six of the play’s episodes illustrate this strong ideological stance.

The pageant opens with 1,029 men, women, and children drudgingly moving to work while muttering with discontent. It closes when these workers rush out of the factory singing “Marseillaise,” an I.W.W. song of revolt in which the entire audience is invited to join (Reed 210). The second episode then dramatizes the peaceful picketing of the strikers, which is followed by massive police brutality, rioting and the death of an innocent bystander, Modestino, who is shot by a stray bullet on his porch and dies with his child in his arms (Reed 210).
Modestino’s death is followed by a funeral re-enactment, which is performed in “somber realism,” working the audience into a “high pitch of emotion, punctuated with moans and groans and sobs” (qtd. in Nochlin 89). Luhan describes the final effect:

The actors entered at the far end of the hall, and the funeral procession marched right through it, so that for a few electric moments there was a terrible unity between all these people. They were one: the workers who had come to show their comrades what was happening across the river, and the workers who had come to see it. (134)

The next scene stages a mass I.W.W. striker’s meeting where the entire audience of 15,000 people becomes a participant, listening to I.W.W. speeches and singing I.W.W. songs (Reed 210). The fifth scene is a processional staging of the May Day parade, the “international revolutionary labor day,” where the strikers’ children are symbolically given to the “strike mothers” of other cities who will care for them during the remainder of the strike. I.W.W. leader Elizabeth Gurley Flynn “speaks to the strikers and the children, dwelling upon the solidarity of labor shown in this vividly human episode,” and Bill Haywood also addresses the actors/audience (Reed 210). The pageant ends with a final striker’s meeting where all present vote to stay on strike until their demands are won (New York Times, “Paterson” 2). This is then followed with speeches by Flynn, Tresca and Haywood (Reed 211).

The I.W.W. produced the Paterson pageant in the hopes of gaining support from its audience members and raising money for their cause (New York Times, “Paterson” 2). Though they failed in the latter, there was a strong sense that the pageant had most definitely served to

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20The pageant strike did not actually raise any money: “Despite the statements, made after the Paterson strike pageant in Madison Square Garden, that it would net $6,000 to the strike fund, the Executive Committee of the strike announced yesterday that when all expenses were paid there would be a deficit of $1,996.45.” This is due,
empower both the actors and the audience. As one Special to the New York Times writes, “The success of the Madison Square venture has given new hope to the agitator [Miss. Flynn], and fresh courage to the strikers. There was no gloomy notes at Haledon to-day” (18). Yet, this success is questionable.

The Paterson Pageant Strike had many attributes necessary for empowerment. For one, it had a strong community-based presence. The actors were actual textile workers who willingly choose to be part of the production. The producer, the I.W.W., was a league of actual labor workers who were fighting for a national working class movement (Kornbluh 1). However, this pageant lacked an essential characteristic: it did not respect participants’ autonomy of thought.

In the early 1900s the I.W.W. was a league of workers, but it was also much more: it was the ideological think-tank of many American strike movements. A popular I.W.W. slogan states, “We’re all leaders.” In the Paterson strike, Bill Haywood is quoted as saying how the strike “has no leaders” because it was “the strikers” who were in charge (qtd. in Kornbluh 204). Yet, this was not altogether true. The Paterson Pageant Strike did not treat the strikers on the stage or in the audience as leaders, capable of thinking independently of the I.W.W.; they treated them as masses that could be carried along on slogans, moving songs and powerful emotions.

This pageant “empowered” participants and audience members to continue to struggle for workers’ rights, but it did this primarily through the manipulation of emotion. By fusing the audience with the action on stage, Reed created a highly charged spectacle. The audience was not only emotionally invested in the action; they were living it as well. I.W.W. speeches and songs were carefully placed throughout the play to work the actors and audience alike into a

in part, to the fact that several thousand strikers who showed their I.W.W. cards were let in free and another thousand plus were let in at a quarter the price or less (New York Times, “Deficit” 18).
fervor of unified allegiance. This allegiance was also strengthened by the play’s grand appeal to pathos. Instead of establishing the reasons for their strike (i.e., the injustices occurring in the factories), this pageant attempted to gain support through one-sided dramatization (i.e., peaceful picketers being brutalized by a mob of angry police) and emotionally jarring images (e.g., a child lying helpless in the arms of the dying innocent bystander). While these events are certainly factual occurrences, they are also selective, designed to gain the audience’s support through emotional manipulation as oppose to a critical understanding of the historical situation. Though the Paterson Pageant Strike had the best of activist intentions, its dramatic methods warped these into a coercive production.\(^2\)

While serving a drastically different end than the Pageant Strike, Percy MacKaye’s New Citizenship is a second example of activist good intentions that went amiss. Though envisioned as an empowering dramatic spectacle, New Citizenship’s methods distorted this noble goal into a coercive dramatic form.

*New Citizenship* (1915) is a dramatized naturalization ceremony that was commissioned by the Citizenship Day Committee of New York City to be a “national ritual of American Citizenship.” It was meant to educate new citizens on what it means to be American, to “welcome and consecrate all newcomers to the vows of the American Citizenship” and to show Americans the importance of preserving international folk traditions and culture (MacKaye, *New Citizenship* 5-16). MacKaye envisioned this pageant as a “community ritual.” The staging is designed to

\(^2\) Despite all of the speeches, songs and depictions of union solidarity, the Paterson strikers did not stay unified. The strike ended on July 18, 1913, when the ribbon weavers withdrew from the strike, announcing that they were going to have private negotiations with the employers on a shop-by-shop basis. This broke up the unified front. Splitting up into three hundred separate shops, the strikers were unable to win their demands and returned to work under very similar conditions to what they were striking (Kornbluh 202).
hearken back to the Greeks and Romans, with a backdrop similar to the Roman *scaenae frons* and a circular playing space with a “civic altar” (MacKaye, *New* 28-29).

The first half of *New Citizenship* is a brief and selective American history lesson that is designed to teach all participants, but especially immigrants, the ideals upon which America is rooted. The character of Liberty calls forth national icons who deliver famous orations (i.e., Thomas Jefferson reads the Declaration of Independence, George Washington gives his farewell address, and Abraham Lincoln orates the Gettysburg Address). In addition, all participants (i.e., actors and audience) sing patriotic hymns (e.g., “My Country Tis of Thee”).

The second half of this pageant is dedicated to the naturalization of the New Citizens. In the very opening of the play, A Man (carries a flag), Woman (carries a symbol of the arts and crafts), and Child (carries a national musical instrument) enter to the music of their national hymn. The male New Citizen offers Liberty his country’s flag, dedicating his loyalty to the American flag—the flag of his “children’s Fatherland.” Once each country completes this ritual, all sing “The Hymn of the New World,” which is followed by Jefferson, Hamilton and Franklin distributing to each New Citizen his/her naturalization papers (MacKaye, *New* 64-72). The pageant wanes to a close with a speech by President Woodrow Wilson, which is then followed by Liberty blessing the New Citizens: “You who came to my altar as separate groups depart now as a community of Americans…go forth in the fellowship of a common will—the will for justice and freedom” (MacKaye, *New* 86).

MacKaye designed *New Citizenship* to “welcome and consecrate all newcomers to the vows of the American Citizenship,” while recognizing their cultural heritage and instilling into them national pride. This was not meant to be a form of cultural assimilation but a way to welcome “all world-cultures to create an American excellence: not for a national melting pot to
reduce all precious heritages to a cold puddle of shapeless ore, but for a national studio to perpetuate them in new creative forms of plastic life” (MacKaye, New 14). MacKaye clearly desired the work to be empowering; however, his methods got in the way.

Percy MacKaye was a visionary, but his methods often worked against him. The major reason for this is MacKaye’s concept of education. New Citizenship relies on famous historical speeches to educate new citizens on what it means to be American. Yet, this is a selective account, which educates more on American idealism than American history. Consequently, these new citizens are not given a diverse history (i.e., there is no free distribution of information), they are shown a filtered, one-sided viewpoint. This negates critical thought. Instead of seeing America for the complex nation that it is, full of grand ideals and great hypocrisy, New Citizens are shown only a majestic nation. Instead of being able to decide how this complex picture will affect their identity within this new land, New Citizens are told what their identity should be as they are overwhelmed with patriotic sentiment and American idealism.

John Reed’s The Paterson Pageant Strike (1913) and Percy MacKaye’s New Citizenship (1915) are two examples of activist theatre from the early twentieth century that was created with high-minded ideals but resulted in coercion. The main reason for this is simple: neither of these works respects the autonomy of human beings to think independently. Reed’s pageant manipulates the audience through slogans, hymns and sentimentality. MacKaye’s dramatic ceremony attempts to educate through, what Freire labels, “a banking system” of education that offers a one-sided picture of American history. In both cases, empowerment is a term that is easily used but much harder to apply.

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22This form of education was common during MacKaye’s time, as can be seen in the fact that New Citizenship was widely produced in the American school system in the early twentieth century (MacKaye, Caliban xxvii; New York Times, “Scene” RPA4)
What does it mean for a theatre ensemble to “empower” an audience? A Freirian-based analysis on the role of empowerment suggests that to “empower” is to promote critical thinking, positive self-worth, and an environment that offers access to multiple viewpoints. How does this empowerment differ from coercion? By applying a Freirian-based understanding of empowerment to the Chambers of Rhetoric in the Low Countries of late medieval Europe and the American pageants of John Reed and Percy MacKaye, this research demonstrates that the distinction between these opposing forces is not just a subjective determination that is based on personal ideology. Rather, there are markedly apparent reasons why certain dramatic methods empower while others coerce an audience. First, empowerment is often tied to education. The methods a society uses to teach are often the same ones it uses to empower. Therefore, it is important for contemporary activist theatre artists to discuss and reflect on their personal educational beliefs and how these interact with their art. Second, while didactic theatre does not always respect an individual’s freedom to think, it is not necessarily coercive in nature. If there are enough opinions being offered, prescriptive plays may actually be used as a means towards empowerment. Third, while contemporary community-based theatre is highly interested in the dual spectator/actor relationship, this must be used with prudence. When this line is blurred and the audience becomes emotionally part of the show, this can lend itself towards extreme emotional manipulation. Finally, best intentions do not necessarily lead to empowering theatre. If theatre wants to empower its audience, it must respect their ability to think independently. Historically, even the best intentions can go amiss when practitioners use slogans, one-sided viewpoints, and emotional manipulation to engage and empower.

Activism is a double-edged sword: it can both empower and coerce. This paper has hoped to present foundational principles and practical insight to better understand this double-
edged nature so that if artists choose to use it, they can wield it wisely. Art is powerful. Theatre artists rally for freedom of expression in their creations; yet, it must be remembered that this freedom does not stand alone. It holds hands with a society’s essential freedom to think. If it does not, then we have to wonder, why exactly are we creating theatre? Is it really to shape an audience’s thoughts and behavior, or is it, as Freire believes, to plant a seed that stimulates their own reflections to grow and flourish.
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