

*Interview with Lawrence Bogad on March 30, 2010, conducted by Emily Rozanski*

**Tell me about your background—what experiences led you to what you do now?**

I've been using the phrase "tactical performance." People talk about tactical media, tactical culture, so I've coined the phrase "tactical performance" as part of that movement. I came to it because I was an activist in high school and college, and also very interested in theatre that was done in the theatre. The kind of theatre I did ranged from the classics and Chekhov to Brecht, and I was also interested in political theatre that was done in theatrical spaces. I still am, I enjoy that, but I wanted to figure out how to merge these interests; how to use theatrical skills and dramaturgical sensibilities and techniques to help social movements express themselves and make interventions. I think there are performance skills that can be added to the tactical toolkit of social movements and creative disturbance to make what we do more effective. I'm still very interested in theatre that's done in theatre spaces, and I still do it, or I'll do performance art in galleries or other spaces. But this kind of street theatre or disruptive creativity/creative disruption is, for me, a way to merge these interests in theatre and political work—the community organizing, social movement campaigns.

**Why use art, and specifically modes of theatricality, to deal with political issues?**

Performance is all around us at all times anyway, so we might as well use it. The President is performing when he gives a speech. Corporations perform in a certain sense, when you see a corporation present its public self, be it in commercials or in white-washing their images by doing certain things in public. Performance is there, it's not a question of us choosing to use it or not. Performance is a core aspect of politics in the public sphere. The more savvy that social movements are in using performance, in making specific choices of how they perform in public, can really enhance the effectiveness of campaigns. Whether or not you're making choices, if you're doing anything in the public sphere, you are performing—you just might be performing badly by not thinking consciously about the aesthetics of what you're doing, the way you're presenting your position, the way you're presenting yourself collectively and individually. We choose costumes, we choose attitude, we choose vocabulary. We choose the way that we frame our ideological positions and our actions. These are all choices, we just may not be thinking about these choices. By being rigorous, by thinking about what works performatively, we're simply doing what politicians do. We're doing what corporations do and authorities do everyday.

I can give you a classical example. I'm working on a book, its working title is *Tactical Performance*, and I'm trying to think about how social movements in the past have either succeeded or failed to take the aesthetics of performance into account. Some of the best moments in the Civil Rights Movement, the most successful moments, were where they really, deliberately created sociodramas. They dramatized the oppression of segregation that they were trying to work against and defeat. It wasn't just going out there and telling

the truth in a very straightforward way, “segregation is bad”—that reality was not compelling enough to enough people to create a change. It was absolutely true, it just wasn’t motivating enough for people to put pressure on the government to end segregation and the Jim Crow laws. So they said, “we need to create sociodramas.” We know what’s going to happen when we test the limits of this law, we know that when we violate this unjust law—be it segregated lunch counters or not having the right to peacefully march from one town to the other. We know that we are going to break those unjust laws, and that dramatically we are going to be oppressed and attacked for doing this. To make this sociodrama more successful, these are the costumes we’re going to wear. This is how we’re going to comport ourselves. These are all chosen and rehearsed. The people in the civil rights movement absolutely rehearsed their nonviolent behavior. They absolutely were coached, and practiced how they were going to handle being attacked, to maintain nonviolence and maintain their dignity. This is backstage preparation for onstage action. When they had that discipline, that consciousness of what they were doing performatively, they scored big victories even though they were outnumbered and outgunned. They were more creative, more thoughtful, more prepared, and they outthought their opponents. They outperformed their opponents. Their sociodrama was very compelling to people in other parts of the country, who before that knew segregation was bad but didn’t really care or weren’t really motivated to get involved. That’s how these techniques can be successful against overwhelming odds. These folks were extremely brave, extremely committed, and also very smart and creative.

### **What are the traits of a good tactical performer/activist?**

A great example are the folks from the Civil Rights Movement. They were really on top of their game, and they were able to very bravely create and march into danger, but knew they had their plan and stuck to their plan. Some of them got hurt very badly, but they still executed their plan. And they won, ultimately, at great length after great sacrifice and shedding of their own blood. That’s not always what tactical performance is. I think that part of it comes down to being open minded to different techniques that other people may bring to the table. A lot of us work in affinity groups where everybody has an equal voice in making decisions, which requires being open minded to others’ creativity and other people’s ideas, and accepting a diversity of viewpoints. Then being ready to agree and move quickly on an action plan.

### **How do you choose the cause/issue that will be affected by a tactical performance?**

This is one way you can tell: when there’s a huge gap between what an authority says and what they do—you can perform that gap creatively. You can show the absurdity of the authorities if there’s a creative way to show this yawning gap between what they say they’re doing and what they’re actually doing. The Oil Enforcement Agency is an example of that. That was a group I participated in as a writer/performer, when President Bush in the State of the Union address said, “America is addicted to oil, we need to move

beyond a petroleum-based economy.” He made this statement, but then continued to have policies that continued that problem as opposed to trying to solve it. So it was just something he said, as a public relations thing, and his oil-friendly policies continued and even got worse. We created a group, the Oil Enforcement Agency, with costume uniforms and everything, and we went out and staged raids on autoshow and things like that, as if the government were actually trying to follow through on Bush’s declaration. It was absurd, but it was only absurd because the president was being so hypocritical. When we raided these places, we said, “We’re supporting the president! That’s why we’re tying climate-chaos crime scene tape around this SUV and warning everyone to stay away from it, because that’s what President Bush told us to do.” We were taking him ironically at his word. Sometimes it’s a little subtler than that, but this was such an un-subtle situation of hypocrisy that we felt we could make an intervention with a tactical performance.

Other times, there’s particularly great timing. The tacticality can come through if this is the right time for this action. Last September, I was a lead writer and editor on a Yes Men project creating a fake New York Post. The reason we did a fake New York Post on September 21, 2009, is that in New York City the next day, a UN Climate Summit was starting, all about climate change and what are we going to do about it. Most New Yorkers were probably too busy with their own lives and didn’t even know it was happening. Widely read newspapers like the New York Post were not covering that story. So we thought, let’s do the New York Post a favor, let’s create a New York Post that is all about the Climate Summit, because if they were doing the right thing then they would cover a story that was so important for New York. Not only that this important United Nations Climate Summit is happening in our fair city, but also talking about how devastating it will be for New York if we have a total climate disaster because we don’t change our policies. The water will rise, the subways will be flooded—those are things New Yorkers should know, so we’re going to do the New York Post a favor by making a copy that actually deals with these issues. We mass produced and distributed this fake New York Post.

### **In that case, your audience was the readers of the New York Post—**

It’s both. It’s readers of the New York Post—people who grab the paper as we’re giving it out for free—and then it’s people who hear about it later, because the media then covers such a naughty thing. You get a little bit of excitement by doing something that’s mildly transgressive like this—“Wow, you’re making a fake New York Post”—that gets attention. So people who don’t read the New York Post, but then the next day hear about it in another newspaper or from the news, learn about it and think about it, too. It’s a ripple effect, waves of awareness of an action.

### **What is the role of the media?**

There's an old slogan, "Sxsspeak through the media, not to the media." That's the idea of not being too reliant on how the media is going to cut and edit what you say and how they're going to present you. Try to speak through the media towards the people who are watching television or reading the newspaper: what can you get through, given that you can't control what an editor does? There are several audiences, of course. There are the people who happen to be walking by when you're doing something on the street. Then there's the mediated audience through the corporate media. You also now have this wonderful thing that you didn't have 30 years ago: Youtube, and other things that go out through the internet. There used to be, and there still is, an underground or progressive small press, but you also have Indymedia, you have Youtube, you put your video up and hopefully a lot of people hear about it and it goes viral—that's the idea.

I've done actions in a suburban place where you don't even have people walking by, you just have people driving by while you're doing a street theatre action at some corporate headquarters. It can be a bit discouraging to see people walking past you, and either the corporate media shows up or they don't. People who work for this company see what you're doing because they're going to work. Even then you'll see people driving by who don't quite get it, but they start taking pictures with their cell phone, or they're stuck in traffic so they take a little video of it. You know they're going to look at it and ponder it later at their own job, and maybe over the water cooler show it to somebody else and say, "What was this about? What were these people doing?" You can't measure that but you can predict this way that things ripple out.

I like to think of it in terms of creating an irresistible image. A dramatic image where, even if nobody quotes you verbally, even if you don't get a fair shake in the media (because you can't control that), it makes some kind of a point you want to make. A classic example, which I'll show in the workshop, is of a clown kissing a riot shield. This was a scenario where the protesters in the United Kingdom were being demonized as hell-bent on mindless violence, as opposed to actually being thoughtful, concerned citizens using their democratic rights to engage with an issue that was deadly serious. They were being presented as hooligans. To try to speak against that, we had these very playful interactions with the authorities as the Clown Army which resulted in other images, and this image of a clown kissing a riot shield. That image went all around the world. Even if we weren't quoted in any fair way, at least that image was shown which undermined this depiction of the protesters in a certain way.

**That seems like an aesthetic taken directly from traditional theatre ideals, as well as the idea of not just strategizing these actions but *rehearsing* them.**

That's right. Thinking about different scenarios, having plan A, plan B, plan C. If plan A falls through, you have something to fall back on, you have an exit strategy. Whenever people do improv games in the theatre, they've rehearsed many different possibilities so they're good at improvising—it doesn't just come out of nowhere. Any improv performer will tell you they work very hard at what they do—so why shouldn't tactical performers work hard at what they do? The stakes are very high, it's important, so you

should take it very seriously and work on your craft like with any theatre genre. If you take your stakes seriously and you prepare for different contingencies, you'll have a chance at creating a moment that's efficacious. And as you said, it comes from basic theatre values. Creating an interesting image eschewing cliché. There's a lot of cliché behavior in performance, in all art forms, and I would say also in protest. This is something you want to get away from—it undermines the efficacy of any social movement if you operate in cliché and do what's been done over and over again. It's the way we are as human beings—if I see it 10 times, I'm not that interested the 11<sup>th</sup> time, even if you have really good intentions. We used to say in the group Absurd Response, if people in protests are doing the “hey hey ho ho chant,” we would start going “hey hey, ho ho, hey hey ho ho has got to go.” Our point was, if it's literally a behavior that's forty years old, it's time to come up with something newer. Not because you don't mean well—you're totally great, your cause is excellent. But our opponents are inventive and they come up with new strategies, tactics and counter-tactics, and we need to do the same thing. They happen to be better paid than us, and their benefits are better, but nevertheless we have to be creative; we cannot be cliché or redundant. We have to be surprising and not cliché.

It's hard to achieve surprise aesthetically, as any theatre director will tell you. How can I do this in a way that's fresh? How can I make it so people who've already seen Chekhov aren't bored? And it's the same thing with a protest. Here we go again. There's 1,500 of us outside this oil refinery, and we want to show that this little refinery is causing asthma and cancer in this town. It's disgusting and needs to be shut down or altered in some way. This is a very important issue, and the way to deal with it is not the way that protest has been done for the past four years. Not because it's not important that cancer is happening and asthma is happening, but because if you want to win, it matters. Let's think backwards from winning—I'd like to win, once in a while. What's going to be effective? Let's think backwards from that goal, not just to make ourselves feel good because we've put our own anxiety and anger out there, as a steam valve, “Oh good, I feel good, I went to a protest today.” Let's actually think about what would help us to win and change the policy. Change this reality. I think that sometimes gets lost with mass protests—what's going to get our point across to people who are not already on our side? It's also good to talk to people on our side: what's going to energize and excite people on our side and not just be the same old thing?

**What does a successful action look like? What are the elements that tell you that it's going well and you're going to get your desired outcome?**

I hate to be too formulaic with this, so I'm not going to say, “this is what it looks like.” I am going to say there are some good indicators. One is if you achieve aesthetic and/or tactical surprise, if you surprise your opponents. And I don't mean shock—I want to make a distinction between shock and surprise. Nothing is shocking anymore, so I don't think people should go for shock. That's a common mistake and a dead end. But if you can playfully surprise, I think that's wonderful, though not easy to do. Not just your opponents, but if you can in a delightful way surprise the general public by doing

something that's honestly creative and surprising in that entertaining way—"I did not expect 150 Rebel Clowns to come marching in perfect rank and file around the corner just now. What is that about? That's a lot of them, and they're good at marching! Oh, now they're going all over the place and being clowns! And then they go back into rank and file and march again—I'm going to follow them around and see what they're doing!" We've had that! And then you make your point. Surprise is a good indicator that it's not cliché. You're opening up people's apertures, you're getting around the horizons of expectations that people have. I think the creation of irresistible images is wonderful. Another good sign is if you're creating a participatory space in the public space. If you're opening up a space for creative participation that's on point, that's relevant to your social movement, I think that's something great. I think people want to participate if it's not boring, if it's actually entertaining. Give a sense of the world that you want to see, not only talking about what you don't like (which is extremely important to make your critique), but also give a glimpse of the world you want to see.

**You've talked about the playful surprise, as opposed to something shocking, of course the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army—Why humor? Why use comedy?**

It's not always the right approach, it's not a universal constant thing. Then it becomes cliché, because you're robotically using this technique no matter what the context. We have to fit the technique to the context, and not the other way around. You can't just make the context work with your favorite technique. When it is the right method, to deal with the very heavy subject matter—very few people like being preached to, outside of church that they've chosen to go to out of their own free will. So when you're accusing, or pointing the finger, or being dower, that's usually a turn-off and people tune out. You may earn a moment by being playful, by being surprising, by making someone laugh or at least grin and shake their head because they can't believe what you're doing. Then you can do what we call in the theatre, "Earning a moment." You earn a moment to make your point, you don't arrogantly assume everyone wants to hear your wonderful insight. You create a moment of, "Okay, I'll give you 5 minutes to make your point," because you've done something with quality, with intention. Some people say that physiologically when you laugh it opens up your lungs, it opens up your face muscles, and that leads to an opening up of attitude. Sometimes humor is the best way to deal with heavy problems you're trying to grapple with.

**Do you ever find that using humor or comedy devalues the problem? Or makes it seem that you're not taking the issue seriously?**

It's not that you're using comedy, it's that you're using the wrong kind of comedy. If you're being glib or flip, that's a certain sub-tone of comedy, and you're being tone-deaf. If you're dealing with something like mass murder, something really terrible, and the tone of your comedy is glib; if you're lazy in your attitude and the work you've put into it—literally intellectually or creatively lazy—and you think that by just being goofy

you're going to deal with it, that's not going to work. It's not the over-arching idea that you're trying to use humor, because there's such a wide palate of humor. Oppressed people dealing with unbelievable oppressive situations have used humor as a survival mechanism in the worst contexts of slavery, etc. There's rarely a context where some kind of humor doesn't work, but we have to keep in mind the extremely broad spectrum: from the dark, black, understated grim humor that might be exactly the right thing, to this clowny, outrageous, absurd humor that's also only appropriate at certain points.

It's also important to not upstage your fellow protesters doing their own thing. For example, during the first advent of the Clown Army (London, 2003), and we were marching around having a great time with this cannon that shot pink pretzels, and we had a whole ammunition wagon filled with pink pretzels. We had a whole circus bit. At one point we came upon other protesters who were having a silent vigil, and we just quietly backed away and got out of there because we would have ruined the atmosphere that they were trying to create. We were being outrageous and raucous and ridiculous, and we realized we needed to tone it down and get out of there, since our purpose was not to disrupt someone else's event and there were plenty of places we could go. Accept the diversity of techniques and tactics and approaches.

**What has been your favorite action you created or participated in? Not necessarily the most successful, but your favorite?**

I really enjoyed when we had 150 rebel clowns in one place in Scotland to protest the G8. At certain moments it was very unwieldy and outrageous. We had no idea how many people would show up. We travelled around the UK, ten or twelve of us as a core squad, and did the recruiting thing all around the country for weeks. We would stop in a town, do a free outrageous show about the G8, and do a free two-day rebel clown training. Then we would say, "You have your group, you are the clown army here! Please bring your group on this day and time, at this intersection in Edinburgh, and we'll meet you there and have a big clown council to figure out what to do." There was this transcendent, fundamentally absurd moment when that date came in Edinburgh, and eventually there were about 150 clowns who showed up from many different towns. A battalion even showed up from Belgium. We had people from France, Germany, Spain, people who were friends of friends, acquaintances, whatever. We had this mass ridiculousness. I wouldn't say that was my favorite, but it really was quite something to behold.

We were able to swarm entire areas with "clownarchy," and we received a great deal of attention. Protesters who had a more outwardly-serious approach I think resented the fact that we got so much coverage, but we got that coverage and leveraged it to make our policy statements and critiques in this ridiculous clown voice. We were making deadly serious points about African debt relief, about the climate disaster that was approaching and the policies that were causing it, but they would be in the media with the phrase, "The clown claimed." I would be reading a manifesto as Colonel of Truth of the Clown Army, and they would cover it and cut and paste from our press release and say, "The

clown claimed” all the important things that weren’t clowny at all. And that’s what we were trying to do, is make this intervention. Now that we have your attention, here’s the problem with what’s going on. We had 150 ridiculous clowns taking over public spaces, and I think some great things came from that. You can always critique things, and I’m sure there’s something problematic about it, but there were some moments when we really did transcend the cliché interactions between protesters and police, between media and protesters. We got outside of that for a second in a good way. We developed a mantra, “Serious but not solemn.” That’s what we would say to people who didn’t appreciate what we were doing, saying, “That’s silly.” We’d tell them we’re deadly serious, just not solemn. We’re not going through the motions of cliché facial expressions in order to show how serious this is. We all know it’s deadly serious, we’re trying to do something that breaks the cliché and achieves some kind of surprise.