

“IT TAKES BRAVENESS AND MADNESS”: IMPROVISING TOGETHER TO TAKE OFF THE MASKS AND TO LET THE UNREPEATABLE EMERGE¹

“CI VUOLE CORAGGIO E FOLLIA”: IMPROVVISARE INSIEME PER TOGLIERE LE MASCHERE E FAR EMERGERE L'IRRIPETIBILE

Eleonora Zorzi

Università degli studi di Padova
eleonora.zorzi@unipd.it

Giovanni Gottardo

Università degli Studi di Siena
g.gottardo@student.unisi.it

Abstract

This contribution aims to give evidence of an experience gained and achieved in the didactic field (a case study), developed during the last school year (2021-2022), in a second year of a Vicenza lower secondary school (the Italian equivalent of a seventh-grade class). This workshop experience highlights the significant relationship - already investigated but not yet recognized enough - between theater, emotions, and awareness of oneself and others (in an inclusive dimension), and the profound bond that transversally binds teaching and performing arts, through the red thread of (individual and collective) improvisation. Through the history of this project and the narration of the results through the participants' voices, the human and profound value of the improvisational theatrical experience will be emphasized. The value being: grasping the beauty of being in the moment and learning to abandon oneself with awareness to the unrepeatable.

Il presente contributo vuole dare testimonianza di un'esperienza maturata e realizzata in ambito didattico (caso studio), sviluppatasi durante lo scorso anno scolastico (2021-2022), in una classe seconda di scuola secondaria di primo grado veneta (provincia di Vicenza). Tale esperienza laboratoriale ha permesso di mettere a fuoco la relazione significativa - già indagata ma non ancora riconosciuta abbastanza - tra teatro, emozioni e consapevolezza di sé e degli altri (in una dimensione inclusiva), e il profondo legame che trasversalmente lega didattica e arti performative, attraverso il filo rosso dell'improvvisazione (individuale e collettiva). Attraverso il racconto di tale progetto e la narrazione dei risultati attraverso le voci dei protagonisti, si giungerà a sottolineare il valore umano e profondo dell'esperienza teatrale improvvisativa: cogliere la bellezza dell'esserci e imparare ad abbandonarsi con consapevolezza all'irripetibile.

Keywords

Improvisation; Theater-education; Emotions; Case-Study; unrepeatable.

¹ Starting from a shared and common design and reasoning, it is possible to attribute the first and the last paragraphs of the paper to the first author and the second and third paragraphs to the second author.

Improvvisazione; Teatro-educazione; Emozioni; Caso-studio; irripetibile.

1. Theater and education: improvising to take off the masks

Theatrical animation is «a multi-faceted cultural movement (artistic-theatrical, pedagogical, social-political), which developed in Italy at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s» (Mamone & Miglionico, 2020; p.35). Its development led to a new way of conceiving theater both in and out of schools, both for and with children. In the wake of a transformation and a union of intentions, in 1995 a *Protocollo d'Intesa*² was built (between the Ministry of Public Education and the Italian Theater Organization) which sealed the relationship between school and theater and which through the *Indicazioni strategiche per l'utilizzo didattico delle attività teatrali*³ (MIUR, 2016/2017), confirmed to the theater the possibility of fully entering into teaching, «definitively recognizing the relationship between expressive-theatrical dynamics and the process of learning and growth of the person» (Oliva, 2016; p.2).

Theater education is usually characterized by a clear methodological proposal based on workshop activities: it is a methodological proposal that has always been present in the school context. It can be defined as a way of conducting activities using specific methods and tools, that involve participants actively and inclusively (Tosi, Rivoltella, Casolo, 2021; p.74). Workshop activities have a coherent methodology most of all because schools today are required to be flexible, responsive to emerging needs, and constantly ready for renewal: this minimal-structured methodology allows teachers and theater professionals to share and collaborate, leaving space and autonomy to students, but always aspiring to reach learning and educational goals and to be able to recognize and valorize individual potential, making each person different.

Theater education teaches individuals to participate in activities which, in turn, empowers them to engage in “real actions”, actions embedded in the sociocultural spheres within their communities, and to be active protagonists in their lives (Dewitt, Kingan, 2021; p.6-7). Furthermore, it can help budding teachers practice classroom management and develop self-reflection skills to question their own biases (Desai, 2017) and self-awareness, involving not just verbal responses but also physical ones.

The value of theater consists in being an art that is realized in the presence, here and now. It acts directly on emotions and feelings, and stimulates individuals to read within themselves holistically, making them discover the enormous potential of their humanity, allowing to re-know themselves and others (Seragnoli, Traitsis, 2014; p.2), revealing the authenticity of individuals, behind their social “masks”: theater, like teaching, is without fictions and brings voice, gesture, and use of the body to the fore in its actions (Rivoltella, 2021; p.25). Through the experience of theater creativity, it is possible to discover unknown sides of oneself, appreciate the overcoming of a limit, develop one's communication skills, and break out of one's usual patterns (Seragnoli, Traitsis, 2014; p.8).

«Teaching for creativity is not an easy option [...]. It involves confidence to improvise and take detours, to pick up unexpected learning opportunities; to live with uncertainty and to risk admitting that an idea leads nowhere» (NACCCE, 1999; p.110-111).

Through theater workshop activities, participants are scaffolded during the creative journey of self-awareness, within a collective and communitarian context (Zorzi, 2019) which is developed as a “safe creativity environment” (Weinstein, 2016). Improvisation (Bertinetto, 2016; Santi, 2010; Santi, Zorzi, 2016; Zorzi, 2020) can be considered the heart of theater-

² https://archivio.pubblica.istruzione.it/normativa/2007/allegati/all_prot1552.pdf

³ <https://www.istruzione.it/allegati/2016/Indicazionistrategiche20162017.pdf>

education workshop (Cappa, Negro, 2006; Demetrio, 2006), and the tool (maybe compass?) to move within the personal and collective discovery journeys it proposes.

Observing and respecting theater education from this perspective, a didactic intervention (case study) had been designed and developed during the last school year (2021-2022), in a second year of a Vicenza lower secondary school (the Italian equivalent of a seventh-grade class). Improvisation was posed at the center of the design of the project and of the activities: following the seven principles proposed by F. Barrett (2012)⁴, every meeting with students was imagined and (de)structured.

2. The “Middle Earth”: the case-study, between improvisation and emotions

The case study (Bassegy, 1999; Merriam, 1985) developed, wanted to investigate the effects of a theater education workshop upon the emotional, social, relational dynamics within a second year of a Vicenza lower secondary school. The class was composed of 17 students (9 females, 8 males), to which a Ukrainian student was added during the development of the project. The implementation phase of the project was preceded by a context analysis and a design phase. In the first phase of context analysis, the school referent teacher described the class as characterized by different realities and underlined the presence of a student with an Asperger profile and two students with African origins who tend to be isolated. Furthermore, the class was distinguished by the presence of small groups and by the difficulty to face educational activities with a low grade of structuration and requiring dialogue and collaboration among students. This first dialogical moment between the school referent teacher and the theater educator allowed to design and figure out the project and the different activities involved.

Seven meetings - lasting one hour - were planned during school time. Theater workshop activities were conducted by the theater educator who is the figure with the more coherent professional profile to the development of the activities itself (Cantarelli & Innocenti Malini, 2001; Mamone & Miglionico, 2020): s/he is characterized by a multifaceted and multi-

⁴ To an exhaustive and complete glance consult Barrett (2012). *Yes to the mess*. Boston, Massachusetts: Harvard Business Review Press. Here for a more clear explanation of the structure of project's design, principles will be briefly summarized (Barrett, 2012; pp.IX-XIII): 1) *Mastering the art of unlearning*; is a call to guard against the seductive power of routines because they are blocks to learning; it means to challenge oneself to explore the very edge of personal comfort level; 2) “*Yes to the mess*” - *developing affirmative competence*; what makes it possible to improvise, to adjust and fall upon a working strategy is an affirmative move, an implicit “yes” that allows to move forward even in the midst of uncertainty; what is needed is an affirmative believe that a solution exists and that something positive will emerge; 3) *Performing and experimenting simultaneously - embracing errors as a source of learning*; innovative cultures maximize learning by nurturing a mind-set of enlightened trial and error that allows to take advantage of errors to offer new insights; this involves creating a psychological comfort zone, one in which it is safe for people to talk about errors and what can be learned from them; 4) *Minimal structure, maximal autonomy - balancing freedom and constraints*; jazz band and innovative organizations create the conditions for guided autonomy; they create choice points to avoid getting weighted down with fruitless rules while also maximizing diversity, encouraging exploration and experimentation; 5) *Jamming and hanging out - learning by doing and talking*; learning and ideas for innovation take place in jam sessions, the creative equivalent of conversation in XIX century coffeehouses; they need to deliberately design for serendipity, to encourage happy accidents and unexpected discoveries, through opportunistic conversation; 6) *Taking turns soloing and supporting - followership as a noble calling*; we put so much emphasis on leadership today that we have forgotten the importance of followership, what jazz musicians call “comping”; followership - supporting others to think out loud and be their best - should be an art more fully articulated, acknowledged, and rewarded; 7) *Leadership as provocative competence - nurturing double vision*; provocative competence is a very special leadership skill that helps people break out of competency traps, and requires that leaders discipline their imagination to see a person's or group's potential even if it is not being fulfilled in that moment. It means provoking “learning vulnerability”, a moment of disquiet in which people are exploring the unfamiliar; finally provocative competence involves facilitating a reorientation.

disciplinary competence and is able to combine theater formation with the socio-pedagogical one. This professional is able to exercise a kind of “maieutic direction” (Cantarelli & Innocenti Malini, 2001), to conduct aimed to the expression and valorization of the group and its dynamics while ensuring freedom of expression, absence of judgment, and the respect of individual times (Guerra & Militello, 2011; Oliva, 2013).

The different activities were based on theater exercises and were contextualized in a “Middle Earth” between emotions and improvisation. These two dimensions are not only strictly bounded and referring to each other, but most of all live within the relationship that is the heart and the condition of their existences (Goleman, 1996; Evans, 2002; Zorzi, 2020). The relationship is at the same time the *proprium* of the theater and of the school which is characterized both by a performative aspect (Massa, 2001; Rivoltella, 2021), developed for and with an audience (spectators and students). This common matrix manifests as theater and the use of improvisation are the more effective method to feel and talk about emotions at school (Bonato, 2016).

Every meeting was (de)structured using one of the seven principles for group improvisation investigated and argued by F. Barrett (2012; it. trans. 2017): every principle was translated and declined in one or more theater exercises (Tab. 1). The activities allowed students to act in the first person and to test themselves in unexpected situations, providing assiduous moments of confrontation and debriefing to share and signify the experience itself. The proposals thus tried to organize themselves around four pedagogical nuclei typical of theater: situation, the action of the subject, relationship, and corporeality (Rivoltella, 2021). In particular, if the educational theater is recognized as having the ability to create a group and give it a voice (D'Ambrosio, 2020), through the use of improvisation an attempt has been made to go beyond this perspective, wanting to transform the class into a real community of improvisation (Zorzi, 2019; 2020).

Theater education through its practical action and its being a mode of action becomes a possibility through which the community can be formed. This training, as Formenti (2006) recalls, is intertwined with improvisation, sharing the five characteristics identified by Sparti (2005). This educational path always starts with individuals, from their stories, from the desire to communicate and be listened to, and opening to the relational dynamics of others, in the community. Through games and theater exercises, students were allowed to express themselves, to tell their stories, and to confront each other, working on a collective process (as a jazz band). Every participant shared with others their meanings connected to reality and to experiences: in this way all the material gathered and re-elaborated became common and collective heritage. The first two meetings were dedicated to creating a safe context «where diversity and fragility become shared resources, the suspended evaluation, and the error welcomed as food for thought» (Carlomagno, 2022, p.383); a place where everyone feels accepted and at ease, where every expression or small bodily gestures is considered and valorized: a community.

(Tab. 1) Theater workshop activities

Meetings	Barrett’s principles	Theater improvisational activities
1	<p>(#1) <i>Mastering the art of the unlearning</i></p> <p>The abandonment of routine, habits and customs as an occasion to open up to new possibilities and opportunities. Welcoming and paying attention to the context, surrendering to the flow and the situation.</p>	<p><i>The walks:</i> moving the body in space as a possibility of encounter and relationship with others, starting from the rediscovery of the gaze up to physical contact.</p> <p><i>The relaxation:</i> proprioceptive awareness of the body, posture and breathing.</p>

2	<p>(#6) <i>Taking turns soloing and supporting</i></p> <p>Recognition of the role and dignity of followership, in order to create spaces for the expression of others. Possibility of exercising shared and rotated leadership in the group, as a guarantee of participation, inclusion and dialogue. Group as a place where thoughts, ideas and intuitions become shared heritage.</p>	<p><i>The unleashed dance:</i> collective free movement on rhythmic music.</p> <p><i>The numbers:</i> the group must count from 1 to 20 aloud, without a predetermined order of words and without overlapping between companions. In the event of an error or overlap, the numbering restarts from one.</p> <p><i>The gestures:</i> creation, sharing, imitation and reworking of individually developed gestures starting from a music.</p>
3	<p>(#4) <i>Minimal structure, maximal autonomy</i></p> <p>The need to set limits and rules to make improvisation possible, creating an order that governs chaos and allows creativity to emerge. Minimum structure as a guarantee of freedom and expression of diversity, enhancing the indeterminacy and ambiguity of meanings.</p>	<p><i>The drawing:</i> To draw without confrontation, in silence, in pairs, on a sheet, following poorly defined instruction, the following themes-topics: the class, using two pens; the theater workshop, holding a pen together; friendship, drawing each stroke with the pen.</p> <p>(In accordance with Barrett's principle, any requests for clarification have been declined or provided by simply repeating the delivery).</p>
4	<p>(#2) <i>“Yes to the mess” - developing affirmative competence</i></p> <p>Unpredictability and inconsistency as a stimulus for exploration and discovery, in a social and collaborative dimension. Need to develop empathic competence, a common rhythm (groove).</p>	<p><i>The guide:</i> to lead a blindfolded companion into space without using words, using physical contact, avoiding collisions and clashes with other couples and the surrounding environment.</p> <p><i>The guardian angels:</i> four pupils protect their blindfolded companions from bumps and collisions with the walls, free to move and meet in space.</p>
5	<p>(#5) <i>Jamming and hanging out</i></p> <p>Spending time together as an opportunity to meet and exchange, share and help. Learning as a practical, experimental and reflective activity from a community perspective.</p>	<p><i>The house:</i> while doing the previously described activity “the guide”, the leader tells her/his companion the meaning s/he attributes to the polysemic Italian term “casa” (see home-house) and what s/he would take away from it in the event of a sudden escape.</p>
6	<p>(#3) <i>Performing and experimenting simultaneously</i></p> <p>Inseparability between thought and action and consequent acceptance of the error. Sharing a “fallibility model” where error is not only allowed but becomes an opportunity for learning and improvement for the entire group.</p>	<p><i>The mask:</i> through the choice and use of some theatrical masks, the meaning of the same in everyday life was discussed. The object metaphorically becomes a “shield”, a social performance to protect weaknesses and fragilities.</p> <p><i>The book of errors:</i> discussion about the theme of error by comparing the meaning attributed to it in the illustrated book of the same name (Luyken, 2021) with the daily experience of the group.</p>
7	<p>(#7) <i>Leadership as provocative competence</i></p> <p>Importance of the role of the leader and her/his ability to develop and work through her/his own and others' resources. Use of discord, divergence and provocation as a stimulus for breaking the routine, promoting group participation.</p>	<p><i>The scars:</i> through the illustration of a human figure, the students discussed about perfection and the concept of scar and wound. After a physical narration of the internal and external wounds of the group, the image was graphically filled with the scars of the participants, acquiring its own identity.</p>

3. “It takes braveness and madness”: the surveys and returns of the participants

The project was monitored using a sociometric test (Moreno, 1964), to investigate possible changes in the relational dynamics among students, and a notebook, a kind of participants' diaries, to understand the meanings attributed to the activities by the participants. The school referent teacher provided final feedback on the workshop, in which she actively participated, and on the dynamics of the class at the end of the intervention. From the comparison of the results of the sociometric tests, the first administered at the beginning of the project and the second at its conclusion, emerged a significant increase in the number of positive nominations among students. Moreover, at the end of the activities, the students perceived themselves as more accepted by their classmates rather than rejected. There was also an increase in the index of group cohesion, from 0.45 to 0.55; although the class cannot properly be defined as a group, the index should be higher than 1.00, the improvement testified to the evolution of the stability of the class (Reffieuna, 2003).

Although the statistical balance may have been influenced by the lack of some subjects during the survey (Northway, 1964), the teacher's feedback on the class dynamics at the end of the project seemed to confirm the results obtained. The teacher reported the birth of «an extended group in which everyone participates in free moments», even the most closed and isolated students. She also observed an improvement in scholastic performance, in her opinion due to relaxation and the fall of inhibitions that stopped teens from participating and actively intervening during the lessons. The students' notebooks witness a change, in the interior, around their sensitivity and emotionality, and in the outside, related to openness and contact with classmates. There were, even if to a lesser extent, some "dissonant voices", which attributed to the activity not a value of change and transformation but rather an extemporaneous situation typical of the workshop space. On the other hand, one girl's contribution was emblematic: «It takes braveness and madness». Certainly, the workshop required bravery to participate, to take off the mask, and to narrate oneself; but also, the madness to rely on novelty, to take the risk. Bravery and madness move and nourish the relationship, the "Middle Earth", between emotions and improvisation.

The different tools seemed to agree on the value and the positive effects that the theater education workshop, and its use of emotions and improvisation, brought to the class in terms of social and relational dynamics. The students, probably through the work on emotions and improvisation, were able to tell and narrate themselves, finding themselves more similar to each other and encouraging dynamics of choice, acceptance, and openness rather than rejection and exclusion.

4. Improvising together to let the unrepeatable emerge

«Theater can be a game, but above all, theater is an itinerary of research through invention. Discovery of what one is, towards the company and the group in which one is inserted. In this sense, making theater is a simple expressive act, a change of perspective towards the objects and people around us. Rediscovery of active doing alongside passive seeing. Theatrical action with children, whose main form is improvisation, is also a search for the meaning of theater today» (Scabia, 1972; p.39)⁵.

⁵ «Teatro può essere gioco, ma soprattutto teatro è itinerario di ricerca attraverso l'invenzione. Scoperta dunque di ciò che si è nei confronti della società e del gruppo in cui si è inseriti. In questo senso il fare teatro è un atto espressivo semplice, un mutamento di ottica nei confronti degli oggetti e delle persone che ci stanno intorno.

In every performative art such as music, dance, and theater (Bailey, 1992; Blom, Chaplin, 2000; McKnight, Scruggs, 2008) improvisation is always a product, but also a process and a procedure (Santi, 2016) developed in relation with others. This collective action event is a meshwork (Ingold, 2019; p.22) where improvisers' knowledge, aesthetic judgment, negotiation of difference, and a sense of play, circulate in the process of making collaborative theater in real-time. Inter-improvisers dynamics become, in a "real" sense, the content of collective improvisations in a way that makes its methodologies identifiable in a general way (Thomson, 2007, 1): silences and inactivity become invested with the same depth of intention as sounds do and are a constitutive element of inter-player communication within an improvisation. One of the most important criteria for successful collective improvisation (whether they are ever achieved, or even achievable) emphasizes the relationships, that are the barometer of the "well-being of the community": successful group improvisation is an environment in which everyone is listening to each other and their impulses and creating an atmosphere of dialogue together (Thomson, 2007; 4). And this listening and presence - intended as with witness, involving body, mind, soul, and energy - teaches participants to stay in the moment, in the here and now, because it is unrepeatable. Learning to be awake and aware when the unrepeatable emerges, is also a very important human and educational goal (Zorzi, Santi, 2022): it contrasts the passive disinterest facing everyday life, it contrasts the repetitiveness that becomes homologation and creates the false certainty that everything can be repeated and reproduced, also relationships. Theater education, through improvisation, focuses on the importance of the unrepeatable, which is the heart of every educator's awareness: genuine professional educators care about singular and unrepeatable features of all their students; they figure out their work as an eternal apprenticeship, and live the classroom as a laboratory, refusing the conservation and repetition of the existing state of things (Borghi, 2000; p.103; Bocci, 2021; p.93). Theater education, as in the case study here represented, becomes a significant manifestation of the awareness of diversity, which is the heart of an inclusive society and an inclusive pedagogy, in which the unrepeatable dimensions of everyone are recognized and valorized, promoting accessible and caring educational context (Santi, 2006; Tomlinson, McTighe, 2006; D'Alonzo, Monauni, 2021).

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