

EDUCATION THROUGH THEATER EQUAL OPPORTUNITY PROJECT BEING A GIRL BEING A BOY

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Abstract: Dramatic narratives give emphasis to the process of storytelling of daily life. The script or story is constructed as a dialogue between actors. The words acquire a signification through a dynamic process of communication, where narratives are written not with a pencil but with the body, not written with the mind but with *anima*. In this paper we present a phenomenological analysis of an experience conducted in a middle grade school of Italy with the proposal to analyze how boys and girls see themselves and the opposite gender and how they perceive the equal opportunity between female and masculine roles.

Keywords:

myth; female and male; theater fiction; metamorphosis; parity of gender

1 INTRODUCTION

Education through theater establishes that the properties of the dramatic action are essential for the promotion of intellectual and esthetic skills as well the sensibility, attitude and behavior conduct of human beings. Schools as an educational institution should offer to students a pedagogic ambience where the exploration and experience assure the development of human competences without pre-definite models as it happen in a traditional educational system. From the latin etymologic *educare*, intensive of *educare* meaning "bringing out" we can infer that the good education should provide the liberty of each student to the self-exploration. In general, arts offer, beyond a model, a method to explore our senses and develop unique abilities. Nevertheless, in occident sight, the artistic teaching at school is not a priority; the traditional program sets music and visual arts as a material of study at middle grade school, in primary formation it's

a secondary and complementary subject. What about theater? Equal opportunity project “Being a Boy Being a Girl” presents one example of the theater practice at school in today’s reality.

The laboratory of theater takes place in a public school of Verona. This laboratory is embraced by a project named “Bambine e bambini, ragazze e ragazzi tra letteratura arte e società” (Children, girls and boys among literature arte and society), it presents an educational project with the aim of promotion of equal opportunity between female and male in school context. It evolved out of a joint educational project encompassed by several artists (painters, writers, theater directors) and teachers. Our common interest was to understand which prejudices and stereotypes are emerging in the future generation about the equality of opportunities issue as well explore the self and group image about feminine and masculine role at the early age and adolescence.

Because school takes an important part in the social and gender education, we aim in this study to extend the theater as an art of dialogue able to identify and solve the problems of social education at school. At the same time we ought to clarify how theater entails a pedagogic instrument capable to recognize problems and act to transform. The Laboratory of Theater presents a process during which the actors (students) used a mythical personage – Tiresias- as mask to explore stories from their own lives or images about the male and female role.

We will present a solving-problem solution based in theatrical fiction that embodies a mediation process and we expect it might offer to teachers a new perspective of conflict resolution in their classes by the means of theater.

2 GENDER IDENTITY: BEING A GIRL BEING A BOY

The construction of a gender identity is related with self-image and role image at the early adolescence. This period of human evolution is characterized by a physical, cognitive and social metamorphosis, with sexual and reproductive maturation, progressively building up capacity to undertake adult behaviors and roles, which includes new competences and knowledge. It’s a “bridge stage”, where adolescents define a gender identity. In this phase parents are a referent model (Barbosa & Costa, 2001/2002) but new personages start their influence in a remarkable manner. In nowadays context, this construction process is influenced not only by the parents and pairs, but also by media and cyber media (Frois, Moreira & Stengel, 2011). The idealization of a female or male role is connected with the image transmitted by media in particular television, internet, video games and cellphones (Levy, 1999; Damasceno *et al.* 2006; Pelligrini, 2006; Rizzini *et al.* 2005). This contemporaneous panorama is largely complex: if a few decades ago we could identify two main protagonist in the construction of an identity of gender (parents and pairs) today’s reality presents a multiplications of “electronic personages” that take an essential part in this process. The gender identity is more than ever a social construction (Barbosa, Matos & Costa, 2011) because of globalization phenomenon.

Connell (2002) notion of “gender regimes” states that in the social institution such as a school, workplace or even a street, gender relations are established in conformation with political and cultural contexts. According with this “regime” some behaviors are expected, for example, women are expected to take up low salary or part time work, in order to accomplish other gender duties such as the household.

A recent study, about publicity and role gender, illustrates an Italian cultural structure that underlines women beauty (thin, young and blond) and fancy clothes; on the subject of professional ambience women are mainly at home and men in public spaces, the role of housekeeper was 100% for women and men were the protagonist in outside works; directive professional roles were in major representation for men and instead women were mostly a depend worker (Panarese, 2012).

At 2008 European commission presented a program of marketing and publicity for parity of gender, in this protocol publicity is considered a irrefutable influence in human behavior. For this reason measures against gender stereotypes should be enterprises by all European countries, in a way that children might be educated without subliminal gender discrimination. In ranking of parity issue Italy is on the last position in Europe (Word Economic Forum, 2007 cit. Zancacchi, 2012).

In order to solve the parity of gender problems the Department of Parity of the Italian Govern in the last years is implementing several measures that include training courses, financial support for project and revision of legislation.

3 THEATER AS AN EDUCATIONAL MODEL

Theater as a mimesis of life has always motivated the interest of educational science and researchers on this field. It is being explored mainly from the beginning of the twentieth century, at least in what concerns to the specular use of theater in nowadays. These experimental and innovative researches are, nonetheless, based in a millenary tradition as the Classic Greek Theater. The instruments of theater are being operated in several areas as a mean to explain other notions or to develop new ideas. Because the academic boundaries of matters tend to disappear with the new academic structure, researchers from all fields have searched in other subject’s new conception as it happen with theater and pedagogy. One recognizable example is the notion of role playing. Role playing is a base of actor’s work but at the same time presents, to the researchers in pedagogy and psychology, an innate behavior that human being perform in order to learn the cultural and social environment and to interact with it.

The notion of play presents a first approach to the pedagogy of theater; we can speak about play as activity for amusement or recreation, or as a dramatic piece; or even as a dramatic performance. The experimentation and exploration of dramatic performance is strictly connected with the ludic perspective of the game. For Winnicott (1971) when individuals play a game they show a modality of acting in reality. When you play you use symbols and signs to build a cultural

matrix that withstand life narratives. In this process creativity is crucial because presents our perception of the world and how we interact with it. The author stands that creativity activity is associated with the research of the self and learning process. Theater offers a space and time where creativity may be developed. Nevertheless this fact, bring into school theater, it was not immediately as it happen with other arts (for example music and visual arts).

By 1929 Walter Benjamin's structured the "Program for a Proletarian Children's Theater" as an answer to the hazardous educational system in the first decades of the twentieth century. Benjamin states that the gestural and creative expression of a child is proportioned to receptive stimulation, because of that is important to develop these abilities in the different forms of expression including theater.

In Italy, if we talk about theater at school we cannot pass by without considering the experimental experiences made by 70's where several authors and theater groups proposed theater for teenagers as a pedagogic activity. Bartolucci (1972) in his book *Il teatro dei ragazzi* introduces different experiences made all over Italy by 1969 and 1970. At this time, theater was in a revolutionary stage, and all over the world, projects and theater laboratories were increasing and creating inflammatory experiences with social ends. One denotable experience in Italian school was embraced by Franco Passatore. The author performed a polemic tour in Torino's school with the comedy *Ma che storia è questa?* (What is this history?). The show presented an ironic and polemic performance about the methodologies used in History teaching, on behalf of it Passatore is criticized by the teachers and this event mark the beginning of internship collaboration between the author and the teachers from the *Movimento di cooperazione Educativa - MCE* (Movement of Cooperative Education) (Pontremoli, 2005). The cooperation between Passatore and teachers aimed the promotion of a new pedagogic model by using an innovative and creative methodology at school. The new pedagogic instruments were: the research and free expression of each student in the class, the objective was the awareness of the creative potential of each student inside of an environment that he is invited to transforme (Pontremoli, 2005). At Modena's school Passatore & Destefanis (1972) present their work as a "Theater of Liberty of Expression". They explain that: "theater underlines the possibility of man to do the theater of himself" (p.57). The authors stipulated the conditions to introduce the theater at school, they say "it's essential the total liberty of expression at school, a permanent ludic relationship as possibility of real projection in the relationship and behavior of the educator, considering his function of constant animator of knowledge". Another experience was proposed by Scabia in *Teatrino di Corso Taranto*. The author strongly influenced by the social and political theater creates his laboratory in a poor and precarious quartier of Torino. He wanted to show the daily life of the young students/actors, making visible the social problems of the quartier. The idea was bring into school the outside reality (Bartolucci, 1972).

At the end of the 80's the enthusiastic movement starts a progressive decrease.

The innovative methodology is organised by the school and the gradual acquisition of competences in theater and communication field by the teachers gives place to role confusion between teachers and professionals of theater (Pontremoli, 2005). Theater is coached by teachers at school as a complementary activity. This reality is not that different from today's. The theater, for the students, was and still it is organized as after school activity. The main part of these laboratories (as ours) is support from political and social institutions with social prevention or pedagogic objectives (Caredda, 2011; Muscarello & Melano, 2000).

4 METHODS

The methodological procedures followed a qualitative enquiry through phenomenological and hermeneutic approach using theatrical techniques in the practical application and group intervention. In arts studies, qualitative methodology is preferred by many researchers because founds in the personal and artistic experience an essential instrument to interpretation (Davis, 2010; Levine, 2005), respecting the individual and contextual territories (Giorgi, 2002). In practical terms this attitude underlines the observation process by listening, relating and interpreting (Berrios & Nydia, 2006). This methodological option gives prominence to the process instead of the results, by describing and clarifying the experience and reflecting over the lived experience. According with this methods we used as support material and instruments for data collection interviews to the participants, video and a diary fulfilled by an external observator and the theater director.

4.1.PARTICIPANTS

Twenty young students, six boys and fourteen girls, between twelve and fourteen years old took part in this study. All participants were Italian from Verona city. Similar conditions concerning family background, social context and financial situation, were verified. Teachers informed students about the laboratory of theater, advising that there was a limit up to maximum 20 participants. The participants proceed their inscription in a voluntary mode. We adopted the criteria of precedence in inscription form because of the innumerous applying form we received. Data were collected during the laboratory, over a period of 7 months, planned in 20 sessions of 2 hours each.

4.2 RESEARCH DESIGN

We divided the laboratory in three stages: 1) exploration of Improvisation Theater; 2) performing the myth and explore ideas and images about the theme; and 3) explore theater fiction as a mean to achieve solving- problem solutions. The students were informed about the laboratory of theater at school but unknowing the main subject they were dealing in this laboratory. This information was revealed at the end of first stage of work. As follows we expected to enterprise a first stage observing the spontaneous behavior and performances. The study

attempted to deal with participants personal point of view about the subjects based in self exploration and group forum.

This laboratory followed the techniques of Playback Theater and Improvisation Theater developed from the Spontaneous Theater of Moreno (Moreno, 1983). The improvisation as a dramatic tool implies performing a role, constructed by spontaneous behavior, this means that there isn't a pre-definite script since is the actor's work of improvisation that creates his personage and consequently the dramatic action and text. Also Playback Theater is a form of theatrical improvisation in which people (normally from the audience) express real events from their lives where the director has the role of mediation between the audience and the actors (Salas, 1993).

5 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In line with the research design of the study, the results were analyzed along the process. This procedures allow us to assist theater director and researcher in the interpretative framework for each participant and each gender. The three stages of the laboratory are described in the following topics.

5.1 FIRST STAGE: PERFORMING STEREOTYPES

There was a recognized rivalry from the beginning between girls and boys. Since the first day boys instinctively separated themselves from girls. On the first stage it was presented to the students one first approach to the subject with several spontaneous and improvisation exercises. From each which we asked a dramatic performance of their daily life. We proceed dividing girls from boys, this allows us to observe how today's boys and girls see themselves and which roles they (imagine or really) perform every day. Both groups presented stereotypes behavior: girls do shopping, hairdressing, talk to cellphone with other female friends and boys play videogames and football. We can say that the image they presented from the female and male role is a reproduction of a culture structure and social environment in which they live. Also we could see that the main part of actions performed by girls where in "closed spaces" as house, shopping center, hairdresser on the opposite the boys action's where performed mainly in open spaces "piazza" (Main Square).

At the end of this stage we revealed the main objective of the laboratory and interviewed the students in order to collect their ideas about female and male role. Girls expressed the following ideas: "We have to take care of our beauty [...] Men have more free time while women have to do housework [...] We are more sensible, boys don't know how to talk to us, sometimes they heart our felling and don't even seem to know or care [...] girls preserve an intimacy world, for example, boys cannot have a diary it's a girl thing [...] boys try to be stuff but they aren't [...] boys think only to football [...]". On the other hand boys stated that: "When we discuss with other boys we are more aggressive but it's a way to solve everything in a short time, but girls when they fight it's a long fight maybe don't even talk for a life [...]"

girls are more sensible than boys [...] girls cry a lot, we are more strong [...] girls only think new clothes, make-up, they are fixed into beauty [...]”.

Several studies confirm some of this stereotypes notions expressed by the participants, for example, the female preoccupation about the body image in comparison with male (Cash & Brown, 1989; Lerner & Jovanovic, 1990; Duncan *et al.* 1985) instead in the male body image persists the idea of a robust body (Fallon, 1990) inspired to the athletic Greek profile (Barbosa *et al.*, 2011).

On the topic of the social and professional role girls expressed the aspiration to become doctor, teacher, cooker, journalist and lawyer on the opposite boys answered biologist, mechanic and actor. It is, in a certain point, an old question this one of gender, on this stage we could see how stereotypes resists crossing the time, even if today's European women and men seem to develop similar activities in the social, professional and familiar environment. According with Gonçalves and Coimbra (1994/95) parents expectations, concerning to the female and masculine roles, influences the future professional activity of boys and girls. The social practices differ according with the sexual difference, this are operated in a crystallization process where traditional roles are stipulated. The authors explain that to girls there's an expectation to execute roles in the "service" professional area and to boys the expectations are in leadership field and in professions with a high social relevance. Even if today's women have higher expectations regarding their professional activity, including performing professions that before were characteristic of a male, we can say that persist the stereotype of the housekeeper as a female activity and this it might be related with the social education of children.

5.2 SECOND STAGE: TIRESIAS AS MASK

In a second stage we proposed the analysis of the mythological personage Tiresias and the construction of a dramatic performance. We choose a particular episode of Tiresias life, his sexual metamorphosis. It was given total liberty in the construction of the dramatic performance including changing mythological text. The only rule was to respect the action of the personage (Tiresias metamorphosis in girl and boy). The objective was to use Tiresias as a mask where both sex could perform the metamorphosis scene.

In *Biblioteca* of Apollodoro we can read the different versions to the blindness of Tiresias. The famous grammatik and erudite tells: “[...] Tiresias, a son of Everes and nymph Chariclo, belonged to the ancient family of Udaeus of Sparta [...] from his blindness and his prophetic abilities we can find several versions. Some say that his blindness has caused by the fact that he had revealed to men things which, according to the will of the gods, they ought not to know. Pherecydes however says that Athena had blinded him . [...] he sees her naked. Therefore she touched his eyes with her hands and blinded him” (Callimaco. Lav. Pall. 57-133 cit. Apollodoro, 1995, p.309). For our laboratory we choose another version that accounts Tiresias blindness in the following manner: “According with Hesiod,

Tiresias saw on Mount Cyllene in Arcadia a male and a female serpent together, he struck them and himself was metamorphosed into a woman” (Apollodoro, 1995, p.95). In Eustazio e Tzete version the scene occurs in Cythaeron, in Boeotia, and says: “Tiresias became woman as cause of killing the female serpent and seven years later when he again saw two serpents and killed the male serpent become man.” (Tzetze, Schol ad Lyc., 683; Eustazio Ad Homeri Od., 10, 492 cit. Apollodoro , 1995, p.310). Was this episode of Tiresias life’s that made of him the only one that could reply to Zeus and Hera discussion: “Once Zeus and Hera, when they were disputing regarding to whether a man or a woman had more sexual enjoyments, they mentioned the problematic to Tiresias, who declared, dividing in ten the pleasures of sex, men could pleaser one and women nine. Because of this answer, Hera blinded him, but Zeus gave him the power of prophecy” (Apollodoro, 1995, p.95).

We proposed several exercises where the students could perform the “metamorphosis”, starting from nature to animal and arriving to the metamorphosis of Tiresias. We expected with this practice to offer an experience that could decrease the constantly argues that they were performing from the first stage, that students had formulated as: “what is better being a girl or being a boy?”. We also projected that our personage could help to formulate a new perspective from female and male stereotypes that emerged in the first stage. But the effect was the opposite. To boys and girls this was the opportunity to intensive their performing stereotypes using the body language. The war of sexes was declared anticipating the discussion between Zeus and Hera.

The tragic myth became a paradigm in the analyses of the adventures of the legendary personage Tiresias. Vernant (1979) argues that because the antagonism between mythic pass and the present, the protagonist is no longer a model but an object of contestant. To Vernant tragedy in the mythic tradition is managed with the goal of formulate problems that have no solution. For that so, with the analyses of a mythological tragedy we could only aim to achieve a pedagogic lesson, thus we formulate the question: what did Tiresias to receive such punishment? Rocco (2007) states that the metamorphosis of Tiresias can offer an interpretation as a key of Eco critics, the author says that the behavior of Tiresias is an aggression to the nature and because of that he is punished with the sexual transformation, he clogged a reproduction act and consequently nature cycle of survival, the essential law of nature: the regeneration. Another answer to our question includes a symbolic analysis of the sign “serpent”. From the many symbolic significant of the serpent we extract the transformation/metamorphosis and knowledge. Tiresias became “the one that knows” after submit himself to a metamorphosis process.

At this point of work we searched for a theatric fiction where we could discuss with the students the punishment of Tiresias and perform solving problem solutions.

5.3 THIRD STAGE: ASKING FOR SOLUTIONS IN MYTHOLOGICAL TEXT

One property of theater is to make visible one event; in this process what actors do is a communication to the public that allow the knowledge of an event or fact. Thus we constructed a theater structure based in the concept of "fiction". Sala (2003, p.112) writes: "Fiction becomes a construction that allows the knowledge [...]". The author explains that when you construct a story you are immediately conducted to words and inside of words there's our desire, images, sensation and emotions. Sala continues "[...] the identification with perception and sensation, the transformation of those in theater and after in words, allows the construction of stories through words and fiction that can provide another experience to the self and collective stories [...]" (p.113).

Accordingly with these notions we decided that as an alternative to Improvisation Theater techniques, to operate re-creating a theater fiction based in Aristophanes comedies *The Wasps* and *The Frogs*. In *The Wasps* the author describes a *home court* session prepared by Bdelycleon and his father Philocleon to their dog. In *The Frogs*, the comedy tells the conflict between Euripides e Aeschylus about who was the better tragedy writer, to solve the question a court is concocted, with Dionysius as judge and a long discuss is made till the final decision. Inspired in these two texts we created a court with the Greek Gods as lawyer from Zeus and Hera. The Olympic Gods could say if they agreed or disagreed with Zeus or Hera. To implement our court we used the techniques of Playback Theater, we made Gods spectators that could intervene and give their opinion. We asked Zeus and Hera to reproduce the discussion that had performed and to present this argument to a court where everyone could ask permission to speak in the role of a Greek God. The Gods discussed for all session. There was an evident conflict between girls and boys. So we planned with the students that the scene where Zeus e Hera argued would be about this conflict, as Zeus (and all boys) wanted to tell how great were men and Hera (and all girls) how marvelous were women. The after day again was asked to discuss since the court hadn't yet found a solution. At the third session actors began to reveal a saturation regarding to the role that they had built, the initial enthusiastic defense of their opinion and accuses were becoming weaker as we repeated the court sessions. Some Gods were changing opinion and others started to say that it was a useless discussion. Saturation process sets out a maximum point of capacity, we can talk about a space that is full fill and cannot sustain anymore the same material without a transformation of it. This notion from chemistry is used in psychology by Kenneth Gergen to explain the saturation of the self; the author talks about social saturation as consequence of the communication and digital era where human beings are foster to a constantly process of socialization (Gergen, 1992). We used this psychological saturation process of the self and apply to the personage. The strong identification with their female and male roles supported us to engage the saturation of the student's personage in order to produce new performances and behavior changes. As a result, Zeus suggested

respecting the original myth. This implied that all the discussion that they had performed before had to be done in the opposite, for example, Zeus that had always defended what “was better be a boy” had to say “how great was being a girl”. All Gods immediately agreed with these changes. The students wrote a new text, according with the original myth that became the script of the play. The following transcriptions show a part of the discussion performed by Zeus and Hera:

[...] Zeus: - You women have great charm and that's why all admires you.

Hera: - This is not truth! Indeed because everyone judges a woman we have to always pay attention to our behavior.

[...] Hera: - We women must do all homework meanwhile men can do whatever they feel like.

Zeus: - How can you say such a thing! If we are always doing hard and stressful jobs! The work that a woman can make is further more soft then man”.

The *court* scene had with main objective to motivate a mediation process. This process is characterized by: 1) the differences between parts have to emerge; 2) do a path, both parts can “be” in their differences/ equality; and 3) transformation, both parts can live together with their differences. The opportunity to engage a mediation process occurred after a saturation process provoked by the repetition of a scene, in a present time and with no script, this produced in the student the will to solve the question and end the conflict.

6 CONCLUSION

This first experience on this Experimental Laboratory of Theater permitted to understand the contemporaneous stereotypes about female and male in the middle grade Italian students. The cultural and social education presents to young people stereotypes roles that they are encouraged to imitate. Because at the beginning of the adolescent stage, girls and boys start a identity construction process, the students preferred to exclude the other sex, presenting rivalry behavior in the interaction exercises , instead of having a mutant identity as Tiresias. The resistance in taking the opposite defense in our mediatic court reflects a common behavior of polarization that has been studiedy in an extensive way by the social psychology in the 50's. For most of participants it was undoubtedly important to perform their female and masculine role as a confirmation of their sexual identity.

In this study we could see the importance of the body and esthetics for girls, this fact can be related with the idealization of the female body through the media and mainly publicity (Novaes, 2006). The routine of beauty presented by girl presents a sort of regulation of the social expectative of beauty (Barbosa *et al.*, 2011; Novaes, 2006). We could confirm the influence of media and the preferred use of cellphones to communicate with other partner (Frois *et al.*, 2011) in both

gender, with a difference that girls use to talk along and boy use to make appoint with friends or ask help for homework.

The phenomenological and hermeneutic approach and theatrical techniques were essential to the conclusions were presented. Merely by the dramatic performance of Tiresias we could explore these stereotypes and play them, promoting the discussion of the theme as well engage an awareness process about the differences between presenting a role and constructing prejudices. We experiment a solving problem solution structured by the Playback Theater techniques and through the mythical and dramatic fiction. The idea was to submit the students to a “judgment process” where they could punish and be judged for their prejudices. We found in Aristophanes the scenography configuration and fiction that could set an action able to solve our conflict and presented a strategy of mediation to end conflictual behaviors. We intend with this experience present a didactic example of social and gender education, by the means of theater, motivating this type of methodology in school prevention to adolescent issues and educational problems.

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