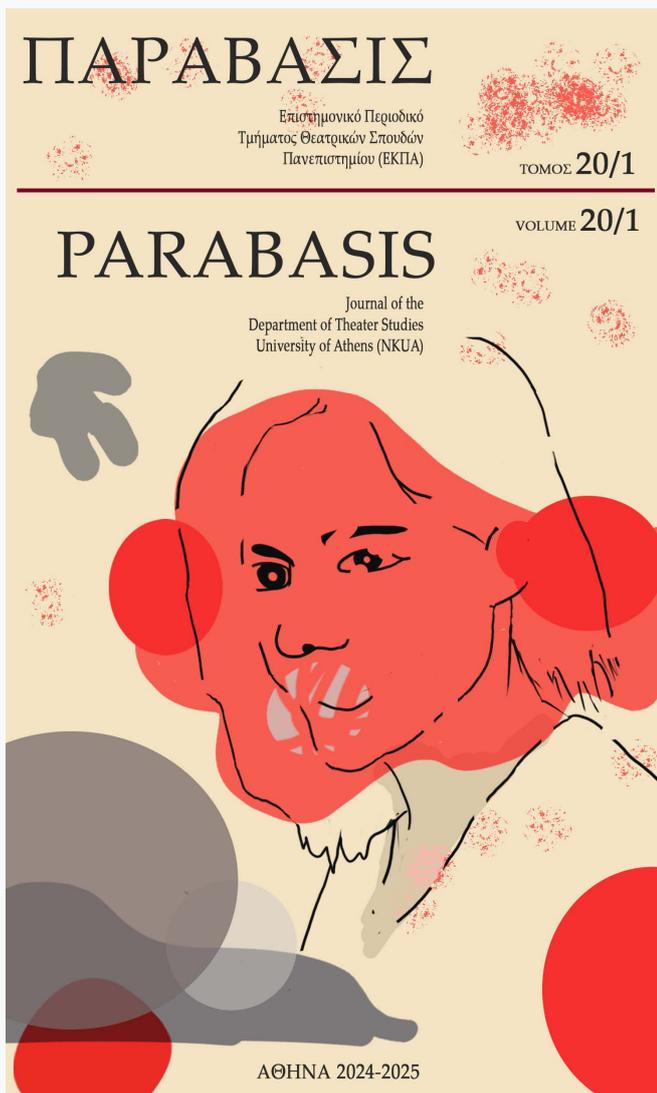


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### ONLIFE VERSUS ONLINE: THE ROLE OF THEATER IN THE POST-PANDEMIC ERA

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VALENTINA GARAVAGLIA

**ONLIFE VERSUS ONLINE:  
THE ROLE OF THEATER IN THE POST-PANDEMIC ERA**

It is common knowledge that live performances were particularly hard hit by the pandemic crisis: Covid 19 had a catastrophic effect on the entire system, eliminating a considerable portion of live performances and accelerating the transition towards digital surrogates. In 2020 there was a 47% drop in the consumption of cultural goods and services,<sup>1</sup> which reached peaks of over 70% in the live performance sector.<sup>2</sup> However, as we can see from the 2022 SIAE report on live performances, in the aftermath of the emergency, Italians have once again begun to organize events and go to the theater in numbers approaching pre-pandemic levels, and in some segments, even exceeding them. In short, despite the fear that the pandemic, the temporary closure of public venues and the transition to online events and streaming would permanently alienate the public and cause them to avoid public performances, the data show that there has instead been a good recovery.

The 2022 trends are confirmed by an analysis of the data of the first semester of 2023, which, though still provisional, shows growth in all the indicators measured (performances, investment and spectators) over the same period of 2022, ranging from 12% to over 35%.<sup>3</sup>

From another standpoint, the «obligatory» use of multichannel platforms, which during the pandemic allowed many artists to continue working, thanks to the transmission of their work in streaming, has on one hand exposed the infrastructural problems of theaters and the digital lag of the organizations, which must inevitably act to eliminate the resulting digital divide, and on the other has shown once again how fundamental live performances are in terms of building interpersonal relations and creating a sense of community.

The lockdown and the subsequent restrictions did not only have economic repercussions on the theater, in terms of production and use: they revealed how the lack of in-person interaction can be felt profoundly, and even cause harm, particularly among the young, and therefore, how valuable and irreplaceable,

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<sup>1</sup> According to the data collected by the Associazione Generale Italiana dello Spettacolo, in 2020 box office revenue fell by an amount ranging between 72% and 80%, which further accentuated the structural vulnerability of the theater.

<sup>2</sup> *Indagine Impresa Cultura Italia: covid-19, la cultura si sposta sul digitale*, <https://www.agisweb.it/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/nsmail-16-1.pdf>, [3.4.2024]

<sup>3</sup> SIAE, *Report 2022*, p. 7, [www.agisweb.it](http://www.agisweb.it), [4.4.2024]

especially in the formative years, the relational basis of every theatrical experience can be, because our work on ourselves, our self-care, depends on our relationships with others.

In relations with others, people project parts of themselves onto others, thus shaping their relational world based on the idiom of their interior world and creating a village of friends who constitute the secret culture that person desires. [...] Internally, we are shaped by the presence and actions of others. Although it is difficult to perceive how a person can «shift» into another [...], we know that it has a profound significance, although it is an extraordinarily difficult «experience» to describe.<sup>4</sup>

Theater can play an important role in the process of reconstructing a community. After the tragic events of WW II, for example, the literal reconstruction of the city of Milan was accompanied by the idea of a moral and cultural reconstruction: the «Teatro alla Scala» was reopened, and Giorgio Strehler and Paolo Grassi opened the «Piccolo Teatro», propelled by the belief that theater could promote ideals and act as a catalyst in the formation of a new community, «Let the core of the theater be the spectators, a silent and attentive chorus».<sup>5</sup> And it was, in fact, around the idea of a «chorus» that theater arose from the ashes of the post-war years; «the history of the theater is one of a dialogue between the creator, who proposes, and the audience, which responds».<sup>6</sup>

Since that time, the theater has gradually occupied a more important space within the institutions, a space that has forged a significant bond with the culture of our time. Between the 20th and 21st centuries, theater has shown itself to be flexible, diverse and versatile enough to adapt and contribute to meeting the public's changing needs. Specifically, over the past seventy years we have seen a proliferation of theatrical experiences that have demonstrated the value of this art, not only in esthetic terms, but as an educational and therapeutic tool, an instrument of cultural affirmation, a locus of constructive expression of surprising potential.

What does theater have that the other [...] media don't? The game. [...] The game of life. The physical game. The relational game. The social game. [...] Today's spectators don't go to the theater to hear a story, or to identify with a character [...], they go to see others play games, or to admire what their idols –the actors– do. They go to learn and then to replicate what they've seen in real life, with real people to play with, spaces in which to have fun creating, time in which to enjoy their own talents.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p. 50, 55.

<sup>5</sup> Paolo Grassi – Giorgio Strehler – Marco Apollonio – Virgilio Tossi, «Lettera Programmatica per il Piccolo Teatro della Città di Milano», *Il Politecnico* 35, Jan-Mar 1947' Federica Mazzocchi – Alberto Bentoglio (eds), *Giorgio Strehler e il suo teatro*, Bulzoni, Roma 1997, p. 34' Paolo Grassi, *Quarant'anni di palcoscenico*, E. Pozzi (ed.), Mursia, Milan 1977, p. 321-324.

<sup>6</sup> Marco Apollonio, *Storia del teatro italiano*, vol. I, Sansoni, Florence 1981, p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> Claudio Bernardi, *Il teatro sociale*, Carocci, Rome 2004, p. 13.

After the tragedy of the pandemic, therefore, I believe it is important to focus on the theater not only in terms of the incentives, investments and concrete actions aimed at supporting the sector's economic recovery, but above all on the reasons that make this art not only an indispensable cultural product for society in general, but also a strategic tool for building social well-being on multiple levels.

Theater presupposes socialization, interrelations and teamwork, from schools to prisons to theaters, in big cities and rural villages: the poles of post-pandemic theater lie within a rapidly transforming polycentric cultural scene, between renaissance and new technologies.

If Artaud, during the course of the 20th century, called for a theater that put the spectator face to face with a disquieting reality «[...] that calls into play not only his spirit, but his senses and body», a magical theater aimed «at the deepest recesses of the heart»,<sup>8</sup> with the goal of giving theater back its nature of a live event, «characterized by the same unpredictability, complexity and uncertainty as life itself, as natural phenomena»,<sup>9</sup> fostering the special qualities of this living art form is even more urgent today in light of the rise of online experiences.

In fact, as «prophesized» by Sisto dalla Palma when he opened his CRT-Centro di Ricerca per il Teatro [Center for Theater Research] in 1974, the former unitary, cohesive theater system completely disappeared, leaving in its place a

...fraying of intentions, sensibilities and cultures, aimed at deconstructing the old unit and recombining it within various subsystems that, through various cracks and fissures, provide hints of new and profound intentions. Apart from the tectonic shift that is shaking the entire system [...] we observe not only a loss of centrality, but the emergence of a new intolerance towards the historically established frames of reference.<sup>10</sup>

Building on the viewpoints developed consequent to the historical and cultural events of the 20th century, the theater of the third millennium has consolidated an increasingly mature awareness of its intrinsic value as an instrument of social change and renewal, in addition to its other enormously influential and variegated potential applications.

Theater's rebirth after Covid, despite all the doomsday predictions, underscores this society's need to actively express, in words and gestures, the intimate bond between theater and life, between public and private.

Theater is an instrument that can bring about change, even and above all away from the stage. In particular, it can guide innovative educational programs, as, for example, in the case studies examined here below.

Teatro Formazione Società and Mondo Acrobata, two projects initiated at IULM University, the first in 2013 and the second in 2020, are theatrical

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<sup>8</sup> Antonin Artaud, *Il teatro e il suo doppio*, Einaudi, Turin 1968, p. 5-10.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Kirby – Richard Schechner, «An interview with John Cage», *Tulane Drama Review* 10/2 (1965), p. 51.

<sup>10</sup> Sisto Dalla Palma, «Momenti e modelli della transizione teatrale», Claudio Bernardi – Benvenuto Cuminetti – Sisto Dalla Palma (eds), *I fuoriscena, esperienze e riflessioni sulla drammaturgia nel sociale*, Euresis, Milan 2000, p. 14.

experiences born before the pandemic and developed during and after it, which serve as concrete examples of the thesis expressed above, and are thus worthy of closer examination: in fact, the university views theater not merely as one of the subjects of study under the umbrella of communication, but as a valuable tool for intervening in multiple areas, creating a productive bond between institutions with the shared objectives of innovating teaching techniques and promoting social inclusion.

### 1. On the Teatro Formazione Società project

The Italian school system, public and private, of every kind and level, includes theater in its curriculum. Traditionally, primary and secondary school, and then university, are the favored venues for developing experience with the theater.

It is a recognized fact that the presence of theater in educational contexts has intensified in Italy during the course of the 21st century: the past three decades have seen the growth of theater aimed at younger audiences, which has spread extensively. The training sector has valorized the theater-workshop experience, seeing it as a fundamental process in freeing up the potential of individuals and groups, as well as an opportunity for cultural enhancement.

«Doing theater» with young people means calling up –and then facing and integrating, thanks to the tools theater provides– a series of emotional states that will characterize their future development. «Doing theater» with young people means training them to plan: theater is the fullest expression of a plan and its execution, a process that calls for study, growth and culture. The preparation that goes into staging a performance necessitates everyone’s informed and responsible participation, and the moment of truth, in front of an audience, stimulates them to collaborate effectively, to achieve the best possible final result.

«Doing theater» means learning how to get involved «onlife», not «online». With this as its goal, the Teatro Formazione Società project has organized itself to serve as an experimental workshop for a study on the value of theater as an instrument for addressing the fragility of young people following the pandemic, as a place to «build» and to express creative and relational potential and develop cross-sectional skills.<sup>11</sup>

Reprising the forms of a strongly anthropological theater has shown itself to be a winning card in terms of a return to normality after the pandemic.

In fact, thanks to a mingling of its forms, it has been utilized and manipulated in order to create opportunities for a culture of relations. It has proven to be a reliable ally in favoring learning processes and favors, and is in turn favored by socialization, offering a dynamic vision of building an identity through an experiential anthropology.

For this reason, the Teatro Formazione Società project thought it advisable to create an ample network of partnerships, so as to be able to exchange ideas with

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<sup>11</sup> *Il progetto TFS*, IULM, Centro Universitario Teatrale: <https://www.iulm.it/speciali/centro-universitario-teatrale-cut/il-progetto-tfs/>, [1.3.2024]

different interlocutors and institutions, all of them active, in various ways, in the educational sector.<sup>12</sup>

## 2. On the Mondo Acrobata project

The bilateral cooperation project with Kenya and Colombia for the development of skills in the youth sector was selected and is funded by the Erasmus+ program «Youth Acrobata World», 608834-EPP-1-2019-1-IT-EPPKA2-CBYACPALA-CBY 2019, in the framework of the «Capacity building in the field of Youth» area. The main partner is the Associazione Circo e Dintorni, the Italian leader in the production of circus-theater, and the other partners, in addition to IULM University, are the European Circus Association, Sarakasi, a Kenyan social circus trust, and Axioma, a Colombian company.

The project's premise is programmatic: often, young circus performers from other countries have superior technical potential that cannot be fully expressed in their birthplace because there are no training facilities up to the task and there is no market for productions featuring emerging talents. The Mondo Acrobata project<sup>13</sup> has organized study-abroad fellowships in Italy for artists from Kenya and Colombia, to favor the development of young talents thanks to international mobility. These performers, selected by a team of instructors from their countries of origin, took part in preliminary workshops in their countries and then, after having come to Italy, completed their training by attending a considerable number of workshops conducted by IULM faculty and professional live performers, who not only helped them to improve their artistic abilities but, above all, introduced them to the world of live performance, offering them concrete employment opportunities with organizations dedicated to live entertainment.<sup>14</sup>

The partnerships with two organizations working with vulnerable youths, like Sarakasi and Axioma, led to the involvement of people from socially disadvantaged places, like the outskirts of Nairobi and the high-crime districts of Medellín, where, thanks to their acquired expertise, the participants were then able to pass on what they had learned to other young people, through workshops *in loco*, thus multiplying the project's beneficial effects, which we hope will continue to be propagated over time.

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<sup>12</sup> Centro Teatro Attivo, «Claudio Abbado» Public school of Music, Accademia di Formazione Teatro alla Scala, set photography course, Teatro Out Off.

<sup>13</sup> This link will allow you to access the images and videos describing this project: <https://bit.ly/3bq11T7>, <https://vimeo.com/701976483>, [12.3.2024]

<sup>14</sup>After an initial selection period in Kenya, Colombia and Italy between December 2019 and July 2020, despite the difficulties created by the pandemic, the young people chosen participated in two mobility periods in Italy, of 21 days each (October-November 2020 and November-December 2021), attending training courses at the Circo and surroundings, in Noventa and San Donà di Piave and at the IULM University in Milan, contacting prestigious realities such as the Monte Carlo Festival, the most important circus festival in the world, the Academy of Circus Art of Verona, one of the best schools at an international level and the Educational Center for the Documentation of Circus Arts of Verona, an established archival institution in the sector. Cf. Valentina Garavaglia – Alessandro Serena (ed.), *Circo e Teatro. L'arte circense come strumento di inclusione sociale*, Bulzoni, Rome 2023.

These two projects have highlighted, each in its own way, the reasons that encourage us, as a university, to promote theatrical practice among young people as an aid to overcoming the scars left by the pandemic.

### 3. Training bodies to speak

Bodily expressiveness is an innate quality in man: the body possesses a vast range of communicative tools and thus lends itself to being used with excellent results in theatrical projects, since it offers multiple possibilities of expression.

The need to create an educational project that will stimulate an individual's awareness of his/her own body, and the relationship of that body with the body of another, is well met by the practice of theater, especially when the objectives of the project involve the achievement of control over one's body and a more pronounced identification and construction of identity.<sup>15</sup>

The theatrical experience, intolerant of the Cartesian dualism that opposes psyche to soma, tries to overcome this dichotomy through the elaboration of a series of techniques designed to emphasize the importance of the unity and reciprocity of mind and body: they are placed on the same level and neither is subordinated to the other, since they are one and the same.

In light of these conceptual premises, we can hypothesize that an emotional event, especially if protracted over time and of excessive intensity, can have direct effects on the body, which preserves, therefore, a very real, physical memory of it.

A conspicuous number of techniques of theater practice concerning the use of the body are rooted in the group of therapies focused on physical expression, formed by a wide variety of treatments whose technical specificity and theoretical backgrounds consist of a rather eclectic synthesis of psychoanalysis, oriental philosophies and religions –Taoism, Hinduism– and principles of humanistic psychology.

The latter provides the goals of these treatments, which do not aim to eliminate the symptoms or reduce an individual's deficiencies, but rather to develop the person's unfulfilled potential and, through the realization of a tailor-made plan, to attain greater well-being. This definition fits the theatrical experience perfectly.

In the context of workshops, one is not always confronted with the concept of the body put forth by modern Western culture, characterized by an almost exclusive investment in efficiency, productivity and purposeful use: theater puts to the test bodies that have not yet found their original stability and integration, that still need to recuperate that state of harmony that, in short, becomes the ultimate goal of a potentially transformative process.<sup>16</sup>

Working with the body is an extraordinary opportunity offered by the theater, particularly so when the bodies acting and interacting are marked by the

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<sup>15</sup> In relation to the thesis that holds that the discovery of one's body is the first step in the discovery of the Self, see: Donald W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, Tavistock, London 1971, p. 14.

<sup>16</sup> Giovanni Del Puente, «Psicoterapie a mediazione corporea», Franco Giberti – Romolo Rossi (eds), *Manuale di psichiatria*, Piccin, Padua 2005, p. 532.

vicissitudes of life, «dramatic» bodies that can now tell their stories of pain, conflict and joy.

At Mondo Acrobata, the theater workshops meet young people who come from borderline places, often at the margins of civil society. The psychomotor behavior of the participants represents the translation –in terms of motor skills, physicality and behavior– of the most varied aspects of each person's life impulses, motivations, instincts, needs, desires, wills, feelings with which it is always in close correlation and connection.<sup>17</sup>

The bodies are at the center of the project proposal, and thanks to the preliminary theatrical activity, they are able to express themselves, to communicate and to reach the second part of the experience, which involves going through a sort of training, designed to lead them along a professionalizing path.

Regarding the importance of physical training, it is impossible to overlook the teachings of Morenian psychodrama,<sup>18</sup> which underscores the fact that the body of an individual who has become an actor must be as free as possible, must be ready to respond sensitively to every stimulus of the mind and the imagination, must be able to express the greatest possible number of movements, and must do so rapidly and easily. These movements must be spontaneously drawn from the assortment of gestures stored during the exercise phase, so that the individual, adequately stimulated by the handler, can recall useful cues to develop creative responses in tune with the psychomotor elasticity acquired.

The theater workshop helps participants to experience and become aware of their body's potential for change, which, thanks to the stimuli provided by the leader and the other participants, has an opportunity to occur. The body becomes both playwright and vehicle of events, which the relationship with objects, music, dance and words unexpectedly arouses.

#### 4. Strengthening emotional intelligence

We can define intelligence as the operational ability –which varies across individuals and within a single individual over time– that allows us to understand, remember, utilize and constructively integrate what we have learned in the past with our present thoughts and perceptions, so as to face and resolve new situations. In short, intelligence is the ability to be active and proactive in solving problems, by adapting one's reasoning to new needs.<sup>19</sup>

Intelligence can, therefore, be diversified according to its performance capacities, into abstract intelligence, with prevalent abilities to formulate concepts, synthetic evaluations and operate abstractions; mechanical intelligence, which allows the understanding of the operation of machinery, and «specialized» intelligence, practical, theoretical, mathematical, etc. The connections between intelligence, other psychic functions and personality are also obvious, and

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<sup>17</sup> Bernard Aucouturier – Ivan Darrault – Jean Luis Empinet, *La pratica psicomotoria rieducazione e terapia*, Armando, Rome 1996, p. 33-137.

<sup>18</sup> Jacob L. Moreno, *Manuale di psicodramma*, Astrolabio, Rome 1985, p. 107.

<sup>19</sup> Rasore, «Elementi di semeiotica», Giberti – Rossi (eds), *Manuale di psichiatria*, p. 24-26.

individual uses and expressions abound.

A theatrical experience will sometimes cause individuals with very different kinds of intelligence to interact: alongside logical-rational intelligence, often quantified by I.Q. tests, there are other kinds of intelligence, like, for example, interpersonal, intrapersonal and emotional intelligence, critical for the management of a person's abilities, the enhancement of their intellect, the development of their ability to adapt and the understanding of their own sentiments and those of others.<sup>20</sup> These affirmations are based on the findings of studies on emotions and behavior pioneered by Howard Gardner and Daniel Goleman.

Interpersonal intelligence is the ability to understand others, their motivations and their way of working, while discovering how it is possible to interact with them in a cooperative manner [...]. Intrapersonal intelligence [...] is the inward-facing correlative capacity: it is the ability to form an accurate and truthful model of oneself and use it to operate effectively in life.<sup>21</sup>

As Goleman affirms, emotional literacy is fundamental to every human relationship, because the ability to understand our emotions, and therefore to channel our reactions into the appropriate relational behavior, as well as to understand the reactions of our interlocutors, allows us to bring to bear all our personal resources, «emotional aptitude is a meta-ability, determining how well we can use whatever other skills we have [...]».<sup>22</sup> Goleman and Gardner therefore recognize the insufficiency of a cognitive approach like the one evaluated by IQ tests, instead underscoring the importance of didactic and expressive activities that develop essential interpersonal skills.

Neuroscience has identified the anatomical basis of emotion,<sup>23</sup> located in the deepest and most ancient structures of the brain, like the limbic system, the first center receiving emotional stimuli, an initial terminus for sensory perceptions, which reach it through special pathways, before they get to the specialized areas of the cerebral cortex, where they are elaborated in a more sophisticated manner.

Emotional intelligence can be reinforced throughout an individual's life, and it tends to increase in proportion to one's awareness of one's emotional states, the ability to contain the emotions associated with suffering, the ability to listen to others and the progressive development of an empathic attitude. This is how theater can help develop emotional intelligence, by enhancing the individual's ability to analyze and synthesize his life experiences with greater complexity and thus optimizing emotional «circulation» and improving the daily process of adaptation that is the basis of a healthy psychic life.

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<sup>20</sup> Alessandro Pontremoli, *Teoria e tecniche del teatro educativo e sociale*, Utet, Turin 2005, p. 45-47.

<sup>21</sup> Howard Gardner, *L'educazione delle intelligenze multiple. Dalla teoria alla prassi pedagogica*, Anabasi, Milan 1995, p. 9.

<sup>22</sup> Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence*, Rizzoli, Milan 1996, p. 55.

<sup>23</sup> Daniel J. Siegel, *La mente relazionale. Neurobiologia dell'esperienza interpersonale*, Cortina, Milan 2001.

Personal competence and social competence are the important consequences of a correct emotional literacy: learning to know oneself and one's emotions, knowing how to self-evaluate in identifying limits and strengths and acquiring greater self-confidence allow progressively greater self-control, adaptability to change and innovation, and increases motivation for making commitments and taking initiative; on the other hand, empathy means putting oneself in «others» shoes, understanding others and helping them grow, even when they are markedly different, while mastery of social skills facilitates communication, conflict resolution and the building of collaborative and cooperative bonds that optimize both individual effort and teamwork.

It is evident how this type of personal growth process, proposed by an education in emotional intelligence, coincides with the proposal of an improvement in the quality of the subject's relational life. Theater adopts the principles outlined by Goleman and his school of psychological thought, promoting an analogous process of maturation in every one of its initiatives:

The theatre is the place of relationships. An excellent diagnostic tool for understanding group dynamics and the type of communication and problems that each person has with others. As a place where relationships are built and discovered, it is also intrinsically therapeutic and socializing. In the protected space of the theatre, daily rituals are innovated and ideas and projects arise that elicit change not only in the individual, but in society itself. Theater always adds something positive to the contexts in which it operates.<sup>24</sup>

## 5. Encouraging reflections on identity

The acquisition of an identity can be considered one of the primary issues of contemporary culture.<sup>25</sup> Today, identity consists of being oneself and at the same time being different, non-conformist, or opposed to the behavioral models approved by the community one belongs to.

An individual must play many roles and manage many situations in this age of globalization, making those models of personality and identity that manifest themselves in the flexibility of learning and in the psychological capacity to adapt to the demands posed by rapid and continuous life changes more adaptive.<sup>26</sup> In a brief list of the abilities required in order to avoid being excluded from the world of work, some theatrical techniques and practices stand out:

[...] the willingness to take personal risks and the spirit of exploration, resourcefulness and creativity (to the detriment, therefore, of conformist, passive and unimaginative individuals); logical and analytical intelligence and the qualities of precision, organization and reliability (to the detriment

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<sup>24</sup> Claudio Bernardi, *La bimba e il drago. Dramma e riti di liberazione nella società post-moderna*, Claudio Bernardi – Laura Cantarelli (eds), *Emozioni. Riti teatrali nelle situazioni di margine*, Euresis, Milan 1995, p. 13-14.

<sup>25</sup> Giovanni Jervis, *La conquista dell'identità. Essere se stessi, essere diversi*, Feltrinelli, Milan 1997.

<sup>26</sup> Bernardi, «Sull'antropologia del teatro», Bernardi – Cuminetti – Dalla Palma (eds), *I fuoriscena*, p. 35.

of the tendency to simplify and approximate); a good capacity for emotional self-control and application (to the detriment of hyper-emotional and discontinuous subjects) and also, last but not least, the capacity for loyalty and open cooperation, to the detriment of individuals prone to diffidence and sectarianism.<sup>27</sup>

Therefore, according to Jervis, the central issue for anthropology, sociology and psychology is identity, both individual and collective, to be created or re-created and constructed in a boundary-free scenario.

The trend towards re-inventing individual identity, based on the rejection of the «received» models (or parental models) of identity is a phenomenon that, although producing dramatic new inequalities, mostly contributes to liberating human potential.<sup>28</sup>

Jervis defines personal identity as a process of independence from received models and an itinerary of self-realization, seen as a union of mind and body rather than as the realization of an abstract Ego. Identity is not immutable, nor is it multiple, nor is it the sum of the roles and masks we wear in our real or virtual lives. Identity, according to Jervis, is the outcome of a gradual, interior progression of innate inclinations and personal style, developed in relation to a changing context of affective bonds and experiences.

The personality of an individual is comparable to that of the actor who plays many characters, but all referable to a precise «body-mind»: often the mutable social conduct of an individual is confused with his identity, just as the various «characters» represented on stage are confused with their «interpreter».

If, for the development of the individual, it is fundamental to learn to express and control one's emotions and to act and relate to others in a vast array of situations, becoming the protagonists, playwrights and creators of our own lives, then a leading role is played by the workshop «of life», the learning and experiencing of theater and performance practices in educational contexts, because it is preparation for day to day «acting»: it promotes awareness of the body and its potential, it teaches control of the emotions, it helps to re-elaborate memories, express joy and fear, liberate the imagination and the nightmares, our dreams and the healthier and less healthy parts of our Egos.

The theatrical experience, therefore, makes it possible to forge a better and more harmonious relationship with reality – Christopher Bollas' studies in this regard are revealing.<sup>29</sup> The theatrical experience, and in particular the experience of theatrical representation, reflects an important characteristic of the experience of the Self: the split between two subjective places, the place of the subject who begins to reflect on the Self and the place of the subject who becomes the object of the thought.

In the theater, the actor –here intended literally, as «the person who acts»– is

<sup>27</sup> Jervis, *La conquista dell'identità*, p. 53-54.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, p. 56.

<sup>29</sup> Christopher Bollas, *Essere un carattere*, Borla, Rome 1995, p. 15-59.

simultaneously present on stage and absent in the wings, from where he organizes the logic of the events. «Plunged» in the performance, the individual, who acts in a kind of dream state, expresses himself totally naturally in a situation –the theater– protected by the «as if», where what happens doesn't have uncontrollable real consequences and his actions are not criticized, but retain a fundamental experiential value that can augment his perception of reality. When the individual lowers his level of emotional involvement, his subjective participation in the performance also diminishes and he sees himself as the protagonist of the play, becoming a witness to his own Self.

Winnicott affirms that we begin our lives not as integrated and coherent beings, but as scattered islands of potential that become a «being». Perhaps when we «act» we return to that state of non-integration, letting our Self free amongst an archipelago of beings that play different roles, directed by the Ego on the stage of theatrical practice.

When an individual acts in a performance, simply as himself, he undergoes profound and significant experiences: the memory and the interpretation of the meaning of those experiences serves to activate the complex Self, critically and productively, objectifying and re-elaborating the actions performed, the reactions experiences, the emotions felt and everything the acting elicits. In this way, theater reproduces life, characterized by a cycle of reciprocal transformations from the simple Self to the complex Self and from action to reflection on action.

## 6. Reappropriating interpersonal relations

A person's work on himself and his self-care cannot neglect relations with others.

In human relationships, people project parts of themselves onto others, shaping their world of relationships according to the idiom of their inner world, creating a community of friends who constitute the secret culture of the person's desire. [...] Internally, we are shaped by the presence and actions of others. Although it is difficult to see how one person «moves» in another, we know that it has a profound significance, although it is extraordinarily difficult to describe.<sup>30</sup>

This makes it clear just how important forming a group is, in terms of the quality of the theatrical experience produced. The potential of working with small groups has been explored since the beginning of the last century by researchers including Trigant Burrow, who worked on group psychotherapy, and Jacob L. Moreno, who pioneered the use of analytic psychodrama.<sup>31</sup>

Foulkes' observations are of particular interest, for the purposes of the investigation of group dynamics in the context of the theater workshop experience: The British psychoanalyst invoked the concept of a «matrix», which

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, p. 50, 55.

<sup>31</sup> Group formation, as the basis for the subsequent development of actions, is one of the central themes of the research-action model proposed by Kurt Lewin (1890-1947), a social psychologist whose work focused on group dynamics and their relation to societal change.

implies (as suggested by the etymology of the Latin term «mater») a powerful dependence of the individual on the group, which nourishes him and keeps him mentally alive. The group is «conceived» and «held together» by a conductor capable of giving meaning to what happens within it, creating a space to be understood as a place in which the production of symbolic bonds accessible to all members can occur. The idea of «boundary» that underlies a theatrical experience implies that the individual recognizes the existence of the group and that he or she can feel inside, outside or on the margins of a «group space», formed sometimes by real people, sometimes by figures from his or her own internal world, and that, in any case, he or she perceives that crossing the boundaries of that space – whether to become part of it or to leave it– calls for intense emotional work.

The capacity to profit from being in a group is determined by the project leader and the reference institution, who, through mutual interaction, create an «emotional field» that encourages relationships between people; in this space it is possible to express thoughts, emotions and fantasies, as well as to represent them physically.

The value of the techniques proposed by the theatrical experience makes it possible to have and share emotions that, until that moment, could only be repressed, projected or consumed in the solitude of one's own Ego. This value is based on the ability of theatre to integrate and, at the same time, re-elaborate both the intrapsychic and interpersonal conflicts of the subjects, declining to «direct» the group towards specific predetermined goals and instead accepting the natural process of development of each individual group.

Not infrequently, in the personal history that each member of the group manifests, the lack of significant figures in the group is highlighted, and in such cases the group itself represents the place where new relationships can be experienced and understood with respect to those experienced in the one's own life. The intertwining of experiences to which it is possible to assign a meaning in the very moment in which they occur can create a «relational space» that encourages the search for new personal paths to follow, paths that tend to reduce stress and favor personal growth.

The understanding and harmony between the participants, both in interpersonal dynamics and in creative work, constitute a strength and a reservoir of energy and resources to draw on for the needs and desires of the individual, for the processes and life of the group, for productions and transformations in daily social life. It is the practice of theater in itself that permits drawing closer to the other, not only through a more or less rational understanding of who he or she is, but also through the possibility of «playing» him, of recognizing oneself and one's own emotions thanks to the theatrical medium, of encountering the other by examining his experience, and therefore developing an empathic rapport.

The theater is the primary locus of «onlife» meetings, as its main purpose is to create relationships, more than creating meaning. It expresses and legitimizes diversity, starting with the most evident of differences: the roles. The role of the actor and the role of the spectator. Diversity becomes a necessary condition for meeting, and the stimulus to know ourselves better, to open up to the world outside.



The theater is the place of relationships. An excellent diagnostic tool for understanding group dynamics and the type of communication and problems that everyone has with others. Being a place where relationships are built and discovered, it is also therapeutic and socializing by its nature. In the protected space of the theater, daily rituals are innovated, and ideas and projects are born for the change not only of the individual, but of society itself. Two projects of the IULM University (International University of Languages and Media) are an example of this: Teatro Formazione Società and Mondo Acrobata.



## Η ΣΥΓΓΡΑΦΕΑΣ

Η Valentina Garavaglia είναι Πρύτανης στο Πανεπιστήμιο IULM (International University of Languages and Media) του Μιλάνου και Καθηγήτρια στον διεπιστημονικό τομέα των Τεχνών και πιο ειδικά, στις Επιστήμες του Θεάτρου. Είναι μέλος του Μεταπτυχιακού Προγράμματος Σπουδών Θεάτρου, Κινηματογράφου και Μέσων Μαζικής Ενημέρωσης. Διδάσκει τα γνωστικά αντικείμενα Μοντέρνο και Σύγχρονο θέατρο, και Σύγχρονες Θεατρικές Φόρμες, ενώ είναι διευθύντρια των ερευνητικών εργαστηρίων: Εργαστήριο θεατρικής σκηνοθεσίας, Εργαστήριο επικοινωνίας μέσω των τεχνών, Εργαστήριο υποκριτικής και σκηνοθεσίας.

Παράλληλα με την ακαδημαϊκή της ενασχόληση, έχει και καλλιτεχνική δράση ως επικεφαλής φεστιβάλ και projects σε σημαντικούς ιταλικούς και διεθνείς θεατρικούς οργανισμούς. Επίσης, είναι μέλος στους διεθνείς οργανισμούς University Theatre Committee, Scientific Committee of the "Orestyadi" Foundation for High Culture και National Coordination of Theatre in Prison. Τέλος, είναι διευθύντρια σε δύο σειρές του εκδοτικού οίκου Bulzoni της Ρώμης: The Sources of the Theatrical Performance και I Quaderni di Gargnano.



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Valentina Garavaglia is Rector and full Professor in the scientific-disciplinary sector L-ART/05 Discipline of performance at the Faculty of Communication, public relations and advertising. She is a member of the Graduate Programme in Visual and Media Studies. She teaches: Modern and contemporary theatre, Contemporary theatre forms, Theatre direction laboratory, Laboratory of effective communication techniques, Acting laboratory and actor direction.

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