

# Theatre as “Pleasure of Being Somewhere Else”: A Pedagogical Fiction

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## **Abstract**

Theatre as an educational tool for “troubled children” requires further reflection and critical input. We see theatre as a powerful educational tool that can stimulate relevant processes of intrapsychic reworking and change our relationship with our bodies. This is why drama workshops are so widely used in educational contexts, especially with young people. However, it is precisely theatre’s ability to influence our relationship with ourselves and our bodies that makes it a tool to be used wisely and carefully when working with minors in juvenile detention centres.

**Keywords:** Juvenile detention; applied theatre; pedagogical programme; pedagogical fiction; game; education.

Developing pedagogical programmes inside a juvenile detention centre is a challenge. There are many reasons for this complexity, starting from the analysis of the contingent and structural factors and conditions that determine the rugged life paths of imprisoned young people. Behind these crimes lies a multitude of meanings, some of which define the individuality of those who committed them and their interaction with the world. Yet, a criminal act also comprises an element of *prominence*, which identifies the search of these teenagers for a place in the world. A search which is generally common at their age but that in the case of these “troubled kids” often reflects a need to be acknowledged and identified, which becomes so intense and urgent that it prompts them to act, more often than not, without

thinking. A boy or girl who commits a crime is to be judged according to the complex system of circumstances they find themselves in (be they social, economic, cultural, material or relative to their home circumstances), the criminal act being its most dramatic outcome. Being aware of this means recognising the rehabilitative work, and the possibility of leading an inclusive journey, first as a deconstruction and later as a reconstruction of those elements which contribute to outlining the personal history of the boy or girl in prison. I deem it unnecessary to discuss here the psychological implications and interpretations which can be used to explain the dynamics lying behind a teenager's criminal act; from a pedagogical standpoint, I'd rather consider the potential generative aspects that can trigger an authentic process of transformation, and which can help the teenager to piece back together their subjectivity. If we agree that crime, when committed by a minor, is the result of the deviant manner in which the subject perceives the outside world, then a pedagogical approach should help minors who have committed crimes to experience themselves beyond their deviant identity. Leaving aside the "rugged" narratives of these subjects, it is fundamental to give more space to *different narratives* in order to bring about a behavioural change. We need to help each boy and girl recognise different forms of "biographical structure" through a double move: hook and engage. This will allow them to create a different narrative that can make an intentional world possible.<sup>1</sup>

An authentic transformation cannot occur without a conflict between the subject's idea that they possess a strong identity due to their criminal lives, and their discovery of resources hitherto experienced which can enable them to discover parts of their personality which go beyond their criminal guise.<sup>2</sup> Theories on adolescents' psychological development suggest that it is at this stage in their lives that young boys and girls experience a cognitive shift as they leave their childhood behind. Indeed, during puberty they develop the ability to speak about themselves.<sup>3</sup> Here lies the importance of a pedagogical approach that gives the young people involved with the justice system the possibility to "speak up" as they start to use the power

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1 P. Bertolini, *L'esistere pedagogico*, Firenze, La Nuova Italia, 1988.

2 F. Scaparro, G. Roi, *La maschera del cattivo*, Milano, Unicopli, 1984.

3 A. Fabbrini, A. Melucci, *L'età dell'oro. Adolescenti tra sogno e esperienza*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 1992.

of “words” to acknowledge and discover themselves so as to modify their self-awareness. Paulo Freire powerfully demonstrated the pedagogical power of words, showcasing their immense value for marginalised communities in Brazil during the military dictatorship. The power of words is, first of all, that of an “embodied word,” a word that is felt, a word rooted in experience that, consequently, can be sensed on one’s skin.<sup>4</sup> For the Brazilian pedagogue, the power of words lies in their ability to make people “conscious”; namely, to make them aware of their transformative consciousness, which comes from their ability to question their own lives.

## The Power of Words and Theatre

For a young boy or girl whose life has been marked by complicated relationships and educational experiences, giving power to words is the key to cognitive change that can lead to a transformation. From an educational standpoint, it is particularly interesting to investigate the role of theatre as a practical exercise to acknowledge words’ expressive power when they are translated into body gestures.<sup>5</sup> The relationship between theatre and education has long been the subject of thorough and widespread pedagogical studies<sup>6</sup> and animated theatre projects with an educational purpose. In that respect, a more in-depth analysis of the impact of theatre on teenagers must consider the variety of situations which in the last thirty or forty years, have allowed the development of new solutions and actions with a definite pedagogical awareness. This has been possible thanks to the transformation of theatre into a cultural and social entertainment as well as an educational asset. However, I do not aim to write a report about what has been happening in Italy in the last few decades but rather to interpret the theoretical implications of this relationship. By doing that, I seek to explore

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4 P. Freire, *La pedagogia degli oppressi*, Milano, Mondadori, 1972.

5 J. Grotowski, *Per un teatro povero*, Milano, Bulzoni, 1968; F. Antonacci, F. Cappa, a cura di, Riccardo Massa. *Lezioni su: la peste, il teatro, l’educazione*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2001.

6 F. Antonacci, M. Guerra, E. Mancino, *Dietro le quinte. Pratiche e teorie tra educazione e teatro*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2013; M. Buccolo, S. Mongili, E. Tonon, *Teatro e formazione. Teorie e pratiche di pedagogia teatrale nei contesti formativi*, Franco Angeli, Milano, 2012; F. Cappa, *Formazione come teatro*, Milano, Cortina, 2016; M. D’Ambrosio, *Teatro come pratica pedagogica. Ricerca-azione per la formazione al teatro-scuola*, Lecce, Pensa Multimedia, 2015; G. Oliva, *La pedagogia teatrale. La voce della tradizione e il teatro contemporaneo*, Milano, Unicopli, 2005.

the associations of meaning that emerge from those dimensions that come together in the theatre experience, when it is understood as an educational experience.

## Elsewhere

To describe the relationship between theatre and education from our perspective, we need to refer to the concept of metaphorical transitivity.<sup>7</sup> I stand by the idea that a theatre experience always entails an interesting semantic shift, which concerns the “fictional” relationship between the person undergoing this experience and the surrounding reality. A fictional relationship that causes a splitting in time and space, and that in light of the possibility of turning that specific time and space into a temporal and spatial “elsewhere” expresses its weight as a pedagogical experience.<sup>8</sup> This “fictional nature” is also emblematic of games; it is, then, this metaphorical transitivity between games and theatre that I want to investigate rather than its intrinsic pedagogical reach. Speaking of which, about sixty years ago, Eugene Fink wrote: “These spaces and times [the spaces and times of games and theatre, but also the spaces and times of the actor onstage] are linked together, they happen simultaneously, and yet not simultaneously, like different actions can sometimes occur in the same space. Somehow, on stage, a clearing [Lichtung] in space and time appears, and it surfaces from the fictional realm of games, whose fiction is produced by the use of existing tools.”<sup>9</sup> From a pedagogical standpoint, it is precisely this clearing in space and time, which the author mentions, that stands pivotal to our thinking about theatre as a tool for education. Theatre and games share an essential feature that is typical of fiction: they both allow a splitting in time and space which redefines reality as a heterotopy and heterochrony without removing its materiality.<sup>10</sup> In other words, theatre, like games, delivers a narrative that can take us elsewhere, while it does not detach our connection with the physical world, with our being in a material “here and now.” It is by establishing a “double” that it is possible to give a different account of

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7 R. Massa, *Cambiare la scuola. Educare o istruire?*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1997.

8 J. Orsenigo, *Lo spazio paradossale*, Milano, Unicopli, 2008.

9 E. Fink, *Oasi del gioco*, Milano, Cortina, (1957) 2008, p. 62.

10 M. Foucault, *Utopie eterotopie*, Napoli, Cronopio, 2006.

time, space, and the bodies that partake in such experience, thus revealing the peculiar nature of both games and theatre.

## Life, Games, Theatre, Education

Fink's quote highlights the existence of a metaphorical transitivity that starts from the interaction of life, games, and education as if these activities were also to be considered as "theatre." This is the starting point: games are intrinsic to human nature. They are ruled by complex dynamics and carry profound psycho-social implications, which make them a model to interpret life. Games represent, therefore, the primary instrument to reproduce reality through their fictional and simulative nature. They allow people to connect with the outside world, and become, thereby, a metaphor for life. Games actually trigger a shift from the inner world of desires, urges, emotions, affections, feelings and experiences to the outside reality governed by relations, limitations, rules, prescriptions and competitions.<sup>11</sup> Playing together, then, has a unique purpose, as it allows an individual to alter reality in the context of a very particular environment. Here, we can face the otherness of the real world, which we see as a challenge to the sovereignty of desire. Through games, humans can symbolically enact reality without suffering its material effects. They learn how to react to life's restrictions in a fictional context that allows them to represent the conflict between pleasure and reality.

At the same time, games stand as an interesting metaphor for education. While acknowledging the role of education in improving and assisting individuals to grow, develop their identities and ultimately achieve independence, education also means creating a relational space where the conflict between desire and reality can develop. This is a liminal space between impulse and frustration, almightiness and restraint, individuality and society. Likewise, when theatre drama is used as a pedagogical exercise, it provides a context of mediation and manipulation, where our real-world experience can be remoulded, recomposed, and restructured. As John Dewey suggests, what makes an educational experience is the possibility of retrieving it creatively by integrating and transforming it in such a way that it can teach us

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11 D. Winnicott, *Gioco e realtà*, Roma, Armando, 1971.

something more.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, the fictional component of education (doing something authentic in a simulated situation) holds the primary pedagogical function. It is like saying that outside that space and time, which were intentionally devised to experience a specific situation, there is no education but a simple reproduction. Education, like games, determines an emotional and cognitive reworking of concrete experiences to turn them into knowledge; theatre makes this mechanism more efficient since it allows us to consciously reproduce onstage those vital instances in which learning and playing occur.

Life, games and theatre are all transitive concepts, since they reveal the centrality of experience in the educational process. And if we accidentally learn from life, and in games, chance and intentionality mingle, theatre requires an intentional reworking of experience for it to further develop.

## **Educating through Fiction: The Pleasure of Being Somewhere Else**

Using theatre as a pedagogical asset for “troubled kids” requires further thoughts and critical input. We imagine theatre as a powerful educational tool (which it actually is) that can boost relevant processes of intrapsychic reworking and can alter our relationship with our body. This is the reason why it is so widely used in educational contexts, especially with teenagers (from local schools to communities and youth detention centres). However, it is precisely its ability to influence our relationship with ourselves and our bodies that makes theatre an instrument to be used wisely and carefully while working with young boys and girls from difficult backgrounds. Working on your body and with your body can be intolerable at an age when your relationship with your physicality is so difficult and taxing. This is an age when appearance seems fundamental, and you try to decipher the complex messages your body sends you, a body that demands to be heard and that does so through pain, discomfort, trouble and clumsiness.

The relationship between theatre and games can, therefore, be a perfect methodological approach to finding suitable pedagogical procedures and solutions that exploit the potential of fiction. It is all about exploiting the recreational component embedded in the fictional experience as an asset

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12 J. Dewey, *Esperienza e educazione*, Milano, Cortina, (1949) 2014.

and a strategy to engage the young participants in theatre, given its representative and expressive nature. By doing so, we can offer them a “clearing in space and time,” where they can experience the pleasure of being *somewhere else*. The same pleasure which is typical of every narrative *performance*, and that through words and gestures leads us to a liminal area where we can experience the potential of *duality* in the *authentic* game of the “staging.”

Educating through fiction means learning how to arrange a series of thoughts and gestures that can create the best circumstance to live a meaningful experience and trigger a transformation. Theatre becomes, in this way, a pedagogical space where people can experiment with new diverse identities.







