



The Forms of Social Theatre and its Educational Function

ELPIS – Artistic expression, performance and social innovation: the role of the educator for the
accessibility of the arts

2022-1-IT02-KA220-ADU-000086370

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA).

Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.

The logo for @TRY THEATRE, featuring a red spiral icon followed by the text "@TRY THEATRE" in a red, hand-drawn, sans-serif font.

Table of contents

Introduction	2
1. Social Theater – Its General Concept and Historical Context	4
1.1. The Spaces of Social Theater.....	8
2. Theater and Education	12
2.1 Experiential Learning	13
2.2 Development of Critical Thinking and Creativity	15
2.3 Increased Self-Esteem and Self-Awareness	18
2.4 Enhanced Empathy and Emotional Intelligence	20
2.5 Promotion of Collaboration and Teamwork	22
3. The Gaps in the Curriculum	25
Conclusion	26
Bibliography	28

Introduction

In this brief but thoughtful discussion on theater, we will focus on analyzing its role in social contexts, with particular attention to education.

Theater goes far beyond entertainment, as it can act as a catalyst for social change, political awareness, and active citizenship. Through performances, it emotionally and intellectually engages the audience, stimulating thoughts, dialogue, and action. The concept of social theater combines art with social and political engagement, actively involving the audience in crucial issues. This approach challenges the traditional separation between actor and spectator, encouraging active participation and immersion in the theatrical process.

Understanding the historical context of social theater is essential to grasp its significance. Emerging from politically engaged theater movements of the 20th century, such as absurd theater and theater of the oppressed, social theater has become a tool for addressing social injustices, political inequalities, and human rights violations.

One of the most powerful aspects of social theater is its educational impact. By actively involving the audience, it promotes experiential learning, exposing people to different perspectives and social challenges. This immersive experience fosters critical thinking, empathy, and social awareness, encouraging active involvement in social change. The emotional connection between the audience and the theatrical performance often generates a sense of urgency and a desire to make a difference. It also contributes to the development of civic skills, improving effective communication, collaboration, conflict resolution, and understanding of democratic processes.

In conclusion, social theater has the potential to shape and transform society, stimulating critical reflection, promoting public dialogue, motivating political action, and developing

civic skills. The next chapters will further explore social theater, delving into its concepts, historical context, and educational impact. Given the scope of this discussion, we cannot cover every aspect here, but let's begin with a deeper understanding of the historical context of social theater.

1. Social Theater – Its General Concept and Historical Context

There are various interpretations of what social theater truly is and in what context it has evolved. Generally, social theater can be defined as a form of theater that encompasses various theatrical approaches actively engaging the audience in social issues. Unlike traditional theater, which may be perceived as passive, social theater aims to break down barriers, encouraging active audience participation in the theatrical process and promoting reflection. It is a theater based on the body and relationships but is not purely therapeutic or solely focused on aesthetics and artistry. It is a less egocentric theater, ready to become a tool for social action through workshops, debates, and performances with a goal of healing and enhancing the quality of social interactions. Helen Nicholson, in her book *Applied Drama: The Gift of Theatre*, offers an insightful definition, describing it as *an art that manifests itself in unconventional contexts, expresses itself in the community, in debates, and in political actions, and finds its place in education and learning*.¹ This perspective also finds its roots in the book by Robert J. Landy and David Montgomery, *Theatre for Change: Education, Social Action, and Therapy*, where the definition provided by the Center for Applied Theatre Research at the University of Manchester is brought forward:

Social theater encompasses the practice of theater and drama in non-traditional contexts and is distinguished by its active engagement in areas of social and cultural policy, including public health, education, the criminal justice system, and the interpretation and development of historical heritage²

Defining a single event or a specific date when social theater emerged is challenging; however, we can pinpoint that it began to take concrete shape in the early 1990s. Although its birthdate is relatively recent, social theater has deep roots in history, tracing back to politically engaged theater movements of the 20th century. It evolved in parallel with political revolutions and social

¹ Nicholson, Helen, *Applied Drama: The Gift of Theatre*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, p. 3.

² Landy, Robert J., Montgomery, David T., *Theatre for Change, Education, Social Action and Therapy*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, p. 131.

movements. Avant-garde theater artists and playwrights like Konstantin Stanislavski, Bertolt Brecht, Vsevolod Mejerchol'd, and Samuel Beckett, to name just a few, sought to break with traditional theatrical conventions, experiment with new forms of expression, and bring greater realism and critical thinking to their performances. This wave of political revolutions and social movements further fueled the growth of social theater.

For instance, Russian director and theater practitioner Konstantin Stanislavski introduced the concept of the "method of acting," aiming to bring an increased sense of realism and emotional authenticity to performances. Under the guidance of Bertolt Brecht in Germany, political theater took on new dimensions, incorporating elements of epic theater and encouraging critical thinking among the audience. One of the most influential theater movements in the context of social theater was the Theatre of the Absurd, which emerged in the mid-20th century and was introduced by playwrights such as Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, Harold Pinter, and Jean Genet. It indirectly critiqued the human condition in modern society by using absurd, illogical, and surreal scenarios to challenge traditional notions of reality and explore themes of alienation and existentialism. Although not explicitly political, these plays indirectly criticized the human condition and the absurdity of existence in the modern world.³

In the 1960s and 1970s, a crucial movement emerged in the world of social theater, thanks to the Theatre of the Oppressed conceived by Brazilian director and activist Augusto Boal. Boal's vision aimed to empower marginalized communities by directly involving them in theatrical creation. A significant example of this approach is "forum theater," where the spectator becomes a "spect-actor," interacting with the performance to change the outcome of the story and generate alternative solutions to social and political issues presented. Boal's techniques aimed to empower these marginalized communities, encouraging them to take collective actions. His work had a profound impact on the practice of social theater worldwide.

³ Schino, Mirella, *La nascita della regia teatrale*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2003, pp. 56.-98.

During that period, social theater experienced significant expansion, influenced by the civil rights, women's rights, and labor movements. These movements were characterized by a quest for identity and a departure from the dominant organizational system and theatrical tradition. The very conception of performance expanded, shifting theatrical aesthetics into the realms of the social, cultural, and political. Dedicated theater groups emerged, such as Julian Beck and Judith Malina's Living Theatre, known for their performances oriented toward social and political change. Director Jerzy Grotowski completely abandoned the boundaries of traditional theater, taking his actors into the forest of Brzezinka, Poland, to create alternative theatrical forms. Other theater groups like the Open Theatre and the Bread and Puppet Theatre, along with directors like Peter Brook and Eugenio Barba, deconstructed classical dramatic conventions related to form, space, and text, offering a critical perspective on politics and culture. These artists ventured beyond the "center" of the theatrical institution, exploring new territories, breaking free from traditional theater in search of expressive authenticity, direct communication, and alternative scenic languages.⁴

The decisive turning point for the birth of social theater occurred in the 1990s when multiple experiences marked the entrance of individuals facing various forms of hardship onto the stage of theatrical exploration. This was not merely about therapeutic laboratory practice but placed people and their diversities at the center of the stage. The non-actor, meaning individuals who were not part of the professional theater scene and in many cases were excluded or marginalized from social participation, shifted from being the subject of investigation to an active participant in a theater that, instead of projecting itself onto others, included them in the scene. This was in pursuit of authenticity and a lack of professional artifice and superstructures. Actors and non-actors coexisted in so-called expanded and integrated companies. The theater no longer confined itself to moving into spaces of exclusion or getting closer to the lives of others; instead, it brought life onto the stage by embracing differences and hosting them.⁵ One of the most emblematic examples of this new type

⁴ De Marinis, Marco, *Il Nuovo Teatro 1947-1970*, Milano, Bompiani, 1987, pp. 88 - 114.

⁵ Fiaschini, Fabrizio, *Per-formare il sociale. Tomo I: Controcampi. Estetiche e pratiche della performance negli spazi del sociale*, Roma, Bulzoni, 2022, pp. 65 - 82.

of theater is the "Compagnia della Fortezza", which originated as a Theater Workshop project within the Volterra Prison in August 1988, under the supervision of Carte Blanche and the direction of Armando Punzo. The Compagnia della Fortezza has produced thirty-eight performances over more than thirty years of activity, earning prestigious awards at the national and international levels. They have conducted tours, thanks to the opportunity to leave the prison on work permits, and have come closer to the realization of a Teatro Stabile (permanent theatre group) within the prison. The company soon began presenting its performances outside the prison walls, and over the years, it was regularly hosted and invited to various important Italian theaters and festivals. In 2003, it was decided to recognize the theatrical activity within the prison as a form of employment, allowing the actors of the company to go on tour according to Article 21 of the Penitentiary Code, which allows prisoners to engage in work activities outside the prison.⁶

In recent decades, social theater has become increasingly recognized as a legitimate and powerful form of art. In the 2000s, we witnessed the professionalization and integrated involvement of non-actors on an ongoing basis. Theater has become a concrete opportunity for expression, the acquisition of techniques, and professionalism, corresponding to a comprehensive educational process for disadvantaged individuals. While reformers in the past believed they could extract the secrets of sincerity and credibility from non-actors, drawing from their everyday life and work gestures to guide professional actors in their search for authenticity, and if the exploration of the other, in cultures and territories without theater, fueled in the 1970s a search for distinctiveness and a departure from the prevailing organizational system and theatrical thinking, starting from the 1990s, the entry of non-actors into the realm of theatrical exploration is no longer a result of rupture but an act of renewal. Theater does not exceed its boundaries; instead, it expands them to embrace a broader humanity and unexpected, more authentic, and real dimensions of being an actor.

⁶ Compagnia della Fortezza's official website. <http://www.compagniadellafortezza.org/new/storia/cera-una-volta/> (u.v. 3rd August 2023).

1.1. The Spaces of Social Theater

Social theater takes place in various settings, ranging from prisons, refugee camps, and hospitals to schools, orphanages, and nursing homes. Participants include local residents, individuals with disabilities, young inmates, and many other groups often hailing from vulnerable, disadvantaged, and marginalized communities. It can also involve individuals who have lost their connection to a sense of community, those who are internally and externally displaced, and the homeless. Social theater often unfolds in locations and situations that are not typical theater settings, transforming "non-actors" into performers. However, social theater is not, or at least should not be, limited to merely bringing performative practices into "non-theatrical" spaces, as if it were the meeting of two distinct and unrelated sets: theater and social work. Instead, we should think of it as the dynamic interaction of both practices, an interaction that can change both disciplines. The idea that social theater is simply about bringing theater to places that lack it or where theater has been disrupted or destroyed should be challenged. Instead, it should be understood as a complex process of interdisciplinary performance. It should be seen as a process of engagement, not just as bringing theater to people and places without theater. Instead, it involves creating theater with, from, and by silenced, marginalized, and oppressed communities.

Here is the breakdown of the places and forms that social theater can take, as formulated by the American theater theorist and director Richard Schechner in 1993⁷:

1. In Politics: The United Nations and various NGOs use social theater in many crisis and post-crisis situations, including emergency relief efforts, community capacity building, and

⁷ Schininà, Guglielmo, *Here We Are - Social Theatre and Some Open Questions about Its Developments*, in "Drama Review", autunno 2004, The MIT Press, pp. 26 sg.

democratization. Many formal and informal groups from minority communities have been able to raise their voices, be heard, and be politically included through the power of theater.

2. In Medicine: Workshops in theater, music, and visual arts are taking place in psychiatric care, hospitals, and healthcare facilities.
3. In Everyday Social Interactions: Social theater workshops are currently being conducted in schools, institutions, and healthcare settings. There are many performance interventions in challenging environments such as war zones, refugee settlements, refugee camps, and violent slums.
4. In Education: An increasing number of universities and social work schools offer specific training and specialization in social theater. Social theater is a subject studied in many theater departments and schools. More generally, theater is used as a methodology to educate people in a wide range of subjects.

In summary, we can identify four characteristics of social theater that differentiate it from other forms of theater, such as commercial or avant-garde theater:

1. The purpose of social theater is not primarily aesthetic results but the process of building relationships through creative communication. Aesthetic results can be a means, but they are not the primary goal.
2. Social theater is not integrated into the socio-economic structure of traditional and commercial theater.
3. Social theater sees theater as an activity that can involve everyone and is not a privileged activity for the talented individuals who develop their skills within the confines of traditional theater.
4. Finally, the ultimate goal of social theater is to empower differences and create solidarity, not to purify and "normalize" them.

During my fieldwork, I have come to the conclusion that the value of theater does not lie in its ability to emphasize what unites humans, but rather in its potential to emphasize their differences and create bridges between them. I believe that theater should work at the edges and boundaries, not at the center of what is defined as "humanity".⁸

Theatrical companies, artists, and activists continue to maintain social theater as a formidable platform for addressing and discussing various issues, such as poverty, inequality, gender discrimination, migrant rights, and numerous other social challenges. Over the decades, social theater has served as a means to eloquently denounce social inequalities, political injustices, and human rights violations.

In summary, social theater represents a vital and engaging art form that focuses on active audience engagement in social and political dynamics. With deep historical roots and ongoing evolution, social theater never ceases to challenge traditional theatrical norms and stands as a powerful voice and instrument of change for the most disadvantaged segments of society. The history of social theater is rooted in its early origins, but its modern form has evolved in response to historical and social changes. From its emergence alongside political revolutions and avant-garde experiments to its embrace of identity politics, global activism, and intersectionality, social theater has continually adapted to address urgent social issues and promote collective action. In an era of ever-evolving societal changes, social theater remains relevant as an essential tool for challenging norms, raising awareness, and promoting empathy and understanding among diverse communities. With the aid of technology and the phenomenon of globalization, social theater has expanded its reach and impact, solidifying itself as a powerful vehicle for catalyzing social change and contributing to a more inclusive and just world.

Theater always has a social function, whether its apparent purpose is religious, artistic, educational, or purely commercial. Its social function is to bring people together in a shared

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 17.

experience. The audience is as much a part of the theater as the drama, actors, singers, musicians, dancers, and a place to gather and share the performance. Theater and society are firmly intertwined. [...] If we want to realize our lives, we are compelled to be social beings as well as individuals. We must be born twice: first as individuals, and then as responsible members of society.⁹

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 20.

2. Theater and Education

In the field of education, where the pursuit of knowledge and the holistic development of students play a fundamental role, theater has earned significant recognition as an invaluable pedagogical tool. Theater, with its unique blend of creativity, expression, and collaboration, offers a range of benefits that go beyond the traditional confines of textbooks and frontal lectures. This chapter aims to delve deeply into the importance of integrating theater into educational contexts and explore how it can contribute to the intellectual, emotional, and social growth of students.

Over twenty years since the introduction of theater in the social sphere, it has received dual recognition: as an educational tool and as an ongoing artistic practice. It has been clearly demonstrated that the value of artistic outcomes is closely related to increased self-esteem, improved well-being, self-awareness, and awareness of the capabilities of the social actors. This implies that the artistic goal, while prioritized, should never conflict with the rich pedagogical and therapeutic potential of theater.

Social theater is not just a form of entertainment or protest; it also serves as a powerful educational tool. Through active engagement of the audience and the portrayal of social issues, social theater can influence critical thinking, stimulate empathy, and promote social awareness.

In this chapter, we will examine the educational power of social theater and its impact on individual development. We have chosen to categorize the benefits of theater into different sections, including:

1. Experiential learning,
2. Development of critical thinking and creativity,
3. Increased self-esteem and self-awareness,
4. Enhanced empathy and emotional intelligence,

5. Promotion of collaboration and teamwork.

Each of these sections will highlight how social theater can significantly contribute to the education and growth of individuals in various aspects of their lives.

Theater is inherently pedagogical as it engages all aspects of human functioning: mental, physical, emotional, and behavioral. It cannot be otherwise and should never be otherwise. It is in its primary nature... Theatrical action indeed impacts the individual, their human condition, their consciousness; it rarely remains inconsequential, leaving the person as they were before experiencing it, breathing it, and living it.¹⁰

2.1 Experiential Learning

Experiential learning plays a central role in social theater, standing out as a highly engaging and profound form of education. The theatrical experience engages every aspect of human functioning, involving the body, mind, emotions, and behavior. As Enrico Castellani, director and founder of Babilonia Teatri, states, experience is a perfect teacher that permeates and changes those who live it:

The theatrical experience involves the full engagement of all aspects of human functioning: physical, psychological, cognitive-linguistic, behavioral, and emotional. For this reason, it is inherently pedagogical and potentially transformative, therapeutic, and evolutionary.

¹⁰ Bordignon, Pierangelo, Burbello, Gloria, Masotti, Stefano, Presotto, Carlo (edited by), *Paradiso: diario di una ricerca teatrale e umana in Babilonia teatri*, Padova, Libreriauniversitaria.it, 2019, p. 79.

Experience is the only true teacher, the perfect teacher, who comes, passes through us, and changes us.¹¹

In this chapter, we will explore the importance of experiential learning in the context of social theater. In social theater, the audience is invited to actively participate in the experience. This can take various forms of engagement, such as direct participation in performances, post-show discussions, or even the creation of theatrical productions by the community itself. This approach is known as "experiential learning."

Experiential learning in social theater allows people to directly immerse themselves in the social issues addressed in the performance. By emotionally identifying with the characters or situations portrayed, the audience is exposed to different perspectives and social challenges. This direct involvement can generate a profound emotional impact, prompting viewers to reflect on their own opinions and actions in relation to these issues. Social theater aims for change, which can range from a simple change in mood induced by an engaging comedy to a deep transformation of thought inspired by a thought-provoking drama. This objective aligns perfectly with the educational mission of schools, offering a unique opportunity for social theater to contribute to school programs.

The dynamic platform of theater encourages active participation and experiential learning. Students, by taking on the roles of characters, engage in an empathetic exploration, analyzing motivations, emotions, and dilemmas from different perspectives. This experiential involvement promotes deeper understanding and critical thinking, allowing students to grasp complex concepts in literature, history, and social studies with greater insight. Through the physical embodiment of historical figures, literary characters, or scientific principles, students not only learn but also create meaningful connections with the content.

¹¹*Ibidem* , p. 100.

The classroom becomes a dynamic arena where students can actively engage with knowledge and ideas.

Experiential learning in theater stimulates curiosity and fosters the creation of connections between otherwise seemingly disconnected topics. For example, a science lesson about the solar system can turn into an interactive experience where students become celestial bodies, demonstrating orbits and gravitational forces. This approach allows students to gain a tangible understanding of abstract scientific principles. Social theater caters to various learning styles, accommodating visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learners. Students who have difficulty expressing themselves in writing find an opportunity to improve their communication and relational skills through dramatic representation. Furthermore, experiential involvement promotes interdisciplinary learning by connecting concepts that may seem distant.

In summary, social theater, through experiential learning, transforms classrooms into spaces of exploration and discovery. By engaging students on multiple levels—physically, emotionally, and intellectually—theater provides a path to deeper understanding and personal growth. Through role-playing, dramatic representation, and empathetic exploration, students not only learn but also experience knowledge in a tangible and engaging way.

2.2 Development of Critical Thinking and Creativity

Theater is an artistic realm that thrives on creativity and independent thinking. Through activities like improvisation and scriptwriting, students are tasked with creating stories, characters,

and dialogues from scratch. This stimulates their imagination and strengthens their ability to tackle problems with innovative solutions.

Within the educational landscape, nurturing creativity and problem-solving skills is of vital importance to prepare students to thrive in a constantly changing world. Theater, as a dynamic medium that requires creativity and quick thinking, plays a crucial role in encouraging these vital skills.

Theater, essentially, is an art of creation. From conceiving characters to constructing narratives, from designing sets to choreographing movements, every aspect demands a high degree of creativity. Students engaged in theater are encouraged to freely explore their own imagination, generating new ideas and solutions. Through improvisational exercises, they learn to trust their instincts, respond adaptively to unexpected situations, and think creatively under pressure. Engaging in theatrical activities such as scriptwriting and role-playing challenges students to create something entirely new from scratch. This process fuels their ability to approach problems with innovation. Just as a playwright constructs a plot, students learn to construct coherent and innovative solutions to the challenges they face, both in their studies and in everyday life.

Theater is an arena where uncertainty is embraced, and spontaneity is celebrated. Actors must adapt to unexpected situations, such as forgotten lines or sudden stage malfunctions. These unpredictable moments reflect real-life scenarios where problem-solving is crucial. Through these experiences, students develop resilience to face the unexpected and creativity to find immediate solutions.

Collaborative theatrical projects require synergy between creativity and problem-solving. Designing sets, costumes, and lighting, for example, demands innovative thinking to realize the director's vision while overcoming practical limitations. Students learn to balance art with logistics, a skill that translates well into fields beyond theater.

Furthermore, theater encourages embracing ambiguity and exploring different perspectives. In character analysis, students explore motivations, emotions, and actions that may not reflect their personal experiences. This practice of stepping into others' shoes fosters an open mindset, allowing students to approach challenges from various angles and devise global solutions.

The importance of theater in promoting creativity and problem-solving extends well beyond the stage. It shapes students' mindsets, prompting them to approach learning with curiosity and an open mind. The skills acquired through theater are transferable to many disciplines that require creative thinking, such as literature, science, and the arts.

In the context of education, fostering creativity and critical thinking skills is essential to prepare students to thrive in a constantly changing world. Theater is a powerful means to promote responsible and political citizenship, creativity, and critical thinking as an alternative to homogenization, dogmatism, and dominant culture. By daring to challenge uniform and globalized thinking, theater nurtures critical thinking, diversity, cooperation, and originality.

Indeed, theater helps to perceive the discomfort and dissatisfaction that can be a prelude to change. It helps us change our often dogmatic, imperfect, and partial imaginaries. Education itself is a process of change, and theater helps us imagine and glimpse the potentials. Creation is a constituent element of everyone's freedom. Every person possesses their own natural expressiveness and a precious creative capacity that makes them unique. Realizing these expressive potentials depends on the opportunities offered by the environment, society, and educational institutions. Unfortunately, these expressive potentials are often repressed and inhibited due to social conditioning, status, and the role assumed in society. Theater can be a laboratory in which individuals are encouraged to explore the expressive means they need and to consciously use the communicative faculties of their own bodies. The education in theatricality provides tools and expressive languages that facilitate the conquest of one's identity and the creation of meaningful bonds with others.

In conclusion, integrating theater into education is a dynamic way to cultivate creativity and critical thinking skills. Through theatrical experience, students acquire the skills to generate innovative ideas, adapt to unexpected challenges, and tackle problems with resilience and ingenuity. These skills enable them to become agile thinkers capable of addressing the complex challenges of a constantly evolving world.

2.3 Increased Self-Esteem and Self-Awareness

The integration of theater into education offers a diverse range of benefits, significantly contributing to students' development. One of the key advantages lies in the enhancement of their communication skills, which is fundamental to their growth and future success. Through various theatrical activities such as acting, improvisation, and public speaking, students refine their ability to express ideas and emotions clearly, persuasively, and engagingly. In particular, theater requires students to immerse themselves deeply in their roles, memorizing lines and internalizing the characters' emotions. This process not only improves their language proficiency but also enhances verbal fluency, enabling them to communicate more effectively and eloquently. Consequently, theater serves as a laboratory where students can refine their communication skills, gaining confidence and self-assurance.

It's important to note that the development of communication skills is not solely of academic importance; these skills play a crucial role in students' personal and professional growth. However, it is essential to recognize that the journey towards perfecting theatrical skills often involves mistakes and challenges. Theater, with its emphasis on communication, expression, and performance, emerges as a powerful tool for cultivating resilience and the ability to face failure constructively. Students learn to celebrate failure as an integral part of the growth and learning process, understanding that difficulties are opportunities for improvement.

In addition to the communicative aspect, theater helps students overcome a common challenge: the fear of the stage. As they perform in front of an audience, students gradually confront their fears, gaining the confidence needed to face similar situations in the future. This boost in confidence is not limited to the theatrical context but positively extends to classroom discussions, presentations, and everyday interactions.

Theater also promotes the practice of active listening, empathy, and collaboration. Actors must listen attentively to their fellow performers, responding in real-time to cues and prompts that shape the direction of scenes. This practice enhances students' ability to be fully present in conversations, consider others' perspectives, and respond thoughtfully, fostering richer and more meaningful interactions.

Furthermore, collaboration is a central element of theater and strengthens communication skills by encouraging effective teamwork. However, it's important to note that collaboration often involves challenges and moments of tension, which can be considered as moments of failure. Students learn to manage these conflicts constructively, gaining a deeper understanding of group dynamics and interpersonal relationships.

In summary, theater education provides an ideal environment for the development of communication skills, the growth of resilience, and the management of stage fright. These skills are valuable in daily life and the professional environment, preparing students to thrive in a complex and interconnected world. Theater becomes a vehicle for intellectual, emotional, and social growth, offering students a comprehensive learning experience that goes far beyond traditional academic disciplines.

2.4 Enhanced Empathy and Emotional Intelligence

The process of embodying different characters and exploring their emotions through theater is an effective tool for cultivating empathy and emotional intelligence in students. When students immerse themselves in the lives and psychologies of characters with diverse backgrounds and perspectives, they gain a greater sensitivity to the nuances of the human experience. This development of awareness of different emotions and perspectives promotes compassion and open-mindedness, preparing students to navigate an interconnected world with greater empathy.

In the educational context, promoting emotional intelligence and empathy is equally crucial as the development of cognitive skills. Empathy, the ability to understand and share the feelings of others, along with emotional intelligence, which includes managing one's own emotions and interpersonal relationships, are essential for shaping well-rounded individuals. Theater, with its deep exploration of human emotions, emerges as a powerful tool for cultivating these vital qualities in students. Through theater, students have the unique opportunity to assume the identities of characters from diverse life experiences. This embodiment of different roles allows them to experience a variety of emotions, backgrounds, and viewpoints. This process fosters empathy because students can see the world through another person's eyes, understanding the joys, pains, fears, and aspirations of these characters. This improves their ability to connect with and understand the experiences of real-life individuals.

Acting requires students to authentically explore and express various emotions. This emotional exploration leads to greater self-awareness of their own emotions and those of others. As students portray characters experiencing anger, love, sadness, or joy, they develop a richer emotional vocabulary and a deeper understanding of the complexity of human emotions. This understanding contributes to emotional intelligence, enabling students to perceive and manage their own emotions while responding empathetically to the emotions of others. Theater provides a safe space where

students can explore and process their own emotions. Often, as they explore the experiences of characters, they discover parallels between their own lives and those of the characters, facilitating self-discovery. This introspective process helps students reflect on their own emotions, motivations, and personal growth, contributing to greater emotional intelligence that helps them manage stress, communicate effectively, and make informed decisions.

Empathy, which forms the foundation of social intelligence, extends beyond the stage. By promoting empathy in the classroom, theater prepares students to interact empathetically with their peers, family, and the community at large. They learn to value the diversity of human experiences, engage in meaningful conversations, and contribute positively to their social circles.

In summary, the exploration of emotions and perspectives through theater emerges as a powerful tool for cultivating empathy and emotional intelligence in students. Through immersion in characters, emotional expression, and collaboration, students develop the ability to understand and connect with others on a deeper level. This set of skills enriches not only their personal lives but also prepares them to face the challenges of a socially interconnected world with compassion and empathy.

As the Australian philosopher Roman Krznaric emphasized, empathy is *the art of putting oneself in another person's shoes with imagination, understanding their feelings and viewpoints, and using that understanding to guide one's actions*.¹² If theater indeed contributes to increasing our empathy and understanding of others, this supports the importance of theater in society. Historically, the Aristotelian doctrine of catharsis and purification emphasized how theater allows us to immerse ourselves in fiction to free ourselves from feelings of terror and pity. Theater is based on relationships and becomes art when it transforms emotions through everyday language. Emotion itself, defined as *e-movēre*, is the impetus to move from one condition to another to present a new representation of reality.

¹² Krznaric, Roman, *Empathy: Why It Matters, and How to Get It*, London, Random House, 2014, p. 45.

Delving into the soul of another cannot help but teach openness, empathy, and completeness. It brings together breath with the body, voice, and emotions. It challenges the intellect and critical thinking. It develops values and promotes the acceptance of diverse opinions. I work hard to create a comfortable environment in my classroom where students feel safe and respected. I guide them to protect and motivate each other so they can trust their instincts, value their insights, and celebrate their humanity. These ideas and values have shaped all of my teaching over the past twenty-five years. I have always felt that by training actors, I was actually shaping human beings on their path to completeness.¹³

2.5 Promotion of Collaboration and Teamwork

Theater is a collaborative art form that requires cooperation and coordination among actors, directors, designers, and crew members. This collaboration is essential for the success of a theatrical production and provides students with valuable learning opportunities. When students participate in a theatrical production, they learn the value of teamwork, effective communication, and shared responsibility. Each member of the troupe contributes uniquely to the overall success of the performance, and this experience cultivates a deep understanding of group dynamics, which translates to the real world. This prepares students for future professional and personal collaborations, where the ability to collaborate effectively is essential for success.

In the field of education, preparing students for success goes beyond individual achievements; it also involves promoting the ability to collaborate effectively within a team. In the modern world,

¹³ Homan, Sidney (edited by), *Why The Theatre, In Personal Essays, College Teachers, Actors, Directors, and Playwrights Tell Why the Theatre Is So Vital to Them*, New York, Routledge, 2021, p. 118.

cooperation and synergy are crucial, making collaboration and teamwork indispensable skills. Theater, with its inherently collaborative nature, provides an ideal environment for cultivating these skills in educational settings. In theater, productions come to life through the joint efforts of actors, directors, designers, technicians, and other troupe members. When students actively participate in theatrical activities, they enter a microcosm where every role is crucial to the overall success. This direct experience of interdependence encourages students to recognize the value of cooperation and shared responsibility.

Through collaborative projects such as producing a play or creating a performance, students learn the art of negotiation and compromise. They must merge different ideas and perspectives, resolve conflicts, and find common ground. This practice not only fosters effective teamwork but also provides students with the communication skills necessary to manage different viewpoints, an invaluable skill in academic, professional, and personal contexts.

Theater requires active listening and responsiveness from actors, who must pay attention to their fellow performers' cues and adapt their actions in real-time. This heightened awareness of others' actions translates into improved interpersonal skills, as students learn to read non-verbal cues, respect personal boundaries, and engage more effectively in conversations. Furthermore, the collaborative nature of theater requires clear communication. From creating rehearsal schedules to providing stage directions, every aspect of a production relies on effective communication among team members. Students learn to articulate their ideas clearly, provide constructive feedback, and seek clarification when needed. This communicative practice promotes a culture of openness and transparency that translates into better communication skills in everyday life.

Group dynamics in theater reflect real-world dynamics, offering students valuable insights into leadership and collaboration. When students participate in a theatrical production, they experience leadership through directors and mentors, learning to follow directions and contribute to a broader vision. At the same time, they can take on leadership roles themselves, discovering the art of leading a team toward a common goal.

The collaborative process in theater also teaches a sense of responsibility. Students realize that their actions and contributions affect not only their individual performance but also the collective outcomes. This sense of responsibility is transferable to group projects in academic contexts and, later on, to collaborative projects in their professional careers.

In conclusion, theater's emphasis on collaboration and teamwork makes it an exceptional tool for promoting these skills in educational settings. By immersing students in a world where individual efforts contribute to a larger whole, theater prepares them for the collaborative demands of the modern world. Through collaborative projects, effective communication, and shared responsibility, students learn the value of teamwork and develop crucial skills for success in both their academic and professional journeys.

As stated by English actress Joanne Howarth:

theater can extend the threads of communication through the experience of generations, learning from each other over time. Theater employs empathy, myth, ritual, and listening, the functioning of the body, the beating of hearts, and the individuality of each person in the room to take us on a shared journey. I have seen a crowd of strangers breathe, laugh, yawn, argue, and sometimes even pray together during the best theatrical experiences. Not alone in front of a screen, but together. This must be healthy.¹⁴

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 105.

3. The Gaps in the Curriculum

Theater in schools is still often neglected despite its numerous benefits. Even though there has been progress in the United States with certification for teaching theater in some states like New York, the perception of theater as a secondary subject persists worldwide.¹⁵ Many schools do not offer theater programs, and even those that do often do not give them the same value as sports programs or exam preparations.

However, theater education is essential for students' development as it promotes creativity, critical thinking, empathy, and communication skills. These are fundamental aspects of students' personal and intellectual growth. Why, despite these benefits, is theater still neglected in schools?

One of the main obstacles is the limited budget. Schools often have to contend with limited financial resources, leading to cuts in arts education, including theater programs. Subjects considered essential for standardized tests, such as math and science, often receive the majority of resources, at the expense of artistic disciplines. Additionally, theater is sometimes seen as a secondary or "frivolous" subject that does not have a direct impact on test scores or college admissions. This perception limits its recognition and support in schools. However, theater offers invaluable transferable skills, such as self-confidence and communication skills. Sports teams and exam preparation programs often receive more attention and resources because of their perceived competitiveness and their correlation with academic success. This often relegates theater programs to the background.

To address this issue, a change in mindset is needed. Educational institutions should recognize theater as an essential component of holistic education and ensure adequate resources. Furthermore, integrating theater into the curriculum can demonstrate its relevance in various contexts. It is

¹⁵ Landy, Robert J., Montgomery, David T., op.cit., p. 12.

essential to reassess educational priorities and ensure that theater receives the recognition and support it deserves.

The specificity of social theater consists of its functions (educational, artistic, recreational, and professional) that are inseparable and not mutually exclusive. The opportunity for disadvantaged individuals to participate in the creative process, transforming their condition to recognize themselves in the new technical skills and additional expressive possibilities acquired through theater; and reciprocally, the possibility for theater to engage itself, moving away from stylizations and conventions, to connect with essential aspects of reality and regenerate its meaning in contact with original and authentic needs. Placing the theme of the opportunity for expression at the center allows us, from this perspective, to consider the vast and diversified territory of social theater as a place where education, integration, and artistic elaboration coexist actively rather than belonging to separate areas and worlds. Any education that does not help, encourage, and stimulate the student to acquire a passion for knowledge cannot truly be called education.

Theater, like education, aspires to keep complexity alive and can only do so by keeping alive the comparison with the civil and social urgencies of contemporaneity. It becomes a necessary theater for this capacity to be real, to make us confront the reality of the shadow zones, but at the same time to make us imagine, desire, or reinvent worlds in which we want to live or no longer want to live.¹⁶

Conclusion

¹⁶ Gobbi, Laura, Zanetti, Federica (edited by), *Teatri Re-Esistenti. Confronti su teatro e cittadinanze*, Corazzano, Titivillus, 2011, p. 31.

In the ever-evolving landscape of education, the incorporation of theater as a pedagogical tool testifies to the profound impact that creative and experiential learning can have on students' intellectual, emotional, and social growth. Theater, with its unique ability to engage the mind, body, and heart simultaneously, emerges as a transformative force that goes beyond textbooks and lectures. Through its diverse offerings, theater provides students with a rich set of skills and qualities crucial for success in today's interconnected world.

From enhancing learning through experiential engagement to promoting self-expression and communication skills, theater opens avenues for students to deepen their studies while refining their ability to articulate ideas clearly and confidently. Through the exploration of emotions and perspectives, theater cultivates empathy and emotional intelligence, fostering students' ability to connect with others on a profound level. By promoting collaboration and teamwork, theater equips students with the tools to navigate diverse dynamics, communicate effectively, and contribute meaningfully to collective efforts.

Perhaps most importantly, theater offers students a platform to overcome stage fright and build unwavering self-confidence. This journey from anxiety to confidence mirrors the broader educational journey, where challenges become springboards for growth. Theater allows students to embrace vulnerability, step out of their comfort zones, and realize their true potential—a powerful lesson that extends well beyond the realm of the stage.

As the curtain falls on the exploration of the significance of theater in education, it is evident that its influence goes beyond academic content; it shapes character. The skills acquired through theater—critical thinking, effective communication, empathy, creativity, collaboration, and confidence—lay the foundation for well-rounded individuals ready to navigate a complex and interconnected world. Educators who recognize and harness the transformative power of theater provide their students with an enriched learning experience that transcends the boundaries of conventional education. Through theater, students not only learn about the world but also learn to engage with it, shaping their personal growth and the future landscape they will inhabit.

Bibliography

- Bernardi, Claudio, *Il teatro sociale*, Roma, Carrocci, 2005.
- Bernardi, Claudio, *Sull'antropologia del teatro*, in "I fuoricena, esperienze e riflessioni sulla drammaturgia nel sociale", Milano, Euresis Edizioni, 2000, pp. 25-59.
- Boal, Augusto, *Il teatro degli oppressi: teoria e tecnica del teatro*, Molfetta, La meridiana, 2011.
- Boal, Augusto, *Games for actors and non-actors*, London, Routledge, 1992.
- Bordignon, Pierangelo, Burbello, Gloria, Masotti, Stefano, Presotto, Carlo (edited by), *Paradiso: diario di una ricerca teatrale e umana in Babilonia teatri*, Padova, Libreriauniversitaria.it, 2019.
- Caputo, Michele, *Espressione artistica e contesti formativi*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 2019.
- Caputo, Michele, Pinelli, Giorgia (edited by), *Pedagogia dell'espressione artistica*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 2019.
- De Marinis, Marco, *Il Nuovo Teatro 1947-1970*, Milano, Bompiani, 1987.
- Fiaschini, Fabrizio, *Per-formare il sociale. Tomo I: Controcampi. Estetiche e pratiche della performance negli spazi del sociale*, Roma, Bulzoni, 2022.
- Gobbi, Laura, Zanetti, Federica (edited by), *Teatri Re-Esistenti. Confronti su teatro e cittadinanza*, Corazzano, Titivillus, 2011.
- Homan, Sidney (edited by), *Why The Theatre, In Personal Essays, College Teachers, Actors, Directors, and Playwrights Tell Why the Theatre Is So Vital to Them*, New York, Routledge, 2021.
- Jennings, Sue, *Drama Therapy: Theory and Practice 3*, London, Routledge, 1997.
- Krznicaric, Roman, *Empathy: Why It Matters, and How to Get It*, London, Random House, 2014.
- Landy, Robert J., Montgomery, David T., *Theatre for Change, Education, Social Action and Therapy*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

- Levy, Jonathan, *Reflections on How the Theatre Teaches*, in “Aesthetics in Drama and Theatre Education”, inverno 2005, vol. 39, n. 4, University of Illinois, pp. 20-30.
- May, Brian, *Development through Drama*, London, Humanities Press, 1990.
- Nichols, Dudley, *Theatre, Society, Education*, in “Educational Theatre Journal” , October 1956, vol. 8, n. 3, The Johns Hopkins University, pp. 179-184.
- Nicholson, Helen, *Applied Drama: The Gift of Theatre*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.
- O'Hara, Michael, *Drama in Education: A Curriculum Dilemma* in “Theory Into Practice”, autunno 1984, vol. 23, n. 4, Taylor & Francis, pp. 314-320.
- Orioli, Walter, *Teatro come terapia*, Cesena, Macroedizioni, 2001.
- Schininà, Guglielmo, *Here We Are - Social Theatre and Some Open Questions about Its Developments*, in “Drama Review”, Autumn 2004, The MIT Press, pp.17-31.
- Schino, Mirella, *La nascita della regia teatrale*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2003.
- Taylor, Harold, *Education by Theatre*, in “Educational Theatre Journal” , December 1963, vol. 15, n. 4, The Johns Hopkins University, pp. 299-310.
- Thompson, James, Schechner, Richard, *Why "Social Theatre"?*, in “TDR”, Autumn 2004, vol. 48, n. 3, The MIT Press, pp. 11-16.
- Valenti, Cristina, *Arte ed emozione dal sociale. Il teatro per l'educazione e l'inclusione*, in “Ateatro”, n.139, 30th May 2012, Torino, Loescher, 2016.