

Debate-Theatre in La Reina

Moysés Aguiar

Federação Brasileira de Psicodrama (Febrap).

Revista Brasileira de Psicodrama. 2013. 21(2), 11-26.

Abstract

This article introduces the characteristics of the Debate-Theatre, a variation from the Spontaneity Theatre, illustrated by the account of a session in which certain issues were raised. A historical background and the context of this approach, as well as its correlations with other work modalities within this field, are presented. In this format, the audience is invited to debate a specific topic, either previously announced or chosen at the session. The aim of the process is to gradually move from the more traditional verbal debate onto a scenic approach, during which the audience will improvise a story that simultaneously expresses both their feelings and thoughts regarding the chosen topic. The event is led by a director in conjunction with a team of trained actors whose objective is to stimulate the participation of the audience.

Keywords: Spontaneity Theatre. Debate-theatre. Sociodrama. Axiodrama.

INTRODUCTION

The debate-theatre is a form of performing arts, which derives from the “spontaneity theatre”, originally presented by Jacob Levy Moreno (MORENO, 1923). This author is known as the creator of Psychodrama – an elaboration of this same theatrical experience, in which it was found the therapeutic effect of an improvised staging of existential conflicts, where subjects act on stage creating and performing as characters cloned from their personal experience (MARINEAU, 1989).

The spontaneity theatre is basically an improvised theatre (JOHNSTONE, 1990); CHACRA, 1983), in which improvisation is no longer used as a training strategy in order to become the spectacle itself. The absence of rehearsals and of a more elaborate production shifts the traditional aesthetic focus, taking what happens “here and now” as priority values: the spontaneity, the participants’ emotional engagement and the collective constructions.

The practice of the spontaneity theatre allows the detection of two basic orientations. One of which focusses the dramatic production on the performance of a group of actors, preferably specifically trained, that captures the audience’s contribution and uses it as raw material to create both the text as well as its simultaneous staging, in real time. The other orientation instrumentalizes the audience’s transformation into actors/authors, with the spectators themselves occupying the stage and translating their collective creativity into it. In this case, the troupe of actors take the roles of professional facilitators of the unexperienced people’s scenic performance.

Between these two extremes there are several intermediate combinations that use different ways of occupying the stage with actors both prepared and supposedly unprepared for acting. The relation between these two theatrical poles – stage and audience – creates a kaleidoscope of alternatives that have their own expressions throughout the History of theatre, from ancient times to nowadays. This can also be said about the correlation between a spectacle that was prepared and another that is built in the moment.

Through this perspective, the formats of spontaneity theatre are as diverse as the theatrologists that practice them. However, it is possible to name a few work formats that have become models, from which it is possible to develop different styles and propositions. For this purpose, we deemed relevant the Dramatherapy (JENNINGS, 2006), the Playback Theatre (SALAS, 1993), the Dramatic Multiplication (KESSELMAN; PAVLOVSKY, 2000) and the Audience Theatre (AGUIAR, 1998).

In the Dramatherapy, the work begins with a script that stimulates the improvisations done later. There are several ways to do this. One of them is to, as a group, thoroughly examine the offered script and focus on a deep comprehension of the characters, the conflicts and the plot. Whilst attempting several strategic momentary performances, the script's relevant aspects are identified along with the possibility of alternate changes. This creative work allows a confrontation of the conflicts that illustrates the group's issues and has, as a consequence, a transforming effect.

The Playback Theatre, the current hegemonic format, often gets confused with the "Spontaneity Theatre" itself (GARAVELLI, 2003), when the particular is designated by the universal, which ends up getting taken for the particular¹. In its most classical and original form, a group of actors offers to improvise, in real time, stories told by members of the audience, or even emotions explained by them. The narrator, then, sees its life transformed into art. Hence the name "Playback".

A Brazilian version of this proposition has introduced some meaningful modifications to the original format, and was rebranded as "Replay Theatre" (RODRIGUES, 2013). Another one, the "Creation Theatre" suggests not to exactly enact what was told by the audience, but to create a new story from what resonated among the actors based on the audience's contribution (REÑONES, 2000).

The "Creation Theatre's" work line has an important contact point with Kesselman's and Pavlovsky's proposition called Dramatic Multiplication. Originally set within Psychodrama, from a critic perspective and an alternate comprehension of the psychic phenomena, the idea is that any situation told resonates somehow with who has listened to it, mobilizing fragments of memories lived by the "listeners" – resonances -, scenes which can be taken onto the stage. One of its developments is the "multiplication theatre" and, more recently, the "molecular theatre", both proposed by Sintes (SINTES, 2002; SINTES and DOTTA, 2008).

The debate-theatre is an innovation proposed by a Brazilian troupe, Companhia do Teatro Espontâneo (The Spontaneity Theatre Company). Founded in São Paulo, during the 1980s, it was terminated around ten years later, and then re-founded in the city of Campinas, where it survived until the first decade of this century. This group was characterized by the diversity of formats with which has worked (including the aforementioned) throughout its history and by its disposition to experiment with new alternatives and to make its inventions available. One of its major experiments was the so-called "Escola de Tietê" (The Tietê School), an educational project that initially aimed

¹ This same phenomenon occurs in Psychodrama. In theory, Psychodrama is just an application of the Spontaneity Theatre, with psychotherapeutical purposes. However, there is a whole area of knowledge and practices, whose correct denomination would be "Socionomy", frequently called "Psychodrama".

to qualify psychodramatists, but that gradually became an important experiment on the development of spontaneity theatre operators. The word “School” is used with a double sense, meaning both an educational institution and the content of its propositions.

Its work axis was always the audience’s theatre, i.e., to transform the spectators into actors, bringing the audience onto the stage. This instrument gives all participants some initial warm-up exercises, and then seeks a story to be enacted. In the beginning, there is only a plot embryo, often just the main character – the protagonist – performed by a member of the audience. The story is build and acted at the same time, mostly with the spectators’ participation. On the troupe’s actors, there relies the task of leveraging the performance, acting along the “amateur” actors, helping their creations and stimulating them to perform their roles.

This model tends to present two great challenges. One is the unpreparedness, in theory, of the actors coming from the audience. Some of their difficulties: moving from the verbal account to the character incorporation; taking on fictional roles, letting go of the reality in which they live; the absence of familiarity with aesthetic resources, and so on.

Another challenge is the entitlement of the “professional” actor’s role², part of the team that coordinate the activities. Since the acting priority belongs to the people from the audience, often the troupe’s actors are not too demanded, which tends to generate frustration from seating on the bench as a backup for too long. To balance the participations, obtaining both a satisfactory aesthetic effect, benefiting as much as possible from the trained operators’ contributions, as well as allowing the scenic expression of the feelings, conflicts desires, worldviews from the people who came to the event – that is the utopia.

On the other hand, the spontaneity theatre clientele is mostly made of people with a reduced theatrical experience, whether on stage or on an auditorium. The contact they have with subject matters of their interest is usually made on lectures and conferences, resuming innovation to panels expositions, film exhibitions or short theatrical plays presentations. The “moralist” character of these formats assumes that the target-audience is passive, or at best, eager for enlightening ideas.

To overcome this passiveness, some more participative formats are being explored. The “focal group”, for instance, allows the display of ideas and feelings, using basically verbal communication. Another example: the so-called “dynamics” (from the original term “group dynamic”), interactive games with a previously planned structure, that aspire to go beyond words, including physical tasks and the use of objects and tools. The moralist tendency still may prevail, in such cases, insofar as the coordinators has a final word, regarding interpretation, conclusion or counselling, partly recovering the logic of a traditional lecture.

The use of theatrical resources as a form of target-audience expression has two important historical icons: Bertold Brecht and Augusto Boal, both having artistic trajectories characterized by radical political commitment.

The former has developed the “didactic play” (KOUDELA, 1991). This model resembles the dramatherapy mentioned above, but has no therapeutic purposes. The group is offered a short sketch, and it is induced to experiment its various forms of representation, making consecutive criticisms and self-criticisms, stimulating the search for scenic alternatives which potentialize the expression of the text’s accredited meaning. Such strategy allows the subjects to get involved and to deepens their comprehension of

² Rodrigues, R., in his PhD, presented in 2013 at the University of São Paulo (USP), calls these actors “ego-actors”, as an homage to the traditional psychodrama terminology “auxiliary-ego”, the therapist that, on stage, “lends their ego” to the protagonist.

the conflict in question. In this instance, there is no creation of a verbal text, that is never-changing, as a basic stimulus, but there is a creation of an “actoral” text, volatile, of instant consumption, immediately digested and overcome.

Boal (1996, 1999) was a prodigy at creating theatrical games that allowed the community to express itself and, at the same time, to broaden its consciousness, specially regarding the oppressor-oppressed relationship, a consciousness that would foster the possibility of actions that sought its eventual overcoming. Apart from specific interventions, ephemeral, in which the improvisation happens within a previously established structure, he also proposed a more prolonged kind of intervention, where the participants are stimulated to create collectively a text that represents them, to be then enacted. Here, the author comes closer to the famous “Living Theatre” experiment.

An important question to be asked regarding the spontaneity theatre is: Who does it work for? The presentations that are open to the overall public do not always count with a strong enough attraction force, first because there is not a theatrical culture capable of competing with the television’s appeals or even with uncompromised leisure, activities done by the majority of the people. If going to the theatre is practically not an option, going to a “spontaneity theatre” is even less so, it is something that almost no-one knows about.

Whith that in mind, the most viable option is to organize a programme of on-demand sessions of spontaneity theatre, usually by an institution, corporate companies or an event organizer (congresses, celebrations). In general, the one who hires it has specific goals in mind, usually trying to convince people to adopt certain behavioural patterns regarded as desired, values to be built into the target audience’s mind. Less often, however relevant, is the use of the spontaneity theatre to investigate opinions, preferences, relational moods and other group phenomena. In this case, the art would be just a tool used to reach these goals, which in theory, would go against its liberating character.

Nevertheless, there is a possible interest in proposing to people the debate of some themes, direct or indirectly, immediately or not, related to their lives, as a means of social intervention, with neither a moralist, nor a manipulative bias. The spontaneity theatre’s hypothesis is that this approach can be empowered when articulated with the transformative potential of the artistic action – in this case, the theatre. This is a non-utilitarian art, it is not to be confused with the passive or mass consumption of third-parties’ artistic products (AGUIAR, 2010).

THE METHODOLOGICAL PROPOSAL

All of these issues became a backdrop for the Spontaneity Theatre Company’s work, which was constantly looking back at them – and was definitely not alone at this, since these same afflictions must visit meetings of other groups of artists that pursue similar goals.

Assuming as fact that the participant audience is more familiar with the verbal dialogue, the debate-theatre suggests, in a first moment, the approach of a theme made only orally. As the discussion unfolds, the troupe’s actors interrupt to perform completely improvised short scenes (one minute long, on average), through which they seek to encourage a deeper reflexion and to offer an example/model of scenic expression.

When one speaks of completely improvised scenes, in practice, it means that the actors come onto the stage not knowing what they are about to do. Once they are on the scenic space, they act from an instantaneous intuition, although still within a dialectic model (thesis-antithesis-synthesis), in which the first actor – technically the protagonist

– brings up a situation, the second one creates a conflict and the third one, pointing to the relationship between the first two, offers a path to a scenic solution. Oddly enough, the strongest and most beautiful scenes are the ones where this instruction is closely followed: when one goes onstage already with some idea of what to do in mind, the scenes tend to be impoverished. At least, this has been observed in this kind of theatre.

The incorporation of this model demands intense work from the team. The workshops are usually weekly, when the previous performances are examined and assessed, and alternate forms are experimented and are subjected to thorough analysis. On these occasions, the group seeks to explore the entire range of acting possibilities, along the lines of the Grotowskian theatre, with a broad appreciation of the body and of the actor's personal resources (GROTOWSKI, 1968), associated to Umberto Eco's "open work" (ECO, 1991).

During the performance, the actors do not engage in the verbal debate. They only watch the group's movement, letting themselves be saturated by the emotional mood, seizing the relationships' dynamics in a non-rational manner. This way, the scenes emerge from their deepest feelings and serve two main purposes: to mirror the group and to create a temporary synthesis of its reflexion. The mirroring allows the group to reposition itself within its movements surrounding the task. The synthesis favours the relocation of the debate to a new height.

Throughout the session, the director suggests to members of the audience to come onstage the act along the troupe's actors. This way, the participants themselves incorporate the mirrored perspective and the critical distance.

The climax happens when the verbal debate becomes scenic: the actors now all come from the audience and build collectively a story that is enacted right as it is created. This story is usually longer than the short scenes that interrupt the audience's speech and constitutes a real scenic debate, that incorporates the contributions brought until then and shows how far the group has gone in the comprehension and reflexion of the proposed theme.

THE SESSION IN LA REINA

The case described in this paper took place in November 2003, at the La Reina Cultural Centre's auditorium, in Santiago de Chile. The session's theatrical direction rested on this author. The actors of the Impromptu troupe, a local spontaneity theatre group, were asked to create a cast ad hoc.

Those actors already had some experience with the debate-theatre. Their director had participated in a seminar in Campinas. Two actresses had taken part in performances by the Spontaneity Theatre Company, in Buenos Aires. And almost all of them came from a workshop I gave, as part of the post-graduation programme, at the Mariano Egaña University, in Santiago de Chile. However, the team formed for this performance had no history of work together, let alone with debate-theatre. That created an important challenge.

The radical improvisational demand, coming from the actors during the short scenes, is relevant, because the debate-theatre's timing is very specific. If the interruptions are long, with the actors preparing to go onstage, either using elements (costumes, objects, etc.), or trying to settle the slightest on what will be performed, it un-warms the audience and freezes the debate. It is important to note that the interaction between the troupe and the other participants requires a balance that, keeping the characteristics of a theatrical experience, does not obfuscate the audience's participation.

Another uniqueness of this session was its theme. Usually, with the debate-theatre, there is a previous announcement, so that when people come, they already know what they will be debating about. The La Reina invitation had no explanation, so during the session the director had to improvisationally introduce a new phase, a poll to the participants so that they could decide the subject they wanted to deal with through the debate-theatre.

The inexistence of a previous theme affects the initial warmup's planning. When people arrive, they are not focussed yet on the task that awaits them, nor to act together. For this reason, the warmup is an orientation of the energies towards a determined goal and a provision towards synergic actions, which will constitute a groupness of that moment.

As this is a theatrical work, it is imperative to encourage a good spatial relation, to put bodies in motion, that the energies stop concentrating in the brain to find new channels of expression, that people can experience the pleasure and the importance of complementarity, that there is an openness to fiction and to fantasy, and so on. In the debate-theatre, the warmup may include a focalisation on the suggested theme. When there is no such theme, like in this instance, the warmup was done without this reference. However, the choice being made on the spot favoured, through a different path, the necessary concentration.

Another interesting aspect was the route taken in the final dramatization. The story brought by one of the participants – duly stimulated by the debate-theatre's ritual – focused on an embryonic solidarity between people from different nationalities and ethnicities, that were victims of a circumstantial bullying for political and judicial reasons they had nothing to do with. Instead of the creation by the group of a plot that addressed those issues, the director was surprised by one member of the audience that, interrupting a barely started dramatization, urged everyone to immediately express the collective harmony and union beyond any eventual differences that there could be between them. The idea excited the participants, all of whom came onstage and held hands, forming a great circle, and that closed the session.

When the author of this proposal interrupted from the audience, the director felt a brief discomfort. He realized it was someone who knew some performative tools from Psychodrama, that differ from the debate-theatre's orientation, which prioritizes scenes with a plot – beginning, middle, ending -, centred on a protagonist. The proposal changed everything, it was as if the proponent was stealing his role as director, offering an alternate defying solution.

The events then unfolded vertiginously. Since the audience had very enthusiastically accepted the proposal, the director came to the conclusion that this was the desired path to the group and, therefore, it should be followed. Above of and despite the validity of the model he wanted to put into practice.

Another important characteristic from the experiment in La Reina: the director was the only one who spoke Portuguese, in a group of about 80 people, whose native language was Spanish. Even with the director taking the risk of expressing himself in a poor and confusing Spanish, and understanding only parts of the crossed dialogues that took place among the Chileans, this interaction was possible and the performance was very satisfactory.

DISCUSSION

This experiment shows that it is possible to produce an improvised theatrical

work, even when the conditions offered are not those considered ideal.

In this case, there was a language barrier, as mentioned, that could have posed as an obstacle to the collective production. Throughout this director's personal experience, similar phenomena were observed when directing sessions of spontaneity theatre in countries who spoke languages he did not know.

Another adverse condition was the inexistence of a team with previous training and without a close connection developed through a thorough work together. The affectional availability seems to have been fundamental, in this case, apart from the fact that the actors had already had previous opportunities and technical knowledge, even without having put it into practice. The communication between the director and the actors was eased, and they could learn the significance of their task and could put their artistic creativity into action.

On stable theatrical companies, the mission overcomes the mere event, like in this case. Their duty is not to merely act, but to experimentally build their own techniques, which can bring sturdiness and consistency to their work. In the present case, sturdiness and consistency was being built by another team, and there was a quick transference of knowledge within a context of "significant learning".

The irruption of a proposal that differs from the scheme planned by the director can be approached in several ways. One is the challenge to the sensibility and mainly to their spontaneity, since it is a new, unexpected, fact that demands and immediate and creative answer. In the theoretical perspective of the spontaneity theatre, the directors are part of the group, even if it is a distinguished role, which means that they produce and are produced simultaneously; they are co-creators of the collective work. Albeit not having to necessarily subordinate themselves to alternate proposals that come from the group, they cannot refuse to consider them and assess them on a depth that goes at least one step beyond the surface, from what is formally explicated.

The same thing happens with direct or indirect emotional displays in the group, which are important information regarding the work and the paths it takes. In this case, the excitement with which the proposal of harmony was embraced was an indicator that could not be discarded. On other occasions, the audience manifest itself in the most unusual ways, such as distraction, sabotage, dispersity, overlaying of needs (hunger, urination, sleep, etc.). All of these phenomena need to be taken into account.

Another important aspect is related to facing conflicts. In the session described, the director expected to deepen the exploration through the creation of new scenes, through a rhizomatic plot that favoured this confrontation. That was not the path taken by the group. Also in this case, the great challenge that presents itself to the director is to assess the resistance and to decide if it is a matter of confronting it and trying to overcome it or if it simply establishes the limit the group can reach while approaching the theme. There is not a default solution, leaving room to, once again, search for a creative and spontaneous path.

CONCLUSION

It has been ten years since this experience in Santiago. Since then, many troupes have been dedicating themselves to the debate-theatre. We even heard that there are many people across Latin America that dedicate themselves to the spontaneity theatre and that make their living out of it. And the debate-theatre is one of their tools.

From a technical point of view, many skills and precautions were developed throughout this history. The aesthetic concern prevails, given that the aesthetic quality is

defined as the reliability of the artistic message: the power it has on, not only those who make art, but also on those that consume it. With the debate-theatre, maximizing its transformative potential, since its most renowned use has been as a socio-communitarian intervention device, as a device both for Axiodrama and for Sociodrama³.

REFERENCES

- AGUIAR, M. **Teatro espontâneo e Psicodrama**. São Paulo: Ágora, 1998.
- _____. **Tempo para o potencial do fazer artístico**. Trabalho apresentado ao XVII Congresso Brasileiro de Psicodrama: Águas de Lindoia, 2010.
- AGUIAR, M. (org.). **Psicodrama e emancipação – A escola de Tietê**. São Paulo: Ágora, 2009.
- BOAL, A. **Jogos para atores e não atores**. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1999.
- _____. **O arco-íris do desejo**. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1996.
- CHACRA, S. **Natureza e sentido da improvisação teatral**. São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1983.
- ECO, U. **Obra aberta**. São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1991.
- GARAVELLI, M. E. **Odisea en la escena – Teatro espontâneo**. Cordoba, Argentina: Brujas, 2003.
- GROTOWSKI, J. **Em busca de um teatro pobre**. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1987.
- JENNINGS, S. et al. **The handbook of dramatherapy**. London: Taylor & Francis Books, 2006.
- JOHNSTONE, K. **Improvisación y el teatro**. Santiago do Chile: Cuatro Vientos, 1990.
- KESSELMAN, H.; PAVLOVSKY, E. **La multiplicación dramática**. Buenos Aires: Galerna/Búsqueda de Aillu, 2000.
- KOUDELA, I. D. **Brecht: um jogo de aprendizagem**. São Paulo: Edusp/ Perspectiva, 1991.
- MARINEAU, R. **Jacob Levy Moreno, 1889-1974 – Pai do psicodrama, da sociometria e da psicoterapia de grupo**. São Paulo: Ágora, 1992.
- MORENO, J. L. **O teatro da espontaneidade**. São Paulo: Ágora-Daimon, 2012.
- REÑONES, A.V. **Do playback theatre ao teatro de criação**. São Paulo: Ágora, 2000.

³ I understand Axiodrama as the use of spontaneity theatre as a tool for approaching communitarian issues, whereas in Sociodrama, the spontaneity theatre's objects are the group's phenomena as such.

RODRIGUES, R. A. **O teatro de reprise**: conceituação e sistematização de uma prática brasileira de sociopsicodrama. Tese (Doutorado). Escola de Comunicações e Artes da Universidade de São Paulo (USP). São Paulo, 2013.

SALAS, J. **Improvising real life** – Personal story in playback theatre. Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt, 1993.

SINTES, R. **Por amor al arte** – Entre el teatro espontáneo y la multiplicación dramática. Buenos Aires: Lumen, 2002.

SINTES, R.; DOTTA, F. **Psicodrama**: La terapia de los dioses caídos. Montevideo: Psicolibros, 2008.

Moisés Aguiar. Psychologist, psychotherapist, professor-supervisor at Federação Brasileira de Psicodrama (Febrap), Art Psychology Specialist at Universidade Estadual Paulista (Unesp). 1939-2015.