HERE WE ARE - SOCIAL THEATRE AND SOME OPEN QUESTIONS ABOUT ITS DEVELOPMENTS

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Origins

Anthropologists and historians do not agree on the origins of ritual and theatre. According to René Girard (1972), Jacques Heers (1983), and Claudio Bernardi (2000), just to mention a few, at one time there was only religious ritual. However, others maintain that ritual has always been social and has regulated the social functioning of not only human groups, but also groups of animals from the prehuman era (Bonino 1987; Eibl-Eibesfeldt 1989; Schechner 1993). Among those who believe the latter view are those scholars who think that the origin of ritual is biological. Victor Turner’s research, for instance, tended to stress the biological identity of human beings and a rigid division of the functions that regulate the instincts, emotions, and rituals according to the different cerebral regions (Turner 1990). Paul Ekman, with his comparative analysis of the facial expressions of emotions in the human face stresses the bio-neurological origin of these expressions and claims that these are not determined by cultural, historical, environmental, and social specificities (1982).

Those were the theoretical tendencies of the theatre at the beginning of my theatre experience. Today I work with theatre in places affected by war and other crises usually provoked by ethnic and cultural differences and economic disparities (see Schininà 2001, 2002a, 2002b). During my fieldwork, I arrived at the conclusion that the value of theatre does not lie in its capacity to emphasize what unifies human beings, but rather in its potential to emphasize their differences and to create bridges between them. I believe the theatre should work at the limits and the borders—and not at the center—of what is defined as ‘humanity.’

The research mentioned above was scientifically motivated but paved the way and gave theoretical justification to the search for a universal means of communication that was to be found in the unifying factor of the body. This search led to the political and then artistic failure of the new theatre. Its focus was indeed centered on something apparent but not substantial. Even if there are elements human beings have in common, there are, at any level even the biological one—big differences. Even in everyday life, as Boal writes, the job one does or one’s social class “mechanizes” one’s body (1974). If we concentrate on the unifying factors, we create elites who do not act in history; we position them as somehow existing “above” or removed from the social and relational dynamics of identity formation. If we work on the differences among and within all people, we might be able to turn conflicts into peaceful contrasts and exchanges—into ways of relating.

Evolution

What theatre scholars do agree on is that at a certain point, either following its development, or recuperating its original characteristics, social ritual became independent from religion. This process helped the theatre become, after many centuries, an autonomous form of human action.

According to Turner, industrialization prompted the disintegration of the former integrity of the well-organized and all-encompassing religious gestalt that was the ritual of liminal societies. As societies modernized a space opened for a number of performance arts such as theatre, ballet, opera, cinema, the novel, poetry, music carnivals,
processions, popular theatre, sporting events, and many others that Turner dubbed “liminoid” (1982). Thus, there was a transition from a collective and compulsory ritual that was a self-representation of communities and an enforcement of shared and common values through the symbolic inclusion of dissent and marginality in the system, as in Greek tragedy, to the theatre as part of the set of individual, optional activities operating in spare time and by means of the entertainment and arts industries. The economic revolution of industrialization led to a professionalization of the theatre and the specialization of the theatre artists, who could only be admired by those able to buy tickets. The primary socioeconomic “draw” to attend the theatre varied from century to century, from the actor to the playwright, and then to the director and then back again.

I am Sicilian. I grew up in an environment where the main community and social events were, and in many cases still are, processions of statues of the saint protectors of the different towns and villages (usually a female saint: Agata, Rosalia, Lucia, the Mediterranean mother Addolorata, the fishermen’s Lady of Portosalvo) as well as the community-based rituals and performances of Holy Week. They were and are organized by the different social “confraternities or professional associations. The Catholic Church often considers them to be pagan, even when it is deeply involved in the process. Therefore, I know from experience that the divisions between religious and social ritual, between symbol and representation, and the strict evolution of ritual into commercial theatre do not necessarily apply to all the cultures and communities in the Western world. I have traveled enough to understand that these divisions do not apply to other cultures and continents, certainly not to most of the African cultures. What we are describing here is only the mainstream of what has been “globally” defined as theatre in the last century in the Western academic and cultural environments.

**Revolution**

Regarding this mainstream: in the 1950s, following Artaud’s fascination with the Balinese dancers he saw at a colonial exposition in Paris in the 1930s, the search for a new “ritualization” of society began within the “liminoid” sphere of entertainment. This search would give back to the theatre its fundamental role and heritage of political intervention, peaceful redefinition of the rules of the society, cultural discussion, and social therapy. The starting points of this new transition were the experiences of Julian Beck and Judith Malina, and then, also in the USA, Richard Schechner’s Performance Group, Luiz Valdez’s Teatro Campesino, Peter Schumann’s Bread and Puppet Theatre; Augusto Boal and Vania Filho in Brazil, and many more groups in South America; and Jerzy Grotowski, Peter Brook, and Eugenio Barba in Europe. In the meantime, anthropologists such as Erving Goffman (1959) began to study the importance of representation, with its ritual and performative aspects, in everyday life. On the other hand, the traditional playwright and innovative movie director Pier Paolo Pasolini, in his “Manifesto per un nuovo teatro, wrote that the theatre is ‘anyhow, in any case, always and everywhere a rite’ (1968). Numerous other experiences seemed to corroborate those of the founders of this new theatre movement.

In the 1970s, the search for new forms of social and political participation found in this transitional theatre one of the strongest means of communication and symbolic self-representation, as well as a powerful cultural arm. Therefore, from a theatre perceived as part of show business, a widely disseminated theatricality evolved and infused schools, institutions, political groups, marginal communities, suburbs, and cities, while new models of dramaturgy emerged, such as collective (ensemble) work and the workshop-theatre. The first trend took the name “community-based theatre” in the States (see Schechner 1998); and in Italy, France, and neighboring countries, a similar trend was known as “theatre animation” (Rostagno 1980). This latter definition includes all decentralized, educational, recreational, and community-based social activities using theatricality and performance. The second trend took the “new theatre” (De Marinis 1987). These two trends have much in common, since they both refer to what Peter Brook calls the “third culture” (1987). As Bernardi pointed out (1996), according to Brook three cultures exist: the collective, the individual, and the culture of the relationship. The latter is for him the proper culture of theatre because of the theatre’s ability to create bridges between what is usually divided within and among individuals and communities, between the micro- and the macrocosmos, and finally between the visible and the invisible (Brook 1987).
Inclusion

The relationship between the visible and the invisible in the 20th century has been culturally defined by the relation between the visible and the repressed. The long-standing link between theatre and madness is an example and symbol of the relationship between theatre, diversity, and marginality in general. Madness, perceived as tragic awareness that displays the truths present in the repressed part of the human being (desire, violence, and death), is the focus of the history of written dramaturgy; from Oedipus to Hamlet and Othello, to the abnormal psychology of the characters of 1950s American dramaturgy (Tennessee Williams, for example), to the theatre of the absurd. Moreover, over the centuries, the religious and social rituals of many communities have used madness as a justification for an explosion of the repressed in the social field. This included openly criticizing power and rules and performing their symbolic destruction on specific ritual days when everyone was allowed to be “fou” crazy (Heers 1983).

In the second half of the 20th century, and especially during and after the 1970s, the relationship between theatre and mental health evolved and took on new forms. The first such form is the use of theatre as therapy. The most well known methodologies are Jacob Moreno’s psychodrama (Moreno 1947), dramatherapy (Jennings 1997), and most recently the “second phase” of the Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal 1990). The underlying idea is that the characteristics of psychosis or psychological uneasiness are the complete or partial loss of one’s sense of one’s own proper limits and the inability to relate to others or communicate with reality. Theatre, on the other hand, is a relational and symbolic form of communication that structures personal experience in relation to a particular context and the world (Bertoni 2000).

The second form is more closely linked with the experiences of theatre animation and community-based theatre that were perceived in the 1970s as valid instruments to facilitate the community work of a “third-psychiatry” aimed at the deinstitutionalization of psychiatric patients and the perception of psychiatric illness as a social, rather than a medical, phenomenon (Basaglia 2000). Theatre animation/community-based theatre, with its ability to create relationships, to include marginal groups, and to work on a group’s creative self-representation for the purpose of social communication, was perceived as a useful instrument for empowering psychiatric patients and helping to erase the stigma that marked them.

Recession

With the defeat of the ideals of the political movements of the 1960s to 1970s, theatre animation and community-based theatre faced a crisis in the 1980s. At least this was the case in Italy, where the demand for new forms of participation declined, leaving space for a new individualism. Drama therapy and psychodrama, which had become popular, were largely used and sometime misused in therapeutic practices. Ensembles of the new theatre faced a crisis in the same period because of their obsession with a universal language to be found in the transcultural value of the body.

Reasons for this obsession differed. Artistically, the body was perceived as an element of theatre that was neglected by the dramaturgy of official theatre from the 18th century onward. Culturally, the new theatre was born in the years and within the cultural context of “naturism,” “free sex,” and an intellectual rediscovery of the instincts. But mainly for bio-anthropological reasons, the body was perceived as the element common to all humankind, conclusion drawn from the research of Ekman, Bonino, and others previously mentioned. As a consequence, in the search for universal theatrical relationships, there was an underestimation of the importance of nonphysical languages and of the relevance that social and cultural contexts, symbolic elements, and individual memory have in the formation of both the individual body and the social perception of bodies.

The actors in new theatre groups achieved outstanding physical technique and collective dramaturgical skills, but this resulted in new stereotypical mannerisms. In certain commercial theatre settings, tickets were bought to view the new professionals, which these “ensembles” had become. From a political point of view, these groups were confined in the cloisters of the theatre world—from Holstebo to Pontedera—unable to communicate any longer with their respective societies.
The new theatre, as well as community-based theatre and theatre animation, while initially willing to be radically liminal and to play an active role in the symbolic and political redefinition of communities, ended up being part of the liminoid spheres of show business and of spare time. Ironically, these theatres were merely a minority phenomenon within these spheres, as Patrice Pavis has stressed (1988). Thus, they changed neither society nor the entertainment industry.

I went through different forms of theatre training at the beginning of the 1990s when the transcultural tendency of theatre still dominated the cultural environment but was already in serious crisis. I was not interested in becoming an actor but wanted a better understanding of the experience of acting in order to use theatre in the social field. In all of my training, which included mime, new theatre, Peter Brook’s CICT (Centre Internationale de Creation Théâtrale) methods, Barba’s techniques, and many more, I used the body, sometimes the voice, and, in some exercises, the words of famous dramaturgical texts. I greatly improved my physical skills and the expression and control of my body; but very often, I felt intellectually frustrated. I often spoke with the trainers after the workshops. The usual answer given to my questions was that theatre was not an intellectual activity. But why was this? They were intellectuals and they intellectually explained to me the “non-intellectualness” of their theatre work. We were living our “everyday” lives, making representations and intellectual analyses just like other people, but within the codified spaces of the theatre workshops, we were forbidden to do so.

Contradictions like this made me feel that the theatre would not take me where I wanted to go. Using today’s terminology, I would argue that it was totally unclear to me why it was good to create islands where a limited number of people (usually wealthy intellectuals) were able to develop their global unintellectual communication skills and simultaneously lose their ability to interact with their local contexts. Although I felt comfortable in these “theatre islands,” I missed the bridges connecting me to the wider society.

I was about to give up on the theatre when I met Boal. With his work I used my body and was able to voice my thoughts in new and extraordinary ways. Finally, through Boal’s different kind of theatre workshop, I was able to build bridges from the workshop to the reality outside. This convinced me to continue with the theatre. Meanwhile, many other people shared my experience and frustration.

**Definition**

At the beginning of the 1990s, a new form of theatre—taking inspiration and methodologies from theatre animation and community-based theatre, new theatre, and theatre therapy—found its way into direct interaction with the problems of individuals and groups in specific areas. It was a theatre based upon the body and relationships, but distanced from purely therapeutic approaches and without solely aesthetic and artistic goals. It was, in fact, less self-centered and was ready to become an instrument of social action through laboratories, workshops, and performances with a goal of healing and of heightening the quality of social interactions (see Schininà 1998). It was a theatre that linked the experience within the group to the sociocultural, economic, and historical context the group emerged from and remained a part of. This was and is called social theatre.

As Bernardi stresses, social theatre is part of the current involvement of anthropology in society and facilitates:

- the social construction of the individual;
- the dynamization of interpersonal relations and inter-subjective comprehension;
- the structuring of the entire community and of the smaller social institutions of which the community is comprised, such as schools, hospitals, villages. (2000: 31)

Three things differentiate social theatre from theatre animation and community-based theatre:

1. The care social theatre exhibits for the role of the individual within the group and, therefore, its focus on the empowerment of differences rather than on a collective experience or transpersonal/transcultural unity;
2. The importance given in social theatre to the training of individuals and groups rather than community and community-based dramaturgy or
3. The role of the social theatre trainers: the new trainers are or should be skilled professionals able to consider in depth all the social, psychological, relational, and theatrical implications of their interactions with the group and the context.

What differentiates social theatre from the new theatre, commercial theatre, and the avantgarde are the following four points:

1. The aim of social theatre is not the aesthetic result, but the process of building relationships through creative communication. To this end, the aesthetic result can be a means, but is certainly not the primary goal;

2. Social theatre is not included in the socioeconomic structure of the mainstream, commercial theatre;

3. Social theatre perceives the theatre as an activity, which can involve everyone within its purview, and is not the prerogative of only the most talented and/or committed, who build up their technical capacities in the cloisters of the theatre.

4. The focus of social theatre is on the chorus. The professional of the social theatre is the choragus, the one who is able to build the choir in the group s/he is interacting with. S/he can be an actor, playwright, a social worker, etc., but s/he always uses her or his own particular profession to better serve the construction of the choir. The chorus in the social theatre is always a polyphonic one: a group made up of differences.

The main difference between social theatre and the majority of theatrical therapeutic techniques is that social theatre does not seek catharsis but metaxis (pluralization). Its ultimate goal is to empower differences and create solidarity, not to purify and to “normalize” them. In social theatre, the objective is to question society, with the living presence of its differences, rather than to be purified and brought back to a “normal” value system or social code.

In 1993, Richard Schechner wrote that the future of performance was developing in four directions: entertainment, therapy, training, and ritual (1993: 20—21). These domains cannot be strictly fenced off from each other because performance is the practice of communicating and relationship building, which involves politics, medicine, religion, traditional, and popular cultures, and the everyday interactions between individuals, groups, and communities. Social theatre became the theatre “aware” of all of this, committed and ready to use its power for social aims and the well-being of communities.

In 1993, I was called on to work with theatre in the biggest psychiatric institution in Milan. My companions during that two-year workshop were the long-standing patients of the institution. The psychiatric law in Italy wanted this and other institutions to be closed and substituted with community-based services. The theatre project was an attempt to make this process possible. The value of this plan is not what I want to discuss here. Rather I wish to pose another question. At the time, I was a 21-year-old, inexperienced student of theatre and social communication. Personally, working in the psychiatric institution was a terrific opportunity and experience, which improved my life and my skills greatly. But was hiring me the best thing for the patients? Was I the best person to bring theatre to such circumstances?

Certainly I was not aware of all the medical, psychological, social, and even political implications of what I was doing. I tried to travel around Italy to study what others were doing with theatre, not only in psychiatry but also more generally in the treatment of social diseases. I met many motivated and amazing professionals and artists. But sadly, the majority of people that I met were: students with no experience (like me); teachers compelled to run theatre workshops by these new ministerial programs without having any idea how to do so; frustrated professional actors and directors who, with no other way to earn a living, were haphazardly applying some Actor’s Studio techniques to poor groups of handicapped children; trainers, who wrote dramas at home and personally selected the best “actors” to perform them, regardless of whether they were working with groups of elderly people or raped women and indifferent to the expectations of the members of these groups; theatre directors of dubious artistic skill, making a career as social theatre operators in prisons, with the real goal of producing an artistic show with professional actors the following commercial theatre season.

Social theatre was sometimes the worst of community theatre applied to social problems; sometimes it seemed to be social security for not particularly good actors; at other times, it seemed to be a scene which simply let the trainers express their frustrations.
Sometimes it was funny, at other times, it was unethical and did more damage to the lives of individuals who certainly did not need any more difficulties or stress. However, there were some cases in which it was an experience that truly changed the lives of the group members for the better; altering their perceptions of particular problems and their social functioning in certain areas.

There was a widespread need for a stronger way of building relationships and for social therapy; the theatre became a means to achieve these goals. In the beginning the boundary between “pioneerism” and amateurism was very tenuous but after some years a level of ethical standards and ground rules for good conduct was put forward. Through these exchanges, the operators of social theatre bettered one another, increased their skills, and renewed the function of the theatre. Eventually we all agreed on a basic rule: We remain at the service of the groups we work with and we do not use them for artistic, solely aesthetic, purposes.

Institution

Nowadays social theatre is actually one of the newest tendencies of theatre in many countries. Let us analyze it according to the subdivisions Schechner formulated in 1993.

1. In POLITICS: The UN and different NGOs use social theatre in many crisis and post-crisis situations: for emergency relief, in rebuilding community capacities, and for democratization. Many formal and informal groups, belonging to minority communities, have been able to raise their voices, be heard, and be politically included thanks to the power of performance (for example: ACT UP, the Rwanda Human Rights associations, and many others).

2. In MEDICINE: With the revival of traditional, performative ways of healing and with the experiences of Patch Adams (Adams 1998) who brought together several similar projects from across the world, theatre, music, and visual arts workshops are taking place in many psychiatric care services and health houses.

3. In TRADITIONAL CULTURES: Significant funding (from foundations such as Ford, Rockefeller, and others) has gone to revive, or to keep alive, ancient or renewed community-based, traditional performances and rituals all around the world, even as so-called “world music” has conquered the international market.

4. In EVERYDAY SOCIAL INTERACTIONS: Social theatre workshops are currently taking place in schools, institutions (social, penal, etc.), and health facilities. There are many performance interventions in difficult environments such as war zones, refugee settlements, displaced persons camps, and violent slums.

5. In EDUCATION: Training facilitators in social theatre is very popular. A growing number of universities and social work schools offer specific training/majors in social theatre. Applied theatre is a subject studied in many theatre departments and schools. More generally, theatre is used as a methodology to educate people in a wide range of subjects. This is a method originating in “theatre for development” projects but now more generally applied.

6. In ENTERTAINMENT: In the sphere of leisure time, the use of theatre workshops is popular within trade unions’ recreational sectors, social centers, and squatters communities” (Dragone 2000). In addition, commercial and new theatre were challenged by social theatre to find ways to overcome their creative crisis by turning to social theatre initiatives. The most prestigious Italian theatre awards, the UBU and the Hystrio, were in recent years often presented to socially oriented projects, such as a theatre group of prisoners or groups comprised of both professional actors and people with physical and emotional impairments.

In the last few years, I have worked as a choragus in various places in the world marred by social divides, war, and injustice. In 2003, I was engaged in a broad range of social theatre activities. I worked with youth volunteers in Moldova, with mixed ethnic groups in Kosovo, with Roma youth living under siege in the Balkans, with women Victims of Trafficking in Human Beings in Macedonia. In all this work, I used what I learned directly or indirectly from Augusto Boal, Roberto Mazzini, Sue Jennings, Mamadou Dioume, Bano Ferrari, and Duccio Demetrio—just to mention those whose methods I found most effective. Likewise, I greatly benefited from the theories of Claudio
Bernardi, Richard Schechner, Sisto dalla Palma, and Claudio Meldolesi. I work with theatre, or perhaps it is better to say that I work with the logic of communication and relationship-building inspired by the games of theatre and performance. This has little to do with the theatre as an aesthetic activity, per se.

I believe that this logic is highly effective in working on the reconstruction of individual, group, and community roles. Playing with theatre in dangerous situations among threatened or oppressed people, makes it possible to initiate ethical processes and changes that begin with the individual, move to the group level, and ultimately enable the group to introduce the content of these processes to an institutional domain—thus, increasingly widening the ritual circle of theatrical communication and, often, political and social change. The individuals, groups, institutions, and organizations I have worked with have found the logic of social theatre both powerful and useful.

Disillusion

While the institutionalization of social theatre can be viewed as a success, it also is a means of hiding a crisis, or at least, some incoherence. I find this troubling on a personal level. When I speak with my colleagues, I often find them in agreement with me. We find ourselves facing questions that need to be addressed immediately and collectively. Some of the latest developments of social theatre endanger or threaten its original, positive characteristics. Below I will highlight what I find to be the most pressing concerns.

Socioeconomic and Political Aspects

One of the main characteristics of social theatre is its departure from the mainstream socioeconomic structure of the theatre. We rejected that structure of working in a separated aesthetic and sociopolitical space, in order to facilitate the better functioning of society. This led to freedom, research, a strong involvement with communities, a greater value placed on experience than on professionalism (as theatre artists), and the conquest of new physical, personal, and community spaces.

However, in an ironic turn of events, during the last few years social theatre has adapted perfectly to other socioeconomic structures such as the healthcare and social welfare systems, various government ministries and departments, charities, cultural foundations, international organizations, and universities. Many of us work for entities that are complicit or at least connected/related to the exclusions of the very same marginalized groups for which and with which social theatre operates. Sometimes we do our work directly for one of these compromised institutions; more often we work through nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Nevertheless, these NGOs are financed by the same sources, so our feelings might differ but the substance does not change. Was this our aim? Did we leave the socioeconomic structure of theatre only to find ourselves operating in other, even more restrictive, structures—structures whose sources of funding are even more directly connected to the powers/institutions we want to question, that we need to question?

In my work in crisis situations, regardless of whether I am working for the United Nations or the smallest, most obscure NGO, too often I have had the feeling that my projects only get funding when they are deemed useful or functional for achieving or fitting into some larger, general strategy with which the groups I am working must not interfere. Sometimes I assume I am being sent to work on institutional limitations in order to raise awareness and include marginalized people in a democratic dialogue, but once I am in the field, I discover that I was actually sent only to “calm these people down.” To what extent should functionality be our goal? How are we able to know that our work is serving to change things, and not merely being exploited for its strategic “usefulness”?

Employment and Professional Profile

New funding sources have made possible the dissemination of social theatre into many different socio-economic structures. And these new employment opportunities compel many artists without jobs to work in social theatre. Very often these professionals apply acting methods and aesthetic criteria in their social work with unethical and ineffective results. Other times, social workers or other professionals without any theatre experience run theatre workshops because their institutions demand it of them. But how can we differentiate a “good” from an “incompetent” social theatre operator? In depersonalizing the theatre, viewing it not as a specific, learned skill but as an innate human activity that everyone can do, we ended up creating a new profession, the choragus. However, since this was not our goal, we did not establish criteria or definitions for the profession of choragus. This has created a space for the misuse and the unethical abuse of
our practices. We made two mistakes in one and I find it difficult to
see a happy resolution. If we specify the requirements for a “good”
choragus, we give up on the deprofessionalization of the work;
whereas if we continue not to specify the optimal parameters of the
work, we endanger the practice as a whole.

The Artistic Sphere

Traditional and research theatre are in the midst of very deep
creative, artistic, and economic crises. Currently, it is widely
understood that a social theatre project has a much greater chance
of being funded than any other purely artistic production. This has
prompted many theatre companies and ensembles in need of
financial support to present artistic productions as social theatre.
These theatres involve marginalized groups with the sole purpose
of securing funding and earning money, taking advantage of their
differences or abnormalities for financial gain. I disagree completely
with this attitude because it tries to give an ethical value and
significance to experiences that are more akin to a Barnum and
Bailey Circus.

On an even more serious level, this creative crisis, combined with
the surprising and sometimes unplanned and unexpected aesthetic
results of some social theatre experiences, has brought various artists
and theatre ensembles operating in both traditional and new theatre
to develop projects of exchange and interaction with marginalized
groups or individuals. For example, in Italy during the past few years,
handicapped persons, people with anorexia, prisoners, people who
are HIV positive, drug addicts, the homeless, people with psychiatric
disorders, terminally ill patients, economic migrants, the elderly,
street children, prostitutes, and “freaks” participated together with
professional actors in commercial theatre shows (Dragone 2000). These shows are not without merit, but they are not social theatre
because they are rooted in the socioeconomic structure of theatre.
This difference manifests extremely important, contrasting results:

First, social theatre denies both the concept and the practice of
repetition and finished performances—the run, the production “open
for critical review” (Schechner 1985 : 120). In social theatre, the
performance is no longer something that has to be reproduced but
is instead a single experience of growth for the group, enabling it to
communicate with other groups and the reality outside the group.

But the commercial artistic productions described above reject this
concept because they are shows that open, run, and tour:

Second, the idea of a nonprofessional theatre as an activity in which
everyone can participate, which is fundamental to social theatre,
derides the previously described commercial artistic productions
but with a very different end result. As Bernardi wrote:

[O]nly the best (of the nonprofessional marginalized actors) go
onstage. The others are left home. The success and the progress of
the ones who were so lucky and so good to become real artists
are exalted while all the others who live in similar conditions are
forgotten. But they are as able as or even more able than the others
who reached the stage to do what they do and to be what they are.
Why should the joys, the emotions, the successes touch only some of
the marginalized of the world? (Bernardi 2001)

My concern is that in our attempt to champion differences and to
work on metaxis through theatre, we have also, inadvertently, paved
the way for some traditional and research theatre ensembles and
individual artists to solve their artistic and economic crises through
the creation of a new professional, who the audiences pay to see and
who receives prestigious awards for being the “different” one who
can act “normal” or “better than normal.”

Conclusions

And here we are, proud of the achievements of a theatre that
is able to facilitate communication, relationships, true exchange,
democracy, and development; creates groups, celebrates diversity,
spots problems, and raises public awareness; creates circles of barters
and encounters, astonishing in any context, but particularly in the
situations I have witnessed.

But here we also are facing several powerful contradictions
of a theatre that wanted to reject institutions yet has become
institutionalized; a theatre that denied professionalism but has created
a new profession; a theatre that preferred conciliatory questioning
and challenge to revolution but has become all too often useful for
and close to the powers it wanted to question; and finally a theatre
that wanted above all to be ethical yet leaves space for unethical
practices or brings ethical practices into wider unethical political
strategies and processes involving aesthetic exploitation.
As operators of social theatre, we work as the choragus. We know by experience that social theatre is powerful and effective in doing this. We should also be aware that from a political perspective sometimes the choragus is used to make persons copy rather than “re-act” —for example, to “act normal,” even when the conditions/situation they are living in are absolutely abnormal and unjust. From an artistic perspective, a tendency now exists to create theatre actors out of a select few of the marginalized, rather than working on the root causes of the marginalization of their entire group.

There is a word we all use when speaking about our job, and this is the word “limit.” Working at the limits, at the borders, with the aim of creating bridges is always difficult, and it can easily create, or indicate, contradictions. If one works at the ultimate limits of society and wants to create bridges between these limits and the institutional center—and this is what social theatre is mainly about—being trapped in contradictions and functionality are the greatest risks. To avoid these tendencies we must always remember, and not be scared to remind our colleagues, that no matter what our individual background and precise expertise, our goal should be to serve the groups with whom we work. For these reason we:

1. Do not exploit them for our own artistic purposes. Our objective is the well-being of the people involved. The aesthetic must always be a means to an end, not the aim of our work.

2. Do not initiate creative processes of empowerment for groups when the background conditions for change do not exist and it is impossible to create them. We should keep a close eye on where the money for our projects comes from and what the ultimate goal of our donors and employers is—and not only be taken in by what we may accomplish in the short term.

We must not compromise and “go to work” if these points are not clear. If we work without clarity, then the institutionalization of social theatre is a failure that may ultimately do more harm than good to the individuals and groups it seeks to empower. This is a concern I personally grapple with, since I am writing this article in the office of a major international organization where I work as a Social Theatre Expert. From time to time, anti-globalization groups demonstrate in front of the organization’s office windows. How do I resolve the paradox of working inside while many with whom I am in profound sympathy are demonstrating out there? Every day I need to perceive the edge of my office door as a creative limit and my work as a bridge; to make certain that I am bridging and not compromising.

For all references please see bibliography.