

COMPLEXIFYING THE SELF: THE BREAKING THROUGH OF THEATRE IN PSYCHOLOGICAL EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

The following text frames and describes main orienting principles and recent results of *Irromper* [Pt. breaking through], an empowerment lead, artistic and psychoeducational project within the field of theatre, that was devised with a group of patients diagnosed with different psychological disorders. The methodology used in this article is mainly based in auto-ethnographic description.¹ This theatre project was one of the latest outcomes of a line of post-doctoral research initiated in 2014,² intersecting Theatre, Psychology and Education, in collaboration with *Encontrar+se* [Pt. to find oneself]³ an institution for the promotion of mental health, in the city of Porto, Portugal. Since then, we have been conducting, in a weekly basis, theatre sessions that interweave artistic and scientific methodologies, with the objective of helping individuals diagnosed with different psychological disorders (e.g., depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, borderline personality disorder, among others) to cope with complex mental and bodily issues in a collective context. After several years of collective theatre practices and experiences by the *Encontrar+se* users (hereafter referred to as participants), in 2021, during the pandemic, the Portuguese General directorate for the Arts (DGArtes)⁴ opened a call for artistic projects relating theatre and mental health. The fact that the proposal *Irromper* was chosen in the highest funding threshold validated the artistic dimension of our proposal in addition to the therapeutical one, reinforcing the relevance of the arts as an important activity to address complex issues in the contemporary world.

Theatre and Psychological development?

Since 1994, when I first got involved with theatre and performance, I have been observing and experiencing what Erika Fisher-Lichte has called its “transformative power”, not only in myself but also in other colleague actors and actresses I have been working with throughout the years. I have been grateful to all those who, through the practice of theatre, have aided me gaining meaningful experiential knowledge about myself and the world, and I have always also been curious about the reasons behind the transformations it facilitates. This curiosity led me to initiate a doctorate in Psychology, which was, in itself, a profoundly transforming experience. The possibility of looking at Theatre from a psychological angle, gave me the opportunity to acknowledge several relevant studies made in the area throughout the years, as well as to reflect about several aspects of my own acquired experiences as an actor and theatre director, in an expanded interdisciplinary perspective. One of the most striking findings, that I will here highlight, occurred when I firstly encountered Norman

Sprinthall’s systematization of conditions for psychological development. The concept of psychological development is based in classical contributions of authors such as John Dewey, Herbert Mead, and Jean Piaget, among others, and, in a broad sense, presents an alternative to psychotherapy. One of its main underlying ideas is based on the fact that epistemological development is an ongoing process throughout life, directly related with how different subjects experience and relate with the world. Depending on the contexts (e.g., oppressive, caring, violent, challenging, supportive, among others) and the ways in which different subjects construct their own experiences, they may be prone to face difficulties and inner conflicts in result of dealing with the myriad of different elements that compose the world – including other human beings. This state of *cognitive conflict* (to use a Piagetian referential) can be surpassed through an epistemological expansion that dissolves the former elements in conflict, by creating a broader new unity of meaning (or *reflective abstraction*) – a principle relatable to that of the dialectical process described by Georg W. F. Hegel in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. This epistemological expansion thus represents a complexification of the mental structures with reflexes in a global development of the psychological structures of the subject (mental, emotional, and behavioural). After years of systematic empirical and theoretical research in psychology, and evidencing the relevance of the quality of the contexts where subjects construct their experience of the world, Norman Sprinthall concluded that psychological development automatically occurs when: a) individuals are involved in significant role-taking experiences (action); b) balanced with relevant opportunities for reflection; c) in a relational (and emotionally charged) context that is both supporting and challenging of their world visions. From my previous artistic experience, this seemed an accurate description of the kind of work that is developed in theatre, especially in cases when the devising of a performative aesthetic object is more focused in the creative process, rather than in the final artistic product; as well as in the artistic work of performers rather than solely in the director’s ideas. In addition, and very importantly, Sprinthall’s systematization was very relatable with the research work that Jerzy Grotowski had conducted a few decades earlier in search of the minimum elements of theatre (aka. *Poor theatre*). From continuous theoretical research and theatre practices, Grotowski showed that everything can be subtracted from theatre (e.g., lights, costumes, props, scenography, text, among others) except the actors/actresses and, most importantly, the *relation* that is established between actors and spectators during the performative act. Based in my own knowledge and encouraged by the convergence between Sprinthall’s systematization and Jerzy Grotowski’s definition of Poor theatre (figure 1), a line of research started to gain form, allowing new interdisciplinary connections and the testing of a developmental hypothesis for theatre.

<u>Psychological Development</u> (Sprinthall, 1991):	<u>Poor Theatre – minimum elements</u> (Grotowski, 1968):
• <u>Action (body)</u>	• <u>Actor (acts)</u>
• <u>Reflection (Mind)</u>	• <u>Interpretation (interprets)</u>
• <u>Relational (Context)</u>	• <u>Relation (collective context)</u>

Figure 1. Theatre and Psychological development?

Using mixed methods, the research conducted during the doctorate, confirmed our theoretical hypothesis both by qualitative and quantitative data. After interviewing relevant professional theatre actors, actresses and directors without formal education in psychology, we found that, based on their personal experiences, their implicit theories about psychological change were comparable to those from specialized literature.⁵ On the quantitative side we created and validated the Scale of Sociocognitive Complexity in the Domain of Theatre (SSCDT) that showed that the more the experiences in theatre are demanding and intense, the more the theatre practitioners will tend to demonstrate capability for complex thought.⁶

PROJECT IRROMPER

Overall, both quantitative and qualitative data showed good indicators that the very artistic practice of theatre is, per se, capable of enhancing psychological development. Nevertheless, after concluding my PhD, I wanted to test my findings and continue the research. Having found that *Encontrar+se* provided psychological and occupational support to subjects diagnosed with mental issues, I proposed to initiate theatre activities in that institution. After several years of participatory theatre practices and experiences, what came to be the project *Irromper*, started to gain form. In response to a call from the Portuguese General-directorate for the Arts (*DGArtes*), our proposal was based on the theatre work we have been conducting, that was participant-centred, and often included autobiographical and fictional aspects. The core of the proposal was a theatre performance to be devised with (and preferably by) the participants, interweaving three ontological dimensions: a) real life narratives (as some participants routinely do public presentations of their own experiences with mental illness, in the context of an action called *Vozes de esperança* [Pt. Voices of hope]);⁷ b) Fictional narratives (to be created by the participants in the context of theatre work, and that could or not be based in real events); c) Interpretation of narratives (to be undertaken mainly by two professional theatre actors, as they routinely do in their professional work). Besides the devising of the theatre performance, other complementary actions included: a) a video documentary of the devising process,⁸ b) two public round tables gathering experts and participants around the theme of arts, theatre and mental health; c) a publication gathering texts from experts as well as the expert artistic team, and the final script written by the participants,⁹ d) each of the three performances of the play were to be followed by a brief session of questions and answers (Q & A) with the audiences. In addition, an ethics committee was to be appointed to survey the emergence of any possible problems and the team of psychologists of the institution, would maintain their regular support with a special attention to the (positive or negative) impacts of the project in the participants – as the process of development is recognized to be non-linear. Finally, the creative process was to be accompanied by two researchers from the Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences of the University of Porto,¹⁰ in the context of their master dissertations in psychology. Although the call was made by an artistic organization (surprisingly enough, the financing came from the public arts budget and not science, education or public health) and did not require further scientific or research references, the proposal assumed to have been inspired in orienting principles such as those of Participatory Action-Research (proposed by Orlando Fals-Borda and Mohamad Rahman), Theatre of the Oppressed (developed by Augusto Boal), documentary theatre, devising theatre and several other artistic or scientific methodologies, that could be useful to the objective of placing the participants in the centre of all actions. The project aimed ultimately at the empowerment and autonomy of the participants in facing a complex (and too often unsympathetic) world, and this required changing the conventional frame of artistic creation to envisage the participants as the main creative artists. For this great adventure of collectively creating and presenting a theatre performance, a “professional” theatre dispositive had thus to be devised to create a relational, and collaborative environment both supporting and challenging of their world (and

Self) visions - in line with Sprinthall's systematization. In case of financing, this would be the best opportunity to aim beyond the rhetoric that "participation is always good" - as highlighted by researchers Pedro Ferreira, Cristina Azevedo and Isabel Menezes -, for we would be aiming to find sufficient means for creating conditions to facilitate processes of spontaneous development through theatre.

Theatre for all

In our regular theatre sessions throughout the years, we have always been open to all participants regardless of their diagnose. In fact, in our collective gatherings, the participants are never asked about the mental illness they were diagnosed with. The theme is addressed just like any other theme that emerges from the participants during the process and for the project this was no exception. This non-discriminative and receptive attitude, besides installing an atmosphere of receptivity and openness in our sessions, allowed us to focus more on the desires of the participants and the ways in which they could be materialized through a performative artwork. Everybody is welcome to our theatre sessions, that are divided into practical creative work and collective discussions in the end of the sessions - or during the session if needed. Due to the nature of the support provided by *Encontrar+se*, the group of participants is always changing (e.g., ongoing arrival of new participants recommended by the team of psychologists; participants finding remunerated occupations, namely formation courses; change of medication or relapses related with the mental condition, among others). Although this instability in the presences of the group is very disruptive to the systematic practice of theatre, we had opened the season with the idea of publicly presenting a theatre work – which is something that we are not always capable of reuniting conditions for. The theatre activities started by an approach to the body, inviting the participants to develop, through improvisations, physical characters inspired in animals, individuals, personalities, or other beings (contemporary or past) in which each participant would find personal meaning and would like to project him/herself. From materializations of these physical characters, and staying in the context of improvisation, the participants started to develop relations between their own character and the characters played by other participants, interacting with each other and freely exploring, changing, reorganizing, and perfecting the constitutional basis of their characters. This phase was interrupted by a severe lockdown due to Covid-19, where we were obliged to initiate a phase of online-sessions. In these sessions the participants were invited to write narratives and discourses of the characters that each person had been working on. Each participant could decide to write freely about whatever issue in three main categories. The narratives could be about ideas, experiences or emotions related with: a) real personal events (including related with the pandemic); b) they could also be completely fictional; c) they could be fictionalized based in real experienced events. Since no questions were made about the reality or fiction of the narratives and discourses, the character always "protected" each participant in case of unwanted exposure. The texts were deposited in a shared folder and in our weekly sessions the participants collectively read the texts that they have been written during the week. Several weeks have passed, many texts were written and shared, having some of the participants discovered a real pleasure in writing. It was at this point that we received the positive announcement of financing to our project by the General directorate for the Arts, very importantly validating (namely for the participants), the artistic value of the proposal, in addition to the therapeutical one. As the presential activities were reopened and the project gained progressive consistency towards its materialization (e.g., the need to systematize rehearsals, meeting the team of professionals, schedule the calendar of the project activities, defining dates and spaces for the premiere and following performances, among others) the group of participants started to be progressively involved in all the steps of this process, and started to stabilize, having six of them decided to accept the challenge of fully embracing the

professional theatre production. The pictures bellow, taken from rehearsals e few weeks before the premier, may give a sense of the aesthetics that emerged from the proposals brought by the participants.



Figure 2. Irromper (rehearsals)



Figure 3. Irromper (rehearsals)



Figure 4. Irromper (rehearsals)

To be or not to be research-funded

The fact that the proposal was funded, allowed going a step beyond the usual objectives of participant centered “communitarian” theatre projects. In this case, in addition to giving a particular attention to the usual participatory aspects of the creative process (e.g., bottom-up approach, empowering for decision making, horizontality of the processes, among many others), we also managed to adopt the same participatory approach for devising the aesthetic object itself, with the aid of a carefully selected group of theatre professionals (involving lights, music, video, costumes, scenography, and interpretation). We also dedicated a significant part of the funding to paying the participants for their work, as a first step for assuming their participation as the most important part of the creative process. We were thus not only aiming to acknowledge the artistic value of their work, but also to “professionalize” their role in the theatre production, addressing the fact that most participants share the significant problem of having a difficult access to the labour market and to a stable income. As for the group of performative arts professionals, they were carefully selected and integrated in the ongoing work, under the understanding of the context and the premises of working towards the

support and empowerment of the group of participants in all aspects of the artistic work - including artistic decision making as much as possible. My role as theatre director, as well as the creative work of all the experienced professionals was to be understood mainly as a “problem solving” role, balancing challenge and support. The aim was creating the right conditions for the emergence of creative and artistic material from the participants and interfere creatively as least as possible – preferably only when the participants could not find a solution by themselves. This attitude towards the theatre work very subtly involved creating safe and challenging conditions for the participants and required a lot of attentiveness, patience, capacity for listening, acceptance and care for our fellow artists’ ideas and proposals – acceptance even if we may not agree or fully understand the proposals. On the one hand, in most professional artistic contexts these aspects are not required, but on the other, it is likely that most theatre artists would like to work in an environment where their ideas and proposals were accepted, experimented, and worked upon. If these rules were to be implemented in conventional professional contexts, could that change and improve the quality of the performative art works that are being produced? The professionals involved, have discussed this issue collectively after the *Irromper* experience, having concluded that the implementation of these premises in professional contexts would likely be highly appreciated. In addition, the fact that this artistic research project was funded allowed the good accomplishment of all the activities of the proposal above mentioned, which also involved the attention of the media (press, radio and television)¹¹ – highly contributing to the positive public perception of the project and to and enhanced self-perception of the participants.

FINAL REMARKS

From the beginning to the end, there were many interesting artistic and therapeutic aspects to this artistic process, namely the process of self-complexification. Departing from their own constructed narratives, the participants who decided to accept the challenge inherent to this performative creation, got to materialize their desires and ideas, discovering a whole new range of capabilities. From the point of view of the participants, this process allowed, four different levels of Self-interpretation and presentation from which everyone got to choose (or interweave): a) real self-narratives; b) fictionalized self-narratives; c) real narratives of peers; d) fictional narratives of peers. Rigid self-notions were challenged, new possibilities of being were explored and perceived. As recognized by Inês Van Velze,¹² one of the researchers in Psychology that accompanied the process: “(...) telling their [the participants] story, reconstructing their narrative and lending it to the voice and experience of the collective, allowed for a conscious exploration of themselves, and opened the way for the reappropriation and re-signification of the identities associated with the disease.”. In addition, and most importantly, through the language of theatre, the acknowledgement that each participant possessed the tools for its own present and future transformation, became possible: “(...) the theatrical techniques allowed to recover and exercise capacities, and to train adaptive mechanisms that were thought to be non-existent or dormant.”.¹³ Regarding the association between theatre and psychology there are still many aspects of research to be explored and from which contemporary societies could benefit from. In this same line of thought, we will conclude with the words of Inês Araújo,¹⁴ the other researcher in psychology that accompanied the process: “Even though the play *Irromper* was not developed in a therapeutic setting, it ended up contributing to a better psychological and social functioning of the users, proving, in this way, that theatre can be an important instrument of intervention in mental illness and for the recovery process.” We hope the present contribution may help to enhance future studies that focus the value and potential of the artistic work, namely theatre and other performative arts, for psychological and human development. Scientific research has been providing growing evidence of excellent potential in theatre and other arts forms, for addressing

challenges of our complex contemporary societies. Nevertheless, exploring the full potential of this interdisciplinary association, will only be possible with an increased investment in the arts and the systematization of programs interweaving artistic and scientific methodologies. In a world increasingly depleted in result of human action, artistic creativity in theatre and performative arts may well be one of our best hopes for finding sustainable solutions that may reunite all beings, will all their differences, in a coherent, complex, and multifaceted whole.

NOTES

¹ An approach to writing and research that aims to describe and to analyse (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno) – please vd. Ellis, Carolyn, Tony E. Adams, and Arthur P. Bochner. “Autoethnography: An Overview.” *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung* 36, no. 4 (138) (2011): 273–90. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23032294>

² <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9972-0814>

³ <https://www.encontrarse.pt/encontrarse/objectivos/>

⁴ <https://www.dgartes.gov.pt/>

⁵ José Eduardo Silva, *Entre o Teatro e a Psicologia: Ensaios para a reunificação de Corpos e Mentis [Between Theatre and psychology: Rehearsing to reunite bodies and minds]* (Porto: Apuro Edições, 2016), 227-62.

⁶ This study has been reviewed by peers and was published in the American scientific publication *Creativity Research Journal* in 2017. For an exhaustive literature review about relations between theatre and development in different knowledge areas please consult the article: “Theatre and Psychological development: Assessing Sociocognitive Complexity on the domain of Theatre”

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/318032937_Theater_and_Psychological_Development_Assessing_Socio-Cognitive_Complexity_in_the_Domain_of_Theater#fullTextFileContent

⁷ <https://www.encontrarse.pt/intervencao/vozes-de-esperanca/>

⁸ This video documentary (subtitles in English and Portuguese) can be accessed here:

<https://youtu.be/ZvQTX2kAoCE>

⁹ Rui Spranger, ed., *Romper: Teatro e Saúde mental*. (Porto: Apuro Edições, 2021), 11–18. ISBN:978-989-99751-7-0 This publication can be accessed here: [Miolo_Romper.pdf](https://www.uminho.pt/~miolo/Romper.pdf) (uminho.pt)

¹⁰ <https://www.up.pt/portal/en/fpceup/>

¹¹ <https://www.publico.pt/2021/10/08/p3/noticia/irromper-guiao-dramatico-doenca-mental-1980393>

¹² Inês Van Velze, “Práticas teatrais como ferramenta de desenvolvimento psicológico, cognitivo e social de pessoas com doença mental [Theatre practices as a tool for psychological, cognitive and social development of people with mental illness].” (MA, diss. University of Porto, 2022), 36-37.

¹³ Inês Van Velze, “Práticas teatrais como ferramenta de desenvolvimento psicológico, cognitivo e social de pessoas com doença mental [Theatre practices as a tool for psychological, cognitive and social development of people with mental illness].” (MA, diss. University of Porto, 2022), 36.

¹⁴ Inês Araújo. “Teatro e doença mental: o (Ir)Romper de novas formas de terapia [Theater and mental illness: the Breaking through of new forms of therapy].” (MA, diss., University of Porto, 2022), 27.

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