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Communication proposal

The changing theatre: A psychological approach to the experience of acting

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The investigation aims to study the transformational processes in art, more precisely in the art of theatre. A number of particular features has made us elect theatre in its relation with change, as the main focus of our study, namely that to talk about theatre and not talk about change would certainly seem to be a harder task than the opposite. In fact, in the theatrical practice everything is connected into change processes, whether we are talking about transforming emotions into aesthetical forms; written texts into tridimensional plays (props, sets, costumes, lights, sounds, living characters); actors transform themselves into characters; and the characters themselves are constantly transforming and changing, as well as the developing relationships amongst each other. Depending on the lens we choose to look at this phenomenon, we can observe different scale related processes of change, but on the base of each, we constantly find a dialectical process and a dynamical developmental logic of constant transformation. In our case, we have chosen to focus on the experience of acting, from the voice of its practitioners: the actors. We are envisaging the actors (and theatre makers) as “experts” in the art of change, and hope to find in the voice of their experience, knowledge and information that helps us to broaden our understanding of the phenomenon of change, namely from a psychological perspective. For that purpose, the research design that has been developed mixes both quantitative and qualitative methods: The qualitative component consists of collecting implicit theories of change from actors and theatre directors, and is its main contribution; the quantitative component consists in the development of an instrument to measure cognitive complexity for the theatrical context which we have called “Escala de Complexidade Sociocognitiva no Domínio do Teatro” (Sociocognitive Complexity Scale in the Domain of Theater) [Silva, Ferreira, Coimbra & Menezes (2011)], adapted from the “Escala da Política” (Politics Scale) by Ferreira and Menezes (2001) and from the Portuguese version of the IDCP (Parker, 1984) developed by Ferreira and Bastos (1995). Preliminary results of this study will be presented and discussed as well as further developments and implications.

My personal experience in theatre making, first as an actor and later on, also as a director and a teacher, is deeply connected to my own developmental history. Looking back, it seems to me that the most important thing theatre has offered me, was a language, and through that language I became able to speak/express myself – not only in words, but also in actions, emotions, shapes, objects – and to preside and assist to my own transformation. That is probably why my curiosity about the strange processes involved in theatre making never ceased, and from the first rehearsal I went to (about 18 years ago) until today I keep investigating, doing, studying, and acting – although always with the notion of how little I know.

My coming to the psychological sciences was, partly, because I felt that to keep studying theatre through the theatrical perspective was becoming redundant, partly because the experiences I had accumulated in years of exploration in action (actor = action) - which was what attracted me in theatre in the first place - resulted in, what I felt, was an excess of sensorial information that I needed to integrate or organize in some way, conceptually. In my professional life I many times heard a saying: “O Actor não pensa. Faz.” – which means: “An actor doesn’t think. He just does.” There are many ways to interpret this sentence, and, I can even sympathize with some of them, when used in certain contexts (especially because I think cognition is an overvalued dimension of existence in the western culture), but, deeply and inevitably, It is a sentence that I cannot agree with, since promotes and celebrates an (effective) separation and hierarchy, between actions, feelings and cognitions, in line with the hegemonic realistic ontological perspective that it tries to criticize. As an artist and mostly as a person, I need a more holistic and integrated vision of the human being, that takes into account the energetic, dynamic, transformational processes inherent to life.

Why, specifically, the field of Psychology? In the one hand, I took the guess, that if it would be possible to learn more about these processes of human functioning, it would be through psychology; on the other hand,

some of my favorite artists and aesthetic currents where somehow conceptually connected to it:

Constantin Stanislavski “Psychological theatre”

Antonin Artaud “bureau of surrealistic research” and “theatre of cruelty”

Bertolt Brecht “distancing” or “estrangement”

Grotowski “For a poor theatre”

Alejandro Jodorowsky “Panic movement” and “Psychomagic”

Augusto Boal “The rainbow of desire”

Recently, from the convergence of several disciplines and proposing a constant and systematic study of the human psychological functioning, a different perspective on the nature of reality (ontological). The psychological constructivism, proposes the inseparability of the three dimensions of human functioning: emotion, action, cognition – it is by their constant articulation and under the aegis of meaning making, that he concretes the process of broadening his knowledge of the world. In this sense, reality is a construction, and therefore humans actively create and construe their personal realities, as well as intersubjectively.

But what does this mean?

According to Guidano (1991):

- a) Emotions correspond to an immediate and irrefutable perception of the world.
- b) Actions are the exploratory movements that create patterns produced by immediate experience that are always expression of knowledge in the sphere of the practical universe.
- c) Cognition reorganizes the patterns of immediate experience transforming them into objects of distinctions and referrals.

By articulating these dimensions humans are able to build a culture (creating choices) and accede to crescent levels of comprehension of the world. They appropriate the world (symbolically), reconstructing it

semantically, actively building their own version of reality – under the aegis of meaning making.

Saussure (through Barthes, 2006) talks about this process of appropriation of the objects of the world (that he would call *referent*), and for each object, humans construct a symbol by which the appropriation takes place (that he would call *sign*). But the *sign* is composed by two other conceptual elements: *significant* (the explicit level of expression) and *meaning* (the implicit level of content), which implies that in this process of appropriation the subjective dimension is uncontrollable and unavoidable in constructing an individual version of reality, and making of each individual, incommensurable and irreplaceable. Continuing, these two concepts allows us to make an analogy with two concepts from Freud (2009) the *manifest content*, and the *latent content*, to understand that the affective – emotional dimension (*latent/* where the *meaning* resides) remains in an invisible existence (*repressed*) whilst without a shape (form) that can give it an expression. This implies that is by the manifestation of the *significant* signals that emerge from the emotional states, that we are able to gain access to the affective-emotional dimension, or in other words, it is only when emotion transforms into language that it becomes communicant making it possible to be interpreted and reinterpreted by oneself and by the Other. To this process Derrida (2006) calls grammatisation, that is, humans are able to build their own syntactic and semantic structures relationally, and through language they objectivate themselves changing conditions, forms and contents of their psychological life.

It can now be more clear, the way by which humans indeed actively construe and create their own version of reality, limited by the constraints of their own perception, and guided by the effort to progressively escape from the determinism of nature and build multiple possibilities of choice for himself and for the Other – culture.

This perspective brings new insights about, creativity (as inherent in the act of developing), diversity (as a consequence of the creative act) and therefore the collective life. Goodman (1978) reminds us of these “possible worlds” the world is made of. Through examples in the world of

art he shows us how each art form is made of syntactic and semantic structures (a language), and each one is a symbolic representation of the world – a semantic reconstruction (version) of world able to be habited. The pluralism inherent to these versions is applicable, to the multiple processes of construction, and to the diversity of results of construction, that is, to the multiplicity of possible worlds, that share a great part of their predicates.

All this, implies that humans, as living beings, are relational, complex, incommensurable irreplaceable, capable of self determination (creating diversity) and life is an ever changing, dynamic and energetic process, whose development is unstoppable.

Creativity, diversity and change in art

From all the human transformational processes of knowing, appropriating and making sense of the world – in the act of sublimation from which culture emerges – art is probably its most supreme expression (Goodman, 2006; Silva, Menezes e Coimbra, 2012 *in print*). The artist, by the exploratory way of action, is able to transform his felt experience in objects, sounds, drawings, gestures, words and many other aesthetical forms with which he can give shape to his emotions. This way he becomes able to start a dialectical process, where he transforms the world he lives in at the same time as he transforms himself – and through this interactional dialogue he becomes able to open a path of access to his own self knowledge and accomplishment, as well as to an ever increasing knowledge of the world. Life continues and develops through relations, imbued in energetic and dynamic processes where change is a constant presence. In the comprehension of the human functioning, we must take into account the inevitability of change. We cannot choose between change and immutability, the choice that can be done is about the direction that a change can take (Coimbra, 1991): we can choose to participate or don't participate, to influence or don't influence that process. Art seems to have developed a good relation with change and theatre is certainly one of the art forms where this is most evident. From all the human transformational processes of knowing, appropriating and making sense of the world – in the act of sublimation from which culture

emerges – art is probably its most supreme expression (Goodman, 2006; Silva, Menezes e Coimbra, 2012 *in print*). The artist, by the exploratory way of action, is able to transform his felt experience in objects, sounds, drawings, gestures, words and many other aesthetical forms with which he can give shape to his emotions. This way he becomes able to start a dialectical process, where he transforms the world he lives in at the same time as he transforms himself – and through this interactional dialogue he becomes able to open a path of access to his own self knowledge and accomplishment, as well as to an ever increasing knowledge of the world. Life continues and develops through relations, imbued in energetic and dynamic processes where change is a constant presence. In the comprehension of the human functioning, we must take into account the inevitability of change. We cannot choose between change and immutability, the choice that can be done is about the direction that a change can take (Coimbra, 1991): we can choose to participate or don't participate, to influence or don't influence that process. Art seems to have developed a good relation with change and theatre is certainly one of the art forms where this is most evident.

Theories of change in psychology

Freud (1914): “Remembering, repeating and working through”

- . Remembering (fill in the narrative gaps in memory)
- . Repeating (resistance mechanism)
- . Working through (working the resistance through, towards change)

Rogers (1957) “The Necessary and Sufficient Conditions of Therapeutic Personality Change”

. Emphasizes the relational quality of the therapeutic procedure, in order to let the client communicate his experience in a context of acceptance from the part of the therapist (in six steps):

1. Two persons are in psychological contact.

2. The first, whom we shall term the client, is in a state of incongruence, being vulnerable or anxious.
3. The second person, whom we shall term the therapist, is congruent or integrated in the relationship.
4. The therapist experiences unconditional positive regard for the client.
5. The therapist experiences an empathic understanding of the client's internal frame of reference and endeavors to communicate this experience to the client.
6. The communication to the client of the therapist's empathic understanding and unconditional positive regard is to a minimal degree achieved.

Lacan (1978) “The neurotics individual myth”

. Emphasizes the immeasurability, irreplaceability, mutability of the human functioning, and the importance of the transformative symbolic processes (metonymy and metaphor) as constructors of the individual narrative.

Frank (1982): “Therapeutic components shared by all psychotherapies”

- . All psychotherapies are potentially effective (all deserve prizes).
- . The preponderant factor lies in the quality of the established relationship between patient and therapist.

Nawas (1985): “Common factors in psychotherapy”

- . Myth (*rationale*)
- . Ritual (therapeutic procedure)
- . Faith (the patient must believe in the therapeutic procedure)

Sprinthall (1991): “Toward a generic definition of counseling psychology: Development versus therapy”

- Action
- Integration
- Relationship
- Real actions made in natural contexts
- Continuity in time

The case of Theatre

In the particular case of theatre, the answer to the question of whether reality is, or not, a human creation, seems indeed very clear, since each theatre play is, in a sense, the construction and materialization of an alternative, and equally plausible reality that a group of individuals has created in a certain period of time from the confluence of their own similarities and differences, and once created it exists as so. The emergence and permanence of a theatre play, changes the reality(s) we live in, and proposes the possibility of alternatives – that can be later on accepted or refused. Either way it empirically demonstrates that the human capacity of self determination is a fact, limited by the changing balance of human acceptance\inacceptance. This acceptance\inacceptance has to do mostly with other human beings and their personal beliefs systems that constitute the diversity of human kind, and this is of course related to the diversity of possible worlds. The possibility of their coexistence, or in other words, the possibility of a diverse reality, is determined by factors such as power (or its lack), and its ability (or inability) to create conditions for a viable path to the diversity of existing forms. Through this perspective, that always has been present in the world of creating aesthetical objects, we can have a glimpse as how to overcome the limitations of the – hegemonic - principle of mutual exclusion (Maturana, 1997).

Theatre and psychological change (state of the art)

This investigation aims to study the transformational processes in the art of theatre. From my personal experience in theatre -as an actor, and latter on, also as a director and a teacher of young aspiring actors and actresses – it has become gradually clear through the years, that this art form tends to visibly operate transformations and changes, not only in their practitioners (actors, directors and other artists involved), but also in the assisting audiences. In fact, our research is increasingly reaching the conclusion that to talk about theatre and not talk about change would certainly seem to be a harder task than the opposite.

This transformational capacity can be confirmed in the literature by a number of utilizations that sciences such as psychology have been doing of the theatrical practice. Psychodrama (Moreno, 1972), drama therapy (*e.g.* Jones, 1996; Orkibi, 2010) and therapeutic theatre (Snow, D'amico & Tanguay, 2003), are some of the approaches that have developed in the field of psychology, and that have shown effective results in the treatment of different kinds of disturbances and developmental disabilities. But literature also shows that the theatrical processes have been object of interest and study from several different areas, that have revealed positive results in the association of drama with: education (*e. g.*, Bailey, 1996; Hui & Lau, 2006; Leit & Humphries, 1999); social intervention (*e.g.*, Freire, 1972; Prentki, 2002); and more recently the study of emotions and emotional management (*e. g.*, Goldstein, 2009; Goldstein & Winner, 2009; Orzechowicz, 2008). Not wanting to be exhaustive we will mention that other uses of theatre with positive results, can also be found in the literature in the fields of empowerment, equality of opportunities and inclusiveness, amongst many others.

On the other hand, theatre hasn't been indifferent to the developments of science and the social changes that have been occurring in the last century, although not sharing the same realistic ontological perspective that classical "objective" sciences have been postulating through the years (Mahoney & Lyddon, 1988; Silva, Menezes e Coimbra, 2012- *in print*). The perspective of the theatrical and artistic practice has been distant from the ontological discussion, even if always close to a relativistic and

multiple notion of reality, where diversity is a desired consequence of the creative processes, and creativity is inseparable from the developmental process of knowing (Goodman, 2006). Mainly in the last century, theatre emerges with an immense diversity of genres, styles, and conceptual forms, some of them intentionally directed to operate transformations, both at Individual and collective levels. The *Theatre of the oppressed* (Boal, 1979; 1995), *Play back theatre* (e. g., Park-Fuller, 2003; Thomson & Jaque, 2011), as well as the work of the artist Alejandro Jodorowsky (2006) and the *mouvement panique* are just a few examples of the above mentioned intentionality of transformation.

But most of all, at a purely artistic level, it cannot be ignored the transformative impact in our culture, society and individuals, the work of actors, directors, dramatists, and theatre theorists (some of them accumulatively) like: Sophocles (420 *b. c.*, (2011)), Vicente (1527, (2009)), Shakespeare (1623, (2001, 2002)), Moliere (1665, (2006)), Stanislavsky (2006), Artaud (1991, 1996), Pirandello, (2009), Brecht, (1999), Beckett (1989), Grotowsky (1975), Brook (1996) just to name a few.

All the above mentioned works, seems again to confirm that theatre has a transformative capacity that should not be ignored - even when used as a tool to facilitate the desired psychological changes (therapeutic or others). Some authors argue that there is an innate *healing function* in theatre (e.g., Bates, 1998; Emunah, 1994; McNiff, 1988; Pendzick, 1988; Snow, 1996), and we can observe that transformations can effectively be operated through it. But the question is: what does this mean? What happens in the theatre practice that allows/encourages/produces transformation and change in a very visible way?

In order to learn more about this question we decided to investigate the theatrical phenomenon, and coincidently (or not) we have noticed that in the theatrical practice everything is connected into change processes, whether we are talking about transforming emotions into aesthetical forms; written texts into tridimensional plays (props, sets, costumes, lights, sounds, living characters); actors into characters - adopting perspectives different from their own; and because they are living entities, build relationships that are constantly changing and evolving, giving birth

to a new, alternative and provisory reality - thus emphasizing the energetic and dynamic processes involved in the act of living. Depending on the lens we choose to look at this phenomenon, we can observe different scale related processes of change, but on the base of each, we constantly find a dialectical process and a dynamical developmental logic of constant transformation. We then decided to focus our study on the experience of acting in the voice of its practitioners (theatre actors and directors). We are envisaging them as “experts” in the art of change, and hope to find in the voice of their experience, knowledge and information that helps us to broaden our understanding of the phenomenon of change, namely from a psychological perspective.

Methods

For that purpose, the research design that has been developed mixes both quantitative and qualitative methods:

- The quantitative component consists in the development of an instrument to measure cognitive complexity for the theatrical context which we have called “Escala de Complexidade Sociocognitiva no Domínio do Teatro” (Sociocognitive Complexity Scale in the Domain of Theater) [Silva, Ferreira, Coimbra & Menezes (2011)], adapted from the “Escala da Política” (Politics Scale) by Ferreira and Menezes (2001) and from the Portuguese version of the IDCP (Parker, 1984) developed by Ferreira and Bastos (1995).
- The qualitative component is its main contribution and consists of collecting implicit theories - because of the question of social desirability - of change, from actors and theatre directors. In order to do so, we designed two semi structured interviews and for this we have created two vignettes reporting two different situations of change: One in a therapeutic environment, and other in a life situation. We would then pose questions like “what do you think is the problem with this person?” or “have you – or anyone you know - ever been in this situation? How have you – they- dealt with it? ”.

The selection of actors and directors, respond to a criterion of activity and gender (equal number of actors and directors, masculine and feminine), but aims to be as broad as possible, in age, theatrical background, and score on the SSCDT scale (Silva, Ferreira, Coimbra and Menezes, 2012).

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