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FRAMING THE AESTHETIC RESPONSE TO A COMMUNITY THEATRE PROJECT

By Beatriz Angela Vieira Cabral (Brazil) and Dan Olsen (Denmark)

Abstract

This research looks at the distinct aesthetic responses to a community theatre project in Brazil by educated actors, community actors with no previous experience, and spectators. An investigation was carried out by Dan Olsen, based on a previous qualitative account by Beatriz Cabral. The aim was to obtain, through collaboration with Dan Olsen, a quantitative analysis of the impact of a community theatre project on its participants, as a basis for enlarging and improving the participants' understanding of the theatre aesthetics under examination, and therefore their response to the process-based community theatre. The procedures included the application of a questionnaire centred on the aesthetic and pedagogical objectives of the theatre project. The crossing of the references and their variables is intended to enhance the different points of view and interests of the three distinct groups which interacted in this project.

Extrait

Cette recherche présente les réponses esthétiques distinctes à un projet de théâtre communautaire au Brésil par des acteurs éduqués, des acteurs communautaires sans aucune expérience antérieure, et des spectateurs. Une enquête fut menée par Dan Olsen, basée sur un rapport qualitatif précédent de Beatriz Cabral. Le but était d'obtenir, avec la collaboration de Dan Olsen, une analyse quantitative de l'impact d'un projet de théâtre communautaire sur ses participants, pour établir une base pour l'élargissement et l'amélioration de la compréhension par les participants de l'esthétique de théâtre en train d'être examinée, et donc leur réponse au théâtre communautaire basé sur le procédé. Les procédures incluent l'application d'un questionnaire centré sur les objectifs esthétiques et pédagogiques du projet théâtral. La vérification des références et de leurs variables est faite avec l'objectif d'améliorer les points de vue et intérêts différents de trois groupes distincts ayant agi ensemble dans ce projet.

Resumen

Esta investigación observa las distintas respuestas estéticas de un proyecto del teatro de la comunidad en el Brasil por actores cultivados, actores de la comunidad sin ninguna experiencia previa y los espectadores. Una investigación fue llevada a cabo por Dan Olsen, basada sobre la narrativa cualitativa por Beatriz Cabral. El objetivo era obtener, mediante la colaboración de Dan Olsen, un análisis cuantitativo del impacto de un proyecto del teatro de la comunidad sobre sus participantes, como base para agrandar y mejorar la comprensión de los participantes sobre la estética del teatro que se estaba estudiando y por consiguiente su respuesta al teatro de la comunidad basada en dicho proceso. Los procedimientos incluían la aplicación de un cuestionario centrado en los objetivos estéticos y pedagógicos del proyecto del teatro. El cruce de las referencias y sus variables están destinados a mejorar los diferentes puntos de vista y los intereses de los tres grupos diferentes que interactuaron en este proyecto.

Authors' biographies

Beatriz A.V. Cabral (Biange) is Professor at the State University of Santa Catarina and Theatre Director at the Federal University of Santa Catarina, Brazil. She received her MA from São Paulo University and her PhD from the University of Central England, United Kingdom. She currently coordinates teacher students' practice at schools, teaches in the MA program and runs a research project on impact and risk in community theatre. She has been actively engaged in the Brazilian Research and Postgraduate Association, on editorial boards, and in the coordination of congresses and festivals. She has published on drama as a teaching method, theatre and ethics, inclusion and democratic differences.

Dan Olsen is a Lecturer in International Theatre at the University College Zealand, Denmark. He formerly worked at the University of Copenhagen, teaching and researching in political science, quantitative measurements and statistical models. He has worked for the UN Economic Commission for Latin America in Mexico doing research in quantitative models. He has published three DVDs on international theatre.

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[EDITOR: It is possible that some of the tables in this article are incorrectly formatted, owing to platform transcription issues. We apologise for this.]

Introduction

'Theatre in Transit: Impact and Risk in Community Theatre' is a research and extension project, coordinated by Beatriz Cabral, and carried out through a partnership between the Arts & Culture Department of the Federal University of Santa Catarina and the Scenic Arts Department of the State University of Santa Catarina, both in Florianópolis, Brazil. Research, extension and teaching are regarded here as the three faces of academic life, and 'extension' refers to all activities developed outside the university walls, aiming to take the research into the community, once the public universities are backed by public taxes. Impact and risk are the key research areas, and have been examined from the perspective of both outsiders (theatre students and directors) and insiders (community people).

The partnership of Beatriz Cabral and Dan Olsen regarding the evaluation of this ongoing community theatre project emerged during the international conference Researching Drama and Theatre in Education, held in Exeter in the United Kingdom in 2002. Olsen visited Brazil in October 2002 to meet the research group and to observe the context, and again in 2003 to follow the last stage of rehearsals and presentations. By then, Olsen had constructed a questionnaire suitable to the theatre approach under investigation, and Cabral listed five categories of the performance and their potential alternatives to promote impact. Therefore, the questionnaire frames the area under investigation, once its alternatives represent the aims and strategies of the project. Its ongoing analysis, pointed out in what follows, is to be used to plan the next event.

The project

The Theatre in Transit project 1 (2001–05) is named after the 'transit' (the way in which the spectators move around between five distinct and concurrent scenes which intertwine significant sites, history and stories of the community). The actors — theatre students and locals — are split into five groups and gather at their respective sites from the first meeting in order to present their scene. The spectators are also split into five groups, and each group has a different transit from one scene to another, led by a storyteller, who tells the history behind the scene and the site during the walk. The scenes last 10 minutes each, to permit repeats for the other groups of spectators and allow for the conclusion of the distinct tours at the same time, when actors and spectators join for a 'grand finale'.

Impact and risk are the core of the investigation into the *interactive forms* of the transit project, and are focused on:

- *place and scenario* — both are chosen and planned with regard to their significance to the historical memory of the community. The priority is a situation that resonates with the present concerns of the locals;
- *rituals and ceremonies* — as collective forms that are open to many voices, colours and songs. Here they include conflicting points of view and heterogeneous groups of participants;
- *the hidden history* (the non-official one) — the scenarios intend to strike the public by pointing to new ways of looking at history and place. As an intercultural experience, one of the targets is to identify and approach *differences* by observing the otherness through foreign eyes.



Transit 1, Scene 2



Transit 1, Scene 3



Transit 1, Scene 4



Transit 2, Scene 2

This project ran from 2001, and four distinct productions took place in different towns — one each year, involving about 120 actors and other theatre crew. The research team decided where to carry on the event after negotiations with the community leaders, especially the local school head teacher and coordinator. The next steps included:

- identification and selection of the places linked to the historical memory of the community;
- investigation of the historical events that took place in these sites in the past;
- interviews with the elderly members of the community in order to raise the stories related to these events;
- design of a plot by the research group to link history and stories, or distinct historical events to enhance the implications and contradictions embedded in them (dramaturgy is the next step, in the middle of the process);
- design of settings surrounded by torches, braziers/banners, masks or other devices that help to delimit the space and to include the spectators;
- time constraint (10 minutes) to allow for a grand finale at the centre of the village (or municipality).

Snapshots from the production

1527

Sebastião Caboto, a Spanish sailor (captain) arrives in the port of Bombinhas , on his way to Argentina . Here he captures four Aborigines to take with him. The scene shows a ritual by 20 children aged seven to eight years, who sing in Guarany, the Aboriginal language, and tell about the lure of the promised land.



1780

The witches are playing around and challenge Lucifer, who scares them with a prophecy about the future bad times. In the 1960s, a group of Azorean women look for help and ask a white witch to help them to avoid Lucifer's prophecy coming true. Would this be a kind of witchcraft of modern times.



1852

The power of the owner of the cassava mill was present in the family and social relationships, as well in the economic life of the town. The day-to-day lives of the women, the dreams of the female teenagers, and the capoeira game by the young slaves are here intertwined with the unlimited oppression of the *capo famiglia* (literal translation 'family father', but we use this in Italian to mean excessive power).



1910

The scene shows the man's attachment to his land, which is his way of surviving and building his family ties. This situation is counterpointed with a later period of Bombinhas, where the locals start to sell their lands due to foreigners' interest in the beauties of the place, now a summer resort. The scene then shows the end of the interaction among man–family–land.



1992

Before Bombinhas became a town-city (at emancipation, it was a village), the locals used to pay very high taxes, which did not come back to them in the form of preservation and facilities. So they started a movement to get rid of the explorers. The scene expresses this movement and the moment of choice when they voted for freedom.



Historical background of the project

Previous and related experiences took place in Brazil in schools (1996–99), and aimed to increase children's emotional engagement with the dramatic process. The intention was also to open up learning opportunities by transforming the usual space, finding alternative ones around the school, and meeting unexpected characters along the way. By then these experiences were termed *theatre trails*, and emerged during a research link with the University of Exeter, UK, coordinated by Cabral (in Brazil) and John Somers (in Exeter).²

The idea of getting school children into a trail, within a drama frame, was a way of dealing with the scant resources of the local public schools (space and materials), inspired by the observation of a theatre in school project in Devonshire in the United Kingdom. The impossibility of carrying out a drama experience with 28 children, plus a research team, John Somers as foreigner observer — all packed into a small schoolroom with no extra chairs or space to split the children into small groups — was the origin of the transit project.

The evaluation of the school process raised the expectation of exploring its achievements (strategies and theatre forms) in the community context.

Theoretical background

The first experience, in the community, pointed to the potential of the theatrical forms of rituals and ceremonies to gather together people from distinct backgrounds, ages and gender, and to focus ambiguities and contradictions, at the same time promoting the participants' empowerment and sense of authorship.

Ceremonies have been explored in drama in order to focus special events that mark, commemorate or celebrate something of cultural/historical significance. They are structured to involve performance work, reflective attitude combined with celebratory experience and the whole group simultaneously in a controlled way. (Neelands 1990: 47) *Rituals*, notes Neelands (1990: 40), can be considered as 'stylized enactment bound by traditional rules and codes, usually repetitious and requiring individuals to submit to a group, cultural or ethnic, through their participation'.

Faith Guss (2001) investigated the aspects of rituals which are present in theatre in education and other forms of theatre work, and listed the characteristics that come from distinct cultures, establishing patterns of the ritualistic performance: cultural intention; performance modes; acting; the potential for reflective and reflexive positioning of performers and spectators; aspects of playing; the relationships between process

and product; the relationship between producer/performer/spectator aspects; the potential for transformation of experience versus the confirmation of experience — or interrogation of experience versus reproduction of experience; the production of particular or of universal meanings (2001: 164). 3

Among the different anthropological approaches to ritual, that of Victor Turner (1988) was particularly interesting to theatre in community by associating it with a theatre form *in process*, which actualises the cultural process of the participants. So, instead of the emphasis on the communication of the cultural aspects, Turner sees the ritual as a possibility for dealing with power, when there is no other way to do so. As such, it is possible to make visible the cultural situations related to transition or new ways of seeing by young people, and to increase the spectators' understanding through a fair control or indirect intervention.

To put on five concurrent scenes in heritage sites or places linked to the popular imagery (haunted places, etc.), and to organise the same number of transits for the spectators, points to a theatre in process — or, to put it in another way, a theatre *event*. The cultural process of the participants becomes the core of the event. The planning of rituals within the framework of ceremonies allows for the expression of individual points of view within a collective context.

Therefore, the process of investigation looked at the evidence of social, cultural and artistic impact which resulted from the partnership between theatre students/teachers and community people during the production process and the transit.

Three zones or areas of impact were observed throughout the first two events:

- *personal development* — impact on people's self-confidence, new relationships, development of social skills (teenagers who resisted engaging in the process and took on key roles later on);
- *social interaction* — new partnerships and cooperation, identification of common interests and local problems, mainly regarding the revival of public places, frame, context and transit and the enabling of a fresh look into the ordinary space;
- *identification of cultural codes* — many people reported recognising images and customs they used to believe were unimportant, and said they had started to value local culture (elderly participants wrote letters to add information and impressions about parts of the scenes which showed aspects of their youth).

The questionnaire

The format of the questionnaire was chosen by Cabral, in discussion with Olsen.

The content takes into account five key objectives of the research project. Initially, 25 theatre students were asked to answer 12 questions concerning impact. Each question had five corresponding categories, and the students were asked to rank the five categories in order from 1 to 5.

Later, 21 spectators answered the same questions.

Selections from the questionnaire asking for important issues in the transit play

In general

- dramaturgy;
- context of the setting/location/place;
- significant characters;
- music linked to text;
- historical-social content.

Dramaturgy

- the reference for the events;
- the dialogues;
- unexpected situations;
- analogy to real world;
- open to different interpretations.

Location/place

- historical dimension of the place;
- natural beauty;
- scenic resources: torches, fire, sheets, etc.;
- transformation of the space;
- unexpected place.

Data reduction process

The 25 students were distributed between the five scenes, so five students from each scene answered the questionnaire. Next, each of them applied the questionnaire to one community actor of their scene, using it as a guide for an interview to make sure the theatre concepts were understood. Finally, the cast of each scene selected five spectators to interview, from distinct social backgrounds.

The questionnaire thus gathered the responses of the three distinct groups of participants: experienced actors (theatre students/teachers); amateur actors (community people); and spectators. This sequence has been used for interviewing the same groups.

The results commented on below refer to the reception by the 25 theatre students and 21 spectators.

Statistical assumptions

- For each case, the five variables are ranked from 1 to 5. The null hypothesis about independence tests that the five related variables come from the same population.
- The Friedman statistical test is based on these ranks.
- The test is a non-parametric test, so assumptions about the shape of the underlying distribution are not required. The chi-square value is calculated.
- The null hypothesis is rejected if the probability of this event is less than or equal to 0.005. A 'mean rank' is calculated, which gives an idea of the size of the ranking.

Results from the questionnaires .

All 46 respondents are looked at independently of which scenes they belong to. In this case, two of the 12 main questions passed the statistical test:

- Which aspect of the Theatre in Transit impressed you most?
- In relation to the place what impressed you most?

In the following, each of these two questions is investigated more thoroughly.

Which aspect of the Theatre in Transit impressed you most?

The test of the 25 actors suggests that *dramaturgy* is the first choice; *socio-historical content* the second; the *characters* the third; the *place* the fourth; and the *relationship between music and text* the last when taking into account the general impression of all the scenes.

Table 1: Ranks

	<i>Mean rank</i>
Dramaturgy	2.44
Place	3.04
Characters	3.00

Relationship music-text	4.04
Socio-historical context	2.48

Table 2: Test statistics*

N	25
Chi-square	16.672
df	4
Asympt. Sig	.002

* Friedman test

Here the chi-square expected frequency 0.002 is less than 0.005, so the Friedman test accepts that the ranking belongs to the same population.

The same questionnaire was answered by the 21 spectators, representing the distinct social extracts present at the event. Generally, their responses were similar to those given by the actors. From the point of view of the spectators the greatest impact from the Theatre in Transit is that of *dramaturgy*. The second option is *socio-historical context* and the third option is *characters*. The *relationship between music and text* is the fourth impact and the last option is *place*.

The Friedman test shows 0.019, so the agreement among the spectators on the ranking is not as convincing as for the actors.

Table 3: Ranks

	<i>Mean rank</i>
Dramaturgy	2.44
Place	3.67
Characters	3.10
Relationship music-text	3.43
Socio-historical context	2.57

Table 4: Test statistics*

N	21
Chi-square	11.771
df	4
Asympt. Sig	.019

* Friedman test

In relation to dramaturgy, what was most important?

Minimum rank is related to *analogy to the real context*. The second impact is *sequence of events*. The third option is *open to different interpretations*. The fourth rank is *dialogues* and maximum rank is attributed to *unexpected situations*.

If you look at the Friedman test in this question, the chi-square expected frequency is 0.036, so our statistical limit does not allow the conclusion that the 25 students had a common ranking of the themes belonging to dramaturgy:

Table 5: Test statistics*

N	25
Chi-square	10.272
df	4
Asympt. Sig	.036

* Friedman test

The spectators ranked *analogy to the real context* as their first choice, as did the actors. They ranked *dialogues* second and *sequence of events* third. *Open to different interpretations* was ranked fourth and *unexpected situations* was their last choice.

Table 6: Ranks

	<i>Mean rank</i>
Sequence of the events	3.09
Dialogues	2.93
Unexpected situations	3.57
Analogy to the real context	2.26
Open to different interpretations	3.15

Table 7: Test statistics*

N	46
Chi-square	16.574
df	4
Asympt. Sig	.002

* Friedman test

The chi-square expected frequency is 0.002, so it is accepted that the rankings belong to the same population.

In relation to the place, what impressed you most?

All 46 actors and spectators answered this question in a similar way. The mean rank suggests that *natural beauty* is the first choice, *historical dimension of the place* is the second, *scenic resources* the third, *transformation of the space* the fourth choice and *unexpected place* the fifth option.

The chi-square expected frequency of 0.004 is less than 0.005, so the Friedman test accepts that the ranking belongs to the same population.

Table 8: Ranks

	<i>Mean rank</i>
Historical dimension of the place	2.61
Natural beauty	2.52
Scenic resources	3.00
Transformation of the space	3.24
Unexpected place	3.63

Table 9: Test statistics*

N	46
Chi-square	15.391
df	4
Asympt. Sig	.004

* Friedman test

Comments on the statistical investigation (Dan Olsen)

It is interesting to note that the theatre students, from the distinct scenes, agree on what impresses them most in this form of Theatre in Transit. They feel that the *dramaturgy* is the most important aspect of their scene and *socio-historical context* has the second most important impact. The spectators have a similar ranking. In relation to dramaturgy, *analogy to the real context* is ranked by both the spectators and the

actors as the most important impact. In relation to place, all agree that *natural beauty* has the greatest impact.

I think an investigation of this kind mostly helps to characterise the kind of community theatre which Beatriz Cabral has created in southern Brazil under the name Theatre in Transit. I have seen many community plays in Denmark, and I don't think the participants in many of them would evaluate dramaturgy as the factor that impressed the actors or the spectators most. However, I feel it could be interesting to use this questionnaire in other cultural contexts to see the different results.

Concluding notes: Towards a qualitative analysis (Beatriz Cabral)

The decision to carry out a quantitative investigation of the participants' response to their involvement in the community theatre project derived mainly from the understanding that to have these numbers at hand could be a starting point for interviews and qualitative analysis.

First, the questionnaire represents a powerful instrument to engage all the participants in the analysis of the experience. It draws on the specific aesthetics of this approach to theatre in the community, and it brings out the differences regarding the way the individuals look at the key elements of drama.

On the one hand, it makes visible that the alternatives upon which the participants agree are those that required extensive work by the research group — to select historical facts which have resonance with the present times and to intertwine them with the community and/or personal stories was itself a demanding task at the first and second transits. The acknowledgment that these procedures were not enough to give voice to a big and heterogeneous group brought about the need to have more than just a scenario. The consequence is the presence of a *dramaturg* within each group.

On the other hand, the different responses within the same group usually relate to their members' particular expertise in the aspects under investigation. For instance, a dance teacher acknowledged the difficulties of creating expressive movements with small children during such a short span, and therefore would value this aspect of the work more than others.

Regarding the scenes' directors, their evaluation mostly related to their expectations — they valued or undervalued their team achievements according to their previous intentions.

The fact that there was no consensus regarding risk means that this is directly related to specific content and form, and not to the category of work or the theatrical aesthetics as a whole. For instance, the risk of carrying out the political debate on focus at the community level is different from the risk of taking children to work with circus techniques.

This points to the fact that here the questionnaire should not be seen as a means to observe priorities or to define problems, but rather as a guide for spotting the sort of risk each group faced in order to facilitate the following interview.

Finally, it is important to consider that this is an ongoing analysis of a developing aesthetic of theatre in the community. With each experience, new elements of impact and factors of risk emerge. For the teachers and theatre students, this work can be considered as *practice as research*. Log books and/or diaries register the processes — their focus is on the interactive work with the locals and their contributions and/or responses to the scenes. These registers are discussed in seminars and examined under the perspective of Pierre Bourdieu's notions of *habitus* and *symbolic violence*. Such data help us to understand the ways of thinking and responding of people from different backgrounds and how they see theatre as an art form.

It is on the basis of the outcomes and understandings of these discussions that the next event is planned, with the support of Henri Giroux's notions of *crossing borders* and *democratic differences*. The questionnaire, created for structuring the evaluation, is related to the education of the participants — teachers, students, local actors and spectators.

Notes

1. Coordinated by Beatriz Cabral through a partnership between the Federal University of Santa Catarina and the State University of Santa Catarina, Brazil. The research group consists of five to six members, and membership of the group has changed over the years.
2. The sponsors were the British Council and CAPES (the Brazilian government), and the link included five researchers from each country, who formed partnerships based on a particular sub-area of theatre in education, who spent one month observing the work of their partner in their own country.
3. We consider these aspects to be common to both rituals and ceremonies.

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