

## **THE EDUCATOR'S SUITCASE: THEATER-MOTOR PRACTICE AT SCHOOL**

### **LA VALIGIA DELL'EDUCATORE: LA PRATICA TEATRALE- MOTORIA A SCUOLA**

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#### **Abstract**

This discussion aims to shed light on the original fusion between sports and theatrical practices in the school environment. Theater, sport and school are certainly different worlds which, at first, might seem very distant. And, instead, they share multiple values and objectives such as: a strong sense of discipline, awareness of one's own limits and strengths, respect for oneself and for others, the consideration of diversity as uniqueness. The subject of the study conducted is the role that theatrical-motor practice can have in the educational process as a valid teaching tool, capable of enriching both teaching and learning. Theatrical and motor activities can prove to be two valid supports that the educator can choose to include in their cultural and experiential background. The aim is to create a truly alternative teaching method, which stimulates students and helps them to recognize skills and talents useful for success in life.

La presente trattazione vuole far luce sull'originale fusione tra le pratiche sportive e quelle teatrali nell'ambiente scolastico. Teatro, sport e scuola sono mondi sicuramente diversi che, in un primo momento, potrebbero sembrare molto distanti. E, invece, condividono molteplici valori e obiettivi come: il forte senso della disciplina, la consapevolezza dei propri limiti e punti di forza, il rispetto per sé stessi e per gli altri, la considerazione della diversità come unicità. Oggetto dello studio condotto è il ruolo che la pratica teatrale-motoria può avere nel processo educativo come valido strumento didattico, capace di arricchire sia l'insegnamento sia l'apprendimento. L'attività teatrale e quella motoria possono rivelarsi due validi supporti che l'educatore può scegliere di inserire nel proprio bagaglio culturale ed esperienziale. Il fine è quello di creare una didattica davvero alternativa, che stimoli gli studenti e li aiuti a riconoscere capacità e talenti utili ad avere successo nella vita.

#### **Keywords**

Sport, Theater, School, Education, Inclusion

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#### **Introduction**

"The actor's suitcase" is the title of a splendid song by the Roman singer-songwriter and poet Francesco De Gregori. The song tells the adventurous and wandering life of the artists. Men and women who live with life enclosed in a baggage, ready to leave for any new destination, animated by an ardent and inexhaustible passion. "The actor's suitcase", however, can also be understood as a purely artistic expedient, the center of numerous theatrical performances. The

great actor Gigi Proietti, in his legendary theatrical show "To me eyes, please", used to extract from a suitcase (which later became a real trunk) props and costumes through which he could step into the shoes of the most different characters. This interesting concept, therefore, can be interpreted both concretely and abstractly, as a baggage containing objects to which life experiences are inextricably linked.

And this is the point of view from which this contribution originates. The study was born from the attempt to translate this concept from the artistic world to the school one in order to exploit its great educational potential and use it as a tool to strengthen teaching. Thus was born "the educator's suitcase". Specifically, the question to be answered is: what should be placed inside the "educator's suitcase" in order to make teaching richer, stimulating and inclusive? The answer is simple and complex at the same time: theatrical-motor practice.

It should be considered that the term "practice" derives from the Greek *πρακτική* (*ἐπιστήμη*) "(science) practical" is to be understood in the profound meaning of activity aimed at a concrete result, made up of experience and lived everyday life. Furthermore, the idea of merging two disciplines such as theater and sport in the school context starts from the assumption that an education of both the body and the emotions is necessary in order to cultivate talents and form citizens of the future who are physically and emotionally aware and capable of to relate to every form of diversity of which existence is made. Using theatrical tools in the school environment can facilitate the achievement of important objectives from a strictly educational and inclusive point of view, but also from a motor point of view. These areas have numerous points of contact. The feeling of belonging to a group, the sense of discipline, the acceptance of limits, the awareness of one's abilities, the consideration of diversity as an inestimable wealth are founding values of both the artistic, sports and school worlds. Training activities aimed at promoting theatrical / motor practices at school will be proposed below, with the aim of pursuing the educational success of all pupils, especially those with difficulties. These can be considered as additions to teaching practice, or even as parts of a didactic-laboratory path with different complexity and purpose depending on the order and grade considered. They do not necessarily have competitive or artistic purposes. This is because not everyone has the same skills, just as not everyone likes to expose themselves to a judgmental audience. It is right, however, that everyone has the opportunity to learn to get involved, to get out of their comfort zone, in the quiet context of everyday school life. In this way, important goals can be achieved, such as:

- respect for the rules, for oneself, for others;
- strengthening of psycho-physical, emotional, linguistic and relational development;
- improvement in the use of verbal and non-verbal languages and body communication;
- enhancement of creativity and critical thinking skills;
- development of self-knowledge and self-awareness, strengthening self-control and self-esteem;
- consolidation of the ability to relate to others, developing socialization, the spirit of collaboration and mutual acceptance;
- facilitating social inclusion, integration between various cultures, enhancing differences, preventing and combating phenomena of discomfort and early school leaving.

## **1. Historical excursus: the theater between education and inclusion**

The relationship between theater, education and inclusion has very remote origins. The ancient Greeks had already intuited the *paideutic* value of the theater. They considered it a powerful communication tool capable of deeply touching viewers, to the point of influencing moods and thoughts and, therefore, capable of conveying all kinds of values and messages. The

philosopher Aristotle was the first to connect art (in particular, musical art and dramatic art) to the concept of catharsis (from the Greek κάθαρσις, "purification"). He, in his Poetics, defined tragedy as "mimesis of a serious and accomplished action in itself which, through a series of cases that arouse pity and terror, has the effect of relieving and purifying the soul of such passions" . The great thinker of Stagira therefore argued that the purpose of the drama is to purify the audience through the artistic stimulation of certain emotions so that the pathos represented acts as a relief for personal passions. With the transition from the Greek world to the Roman world, the theater of the Greek paideia came to the theater of Latin humanitas. As the scholar Henry-Irénée Marrou clarifies, the Greek paideia is one of the foundations of Latin humanitas, but it is not totally identified with it. The etymology of the two words itself considers two different roots: man (from the Latin "homo") and the child (from the Greek "pais"). The paideia was the education necessary for the child to become an adult. Humanitas is the result of an original evolution of the Greek concept in the Roman world. (H.-I. Marrou, 1966). The theater does not lose its educational function. However, there is a transition from the catharsis of Greek tragedy to the representation of the more universal dimensions of humanity in Latin comedy. In the Middle Ages, the educational aspect of the theater was greatly enhanced, especially in the Christian context. Dramatizations with a biblical or hagiographic theme (such as the Miracle plays, the Sacred representations or the Laudi), in addition to playing an important role in worship, were considered true tools of moral formation, of ethical education. Much importance was attributed, in fact, to the staging: the performances had to impress the spectators in order to make the transmission of the message they intended to convey more powerful. Beyond the religious world, even universities were from the very beginning active centers of theatrical production and actor training. In the Renaissance, with the rediscovery of the rich heritage of classical civilizations, the link between theater and education was strengthened. In this period, we witness the birth of two forms of theater with an educational function (different, but equally interesting): the theater in the Jesuit colleges (who considered the theater a valid instrument of instruction and education) and the oratory of Filippo Neri (who offered ample space to playful-artistic activities for educational purposes). Another important example of educational theater, which is affirmed in the nineteenth century, is that of Giovanni Bosco. He considered ethical-moral education to be the main purpose of theatrical activity, but he also believed in its playful, didactic and above all social value, as an alternative way to the difficult life of many children (Bongioanni, 1990). In the mid-twentieth century, educational drama (also called drama in education or drama for learning) became popular in Great Britain. It was a school of thought that supported the use of theatrical strategies not for aesthetic-acting purposes, but for didactic / training purposes. The pivotal thought was that theater could contribute to the growth of the individual, stimulating creativity and spontaneity of expression, breaking down the limitations and conventions of everyday life. The main exponent of this current was the English educator Dorothy Heathcote. His most famous strategy is undoubtedly the teacher in role: the teacher takes on the role of a character, involving the class in the dramatization of a story and resizing the pre-existing hierarchies in the school environment (Wagner, 1976). From Heathcote's pedagogy, together with the affirmation of Vygotsky's constructivist theories and Bruner's cognitivism, the process drama was born in the early nineties, defined by the Australian Bradley Haseman as a "form of theatrical improvisation tending to involve the participant on an emotional level. , cognitive and aesthetic "(Haseman, 1991). At the same time, the rest of Europe is witnessing the development of the educational institution and national educational systems are beginning to pay attention to the role of theatrical art. Especially from the postwar period onwards, the theater finds more and more place in the daily school work, also determining collaborations between school and professional actors. In the nineties, then, there was a further consolidation of the role of theater

in the educational field, but we also witness the affirmation of the media and the educational implications that accompany the new means of communication (Lewicki). This brief historical digression is intended to reconstruct the evolutionary path of the pedagogical value of the theater, which made it possible for it to be welcomed into the scholastic institution, often finding itself in line with the educational and cultural purposes of the school. The theatrical practice constitutes a valid alternative response to the training needs in the growth path of individual students. As a form of choral art and team play, it also promotes collaboration and openness to each other.

## **2. Childhood and primary school: the strength of the gesture**

Theater is often thought to be primarily word, spoken or written. In the collective imagination, the practice of acting is linked to the classic script to be brought to the stage, to the excerpts to be represented on the set in front of a camera, to the monologue to be interpreted in front of an audience. Therefore, when it comes to theatrical practice aimed at children, it is considered almost an impossible challenge. It is good to keep in mind, however, that reducing this art to the theater-word binomial is limiting. Moreover, verbal language is not the only form of communication for adults and it is not even for children. Communication, in fact, can take place in different ways: verbal (the content transmitted through the use of words), para-verbal (the way of transmitting the content) and non-verbal (mimicry and posture). Each of these channels follows its own line of development, but with times that can be very different from child to child. Having children attend a theater course or accompany them to see theatrical performances is very important for their growth. In fact, theatrical art stimulates the imagination and amplifies the sensitivity of children, but also opens them to diversity, develops their empathy and improves the perception of their body in space. "The magic puppet" is a theatrical-motor activity that has its roots in the great tradition of mime. With the word mime we mean both a set of different types of show as well as a fundamental preparatory moment that lays the foundations for the work of any type of actor on gestures and facial and body mimicry. (Schino, 2006). This activity essentially focuses on visual and body language. It requires few tools to perform: just a few ribbons and a chair. It takes place in pairs: the first child takes on the role of the puppeteer and the second takes on the role of the puppet. The puppeteer, pulling some ribbons tied delicately to the puppet's wrists and ankles, makes him perform some simple movements. The puppet, sitting in a relaxed and inanimate way on a chair, follows the puppeteer's commands, following his gestures. It will then be necessary to perform the activity by eliminating the ribbons: the children will repeat the exercise by mimicking what was done the first time, but moving "invisible threads" and thus working in the abstract. The power of gestures and coordination will make possible in the eyes of children a real magic that always amazes and is also very fun to perform and exciting to observe. It would be preferable to introduce this activity through the narration of a story (such as, for example, the tale of Pinocchio) or by explaining and showing children what puppets and puppets are and what they are for. In this way it contributes to enriching the linguistic vocabulary and the knowledge base of the children. It must also be considered that puppets have great potential as educational tools to be used with children. They are transitional objects, that is, capable of acting as mediators between "the self" and "not self" and of broadening the channels of communication, expression and socialization. It is also advisable to accompany the moment of the performance with a light background music: in this way, not only is it possible to avoid feeding the children's performance anxiety, but it offers them a sound reference to follow in slow and slow performance. sweet of the movements. The exercise aims to strengthen the capacity for imitation, imagination, abstraction and the expressive potential of the young

pupils, improving concentration and coordination and promoting empathy. It is also useful to encourage interaction with each other and the processes of socialization, enhance attention, strengthen knowledge and the management of emotions, stimulate creativity and bodily expression.

### **3. First and second grade secondary school: from speech to stage**

The following activity combines team play, creative writing, theatrical improvisation and bodily expression. Due to the degree of complexity, it is particularly suitable for students of lower and upper secondary schools. It deals with a practice that could be titled "From the word to the scene". It starts, in fact, with an exercise in collective creative writing, very fun and easy to do. Each student writes a word on a note (completely chosen at will), which he inserts inside a container. Each child, then, must extract a word and formulate a sentence that contains it, taking care to link it to the one formulated immediately before. The goal is to develop, sentence by sentence, a real story written by several hands. The set of sentences, therefore, will not only originate from the drawn words, but will give life to a story, the result of the creative contribution of each participant. The next phase consists of the passage from the text to the stage, through the practice of theatrical improvisation. After having drawn up a canvas and identified the characters, with the guidance of the teacher, you can reach the dramatization of the story, according to the "subject acting" technique. This allows the actors to stay on stage without a real script to repeat, but inventing dialogues and twists on the spot. Each student must characterize his character from a physical and psychological point of view: he must attribute character peculiarities (sad, happy, in love, irascible, etc.) and physical characteristics (gait, posture, tone of voice). In order to play your character correctly it is necessary to remember what setting you wanted to give him from the beginning. At this point we talk about identification, which is considered an efficient work tool, useful for improving performance and being able to express feelings and emotions through the body in an automatic and probably authentic way. The actor is not the character, but in the time interval of the performance, he experiences his own emotions that he transmits through the body. In this regard, it must be remembered that the movements of the actor on the stage have two main functions. The first is to achieve goals, such as walking to move or bending over to pick up something. The second is to express moods and this is the most complex to achieve, because in the theater communicating a feeling is not a private fact, but a professional fact. The study of the gestures and corporeality of the characters is an evident testimony of how much theatrical and motor activity are in strong connection. This is because external behavior is inevitably a reflection of what is going on inside. Each character and each scene can also be characterized through the use of props made at the moment, with the material available in the surrounding environment. The participatory creation of an "actor's suitcase" can also be interesting. We make a collection of the most varied objects that will be stored in a container, a trunk, a suitcase. These objects from time to time will become part of the disguise useful to immerse yourself in the role of the character you want to represent. The activity becomes particularly fun the more imagination is used, for example in the use of objects to which a totally different function is attributed to the real one (for example, a hat can become a bowl and vice versa; a ladle can become a microphone, and so on...). In addition to taking care of the scenic movements functional to the acting, it is also possible to create small dancing moments or real choreographies that can enrich the representation, thus bringing it closer to a sort of musical. This activity is particularly stimulating and rewarding for the students both from a personal point of view and from a relational point of view. This is because each participant becomes an active part of a team mechanism in which everyone collaborates in the creation of an unpublished story and makes

it possible to transpose it, from the world of words to that of characters, from the world of fantasy to that of reality.

## Conclusion

The proposed activities are presented as ideas that aim to make school everyday life different, favor the cohesion of the group-class and also improve the teacher-pupil relationship. These strategies can be simplified or complicated based on the teacher's creativity and following the inclinations of the pupils themselves. And therefore they can also be reformulated according to the age group or the characteristics of the group that needs to be involved. Even if it has been argued that final representation is not the purpose of the practices described, this does not mean that this is necessarily to be excluded. What matters is the creative process, in the most artisanal sense of the term, that is, the creation of a product starting from nothing. But it is also right to consider that “open-door lessons” could be organized that could make the contact between pupils and the public less drastic. Furthermore, a final essay could be created that highlights the strengths of each pupil and makes him aware of his abilities. The theatrical-motor practice is therefore to be considered as the entire creative, emotional, physical and experiential path that students face. It is totally part of the baggage of educational experiences and useful tools to face the world outside the school walls. Each student will have his own suitcase to fill with the achievements that these practices can offer him and the teacher will enrich his own with the satisfactions he has managed to generate from time to time. Paraphrasing the wonderful song by De Gregori, quoted at the beginning, "the educator's suitcase" is created or by combining the two terms one can arrive at the "educator's suitcase". If we consider the etymology of the two words, they are not so distant. “Educare” derives from the Latin educere “to draw out”, while “actor” originates from actor, which in turn derives from agere “to act”. The teacher guides and pushes action in order to bring out every talent and increase every potential. The ultimate goal of this project halfway between art and sport is to contribute to the creation of a truly alternative teaching method, which helps students to recognize those skills useful for success in life, which makes them aware of their own body and their own. states of mind, which makes them men and women able to walk their way with their heads held high and with sure footedness.

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