

## **ALIEN BODIES AT ELLIS ISLAND. CROSS-CULTURAL PATHWAYS THROUGH THEATRICAL PERFORMANCE IN 1912**

### **CORPI ALIENI A ELLIS ISLAND. PERCORSI INTERCULTURALI ATTRAVERSO LO SPETTACOLO TEATRALE NEL 1912**

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#### **Abstract**

For millennia, theater with its divergent and polysemic perspective has been an artistic form of strong connection between actors and audience beyond the aesthetic experience. The sciences have provided an explanation of what happens in the minds and bodies of individuals who experience a holistic approach to intellectual, aesthetic and physical knowledge. On stage, actors and audience are actively involved and a mechanism of self-knowledge and other-knowledge is initiated. It insists on the strings of empathy as a form of resistance to individualisms, prejudices and mental closures.

Twentieth-century scientific discoveries about the mechanical workings of "feeling" the other were anticipated by historical paths that were equally innovative but remained hidden in time.

This article presents an interesting educational activity that combats immigrant prejudices and stereotypes by leveraging theatrical activity as a form of in-depth knowledge of the living conditions of foreigners to break the chain of hatred around them. The 1912 educational project presents interesting insights into educational theater to build community empowerment in the largest Western metropolis of the 20th century.

Per millenni il teatro con la sua prospettiva divergente e polisemica è stato una forma artistica di forte connessione tra attori e pubblico al di là della esperienza estetica. Le scienze hanno dato una spiegazione di quanto avviene nella mente e nei corpi degli individui che sperimentano un approccio olistico della conoscenza intellettuale, estetica e fisica. Sul palcoscenico gli attori e il pubblico sono attivamente coinvolti e si attiva un meccanismo di conoscenza di sé stessi e dell'altro che insiste sulle corde dell'empatia come forma di resistenza agli individualismi, ai pregiudizi e alle chiusure mentali.

Le scoperte scientifiche del Novecento sul funzionamento meccanico del "sentire" l'altro sono state anticipate da sentieri storici altrettanto innovativi ma rimasti nascosti nel tempo.

Il caso che si presenta nell'articolo riguarda un'interessante attività formativa che combatte pregiudizi e stereotipi dell'immigrato facendo leva sull'attività teatrale come forma di approfondita conoscenza delle condizioni di vita degli stranieri per rompere la catena d'odio intorno a loro. Il progetto educativo del 1912 presenta interessanti spunti per una riflessione sul teatro formativo per costruire un empowerment di comunità nella più grande metropoli occidentale del XX secolo.

**Keywords:** Educational Theater; History of Emigration; Ellis Island Reception; History of Education

**Keywords:** Teatro formativo; Storia dell'emigrazione; accoglienza Ellis Island; Storia della pedagogia

#### **Introduction**

For centuries, theater has been reduced to its literary component while ignoring the linguistic-expressive meanings and introspective implications. While the territory of the arts is vast and its confines are so uncertain that only partial and provisional maps of them can be made, the recognizability of theater is to alter the balance between the perception of reality and the recognition of scenic illusion, making this boundary ambiguity one of its most characteristic features. Aristotle believed theater was linked to the status of truth whereby the art of the theater represented human

actions through *mimesis* which does not coincide with the true, but with what might turn out to be true. The genesis of theater from the classical model to experimentalisms has over time made use of technical and interdisciplinary elements that have encompassed, especially in the twentieth century, on increasingly dynamic, introspective and fluid representations. Lionel Abel (1963) witnessed the birth of a new interpretation of dramatic art, metatheatre, which allows a compositional and artistic freedom that disregards the Aristotelian unities of space, time and action. Abel envisioned a dramatic form that replaced the fixity substituted for tragedy while remaining equal in speculative engagement. Theater, then, is not mirroring but *verification* of reality through a gaze capable of descending deeper, inside the primary instances of humanity (Paduano 2020, 11). The expansion of theatrical understanding through the paratext and the genres of intertextuality, paratextuality, metatextuality, architecturality, and hypertextuality (Genette 1982) traveled along with the creative experimentation of the 20th century when theater allowed itself to be penetrated by psychology and science. The educational experience of theater uses new awareness and models for a different approach to the artistic discipline and audience experience; particularly the new ability of actors to build a sincere relationship with the audience, to tune into the experiences, emotions, and thoughts, and to create a connection through experiences to enter into the system of knowledge, beliefs, and perceptions of others. Inner knowledge, of the psyche and the body, has allowed theater to become more introspective and relational. The actor's body becomes a medium of meaning recognized by the audience who have an instantaneous understanding like the one between individuals who have already lived and recorded the same experience. The theatrical performance becomes, then, a formative, empathic and living experience: a body-theater that is not mere perception but is felt as density and tension (Nancy 2010, 33). Scenic space is pedagogically relevant because it allows the subject to encounter with its points of resistance; it is a generative space because it charges the experience with life-giving potential; finally, it is transformative because the experience operates a change in the subject.

### **Bodies, theater and interculture in an inclusive perspective**

Unlike traditional forms of communication dominated by logic and speech, artistic communication is perceived as analog, immersive, immediate and more engaging for young people. Communication by analogy deconstructs patterns of understanding and behavior and give new perspectives of meaning never previously questioned.

In 1992 the discovery of mirror neurons (Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia 2006) scientifically demonstrated how the human body understands the intentions of the other (Iacobini 2008) not by transmission of information but by decoding expressive behaviors. Neuroscientific research believes in the existence of neural mechanisms that mediate between the multi-level personal experience we have of the body we live in and the implicit certainties we simultaneously have about others. The subject recognizes the actor's performance because it decodes its behaviors and recognizes itself in it, for Vittorio Gallese is "embodied simulation" (2005). Scientifically explained experience tightens the relationship between art and nature that had already been recognized and applied in the past. Thus understood, in fact, Dewey's experience is a category that still finds full theoretical force and vigor. In this term coexist both the question of evidence understood, and the deconstruction of procedure for the benefit of a practice that determines an openness between subject and object, knowing and not knowing, thought and action (Cappa 2016, 27). In 1934, John Dewey investigated art as an experience intrinsically linked to nature and the human body, sensing and anticipating the discovery of neuroscientists by about sixty years:

No creature lives only under its skin; its subcutaneous organs are means of connecting with that which lies beyond its bodily structure, and to which it must adapt, in order to live, with accommodations and defenses but also with achievements [...] The life and destiny of a living being are connected to its exchanges with the environment, not outwardly, but in the most intimate way (Dewey 1967, 19).

The connection between art and nature, personal and bodily experiential knowledge enables us to understand the actions performed by others and directly decode the emotions and sensations they experience. Those who act and those who perceive are similarly and simultaneously invested by the same process (Dewey 1967, 117). In the play, the empathic process is the action of vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts and experience of another person without the feelings, thoughts and experience being fully communicated in an objectively explicit way.

Empathy is an integrated expression of our intellectual and emotional selves in relationships with others but differs from other relational orientations such as sympathy or affection or empathy in the presence of cognitive activities: the intellect seeks to understand the feelings of others while maintaining a clear perception of the boundary between self and other (Dyche and Zayas 2001, 246-247). Empathic response allows one to experience the contagion of another's affections while maintaining the personal significance of that person's experience. The empathic process knows two stages: sharing which is immediate, unconscious and innate; "feeling" the other which is reflexive, conscious and intentional because it is linked to the individual's will and value system. In theatrical performance, the empathic process is the action of vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts and experience of another without fully communicating them in an objectively explicit way. In the twentieth century transdisciplinary research on empathy and technical applications multiplied and led to important knowledge and new skills for developing empowered communities that are welcoming and open to the other. At the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, studies on cultural empathy consist of the ability to feel an interest in other people and to have an accurate perception of their thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and experiences in the psychological and communicative fields (Ridley & Lingle, 1996; Jiang, Y., Wang J., 2018). Cultural empathy is the willingness to accept ways of doing things and habits typical of a cultural context different from one's own. In formal learning contexts such as schools, pathways to cross-cultural empathy that teaches cultural sensitivity can be activated (Dyche and Zayas 2001). In the late twentieth century it was believed that cross-cultural sensitivity was a dimension that could be developed through specific training pathways to overcome the natural tendency toward ethnocentrism in favor of an ethnorelative point of view. One example is the DMIS, Development Model of Intercultural Sensitivity, was developed by Milton Bennett (1986, 1993, 2004, 2013). The framework describes the different ways in which people can react to cultural differences and assumes that experience becomes complex and sophisticated the more subjects are able to enhance their abilities to perceive and conceptualize it. According to DMIS, it is possible to learn to assume cultural difference as part of one's worldwide and gain a broader understanding of one's own and others' culture.

Such approaches and research have fostered the development of divergent and inclusive thinking, fostering cross-cultural encounters.

The combination of art and interculturalism has found particular fortune in recent years (Dovigo et al. 2015, 39). However, there is evidence of educational theater projects that come from the distant past and exhibit many of the characteristics so far.

## Theater experiment in 1912

### *Context*

In the collective imagination, the history of immigrants to the United States is linked to Ellis Island. The importance of the island lies in its more recent past as a port of entry and immigration station from January 1, 1892, to November 12, 1954, 20 million people passed through on their way to the American dream. The first immigration hub consisted of three small islands in New York's Upper Bay: one island was used as a base for the administrative building, a second for a large hospital, and the third for a small infectious disease hospital. An article which appeared in Harper's Weekly described the almost completed building: "It looks like a latterday water place hotel, presenting to the view a great many-windowed expanse of buffed-painted wooden walls, of blue slate roofing, and of light and picturesque towers. It is 400 feet long, two stories high, and 150 feet wide" (1891, 821). For 62 years people came to Ellis Island from all over the world to try to get visas to become U.S. citizens: after the ferries docked, immigrants landed on the island and entered the large registration room, then doctors checked for physical issues problems and officials made sure their documents were authentic. A century ago this was the island of hope and tears because so many experienced humiliation, deportation, and refoulement here. Families here could either reunite or end up fatally divided by a cruel fate. The "Registry Room" was the last stop on a long journey that in most cases ended on the ferries to Manhattan. First- and second-class passengers on the ships were inspected in their cabins and escorted ashore by immigration officers. Third- and fourth-class passengers, on the other hand, were sent to the island where doctors hastily checked them. Those who failed the examinations were marked on their backs with a chalk and subjected to further examination. A cross in case of suspected mental problems, other symbols or letters for ailments such as hernia, trachoma, conjunctivitis, heart disease, lung disease or even simple pregnancy.

Entry into the United States was only the starting point of a difficult integration into American society. Anti-immigrant theories had found fertile ground in U.S. society, corroborated by the speeches of sociologist Edward Ross who wrote that newcomers brought no intellectual or enriching baggage but socialist ideas, violence and disease (1914). Although more stringent regulatory measures were adopted, the wave of migration did not dissipate but was limited as a result of social, political, and ethnic issues affecting everyone. During the 1870s and 1880s, the vast majority of these people were from Germany, Ireland, and England and a relatively large group of Chinese immigrated to the United States. The anti-Chinese policy led to restricted entry supported by anti-Chinese propaganda to gain public support. A similar fate befell the Italians who began to reach American shores around the late 1870s and were the recipients of aggressive media pressure against them (Connell & Pugliese 2018). Perceived as separate enclaves those who adhered to different value systems and differed in matters of language, religion, customs and society were the victims of severe prejudices that lasted for two or three generations. In the case of Italian emigration, the media with the complicity of the American intelligentsia painted a portrait of Italy as a land perpetually plagued by begging and crime, so much so that immigrants were questioned (LaGumina 2019, 454).

Initially, second generations hastened the unidirectional process of assimilation (Goldon 1964) that led ethnic minorities to accept the dominant culture and forget their origins.

Leonard Covello was a second generation of that first migration phase that punctuated the arrivals to the United States, experiencing firsthand the cultural contrasts between antithetical models. The double process of transition that involved the second generation of the first migratory wave increased expectations at school and at home: while communication in standard English was required in the mornings, Italian students struggled to lose their accents and understand lessons; instead, at home

they were introduced through dialect to the paesana culture, made up of a language respectful toward adults, full of family obligations and extremely different social behaviors (Orsi 1985, pp. 20ss.).

In school, children of all backgrounds found themselves sharing the space and time of learning. School was the place where differences facilitated confrontation and echoed the prejudices of adults, locked in their own mental and cultural rigidities (Petruzzi 2022). In the 1930s and 1940s, Leonard Covello emancipated the immigrants of East Harlem and promoted the community-centered school, the propelling and revitalizing center of marginal and abandoned neighborhoods.

### *The peaceful invasion on scene*

The school was the key to the social inclusion of families; one had to work on the school's curriculum connected to what students experienced in the community (Perrone 1998, p.29). The educational institution believed in cultural pluralism based on knowledge and dialogue to open students first, families later, to the cultural otherness represented not only by American culture but also the many and others who frequented the streets, parks, stores and school. Well before Covello, there are few accounts of experimental streets that have worked on inclusion and pathways to immigrant community empowerment and inclusion in U.S. society. One example that deserves attention is the theatrical work of Mrs. Francis E. Clark who promoted an artistic activity thus described "an Exercise Prepared for the Young People and Descriptive of the Reception, Inspection, and Experiences of our Immigrants in the Detention-Room and Railway Offices."

The 1912 educational exercise for boys echoes the theories expressed in Howard Grose's volume (1906) which argued the maturity of the times to address the issue of "peaceful invasion" of immigrants with American youth:

It is not a question as to whether the aliens will come. They have come, millions of them; they are now coming, at the rate of a million a year. They come from every clime, country, and condition; and they are of every sort: good, bad, and indifferent, literate and illiterate, virtuous and vicious, ambitious and aimless, strong and weak, skilled and unskilled, married and single, old and young, Christian and infidel, Jew and pagan. They form to-day the raw material of the American citizenship of to-morrow. [...] Immigration—the foreign peoples in America, who and where they are, whence they come, and what under our laws and liberties and influences they are likely to become—this is the subject of our study. The subject is as fascinating as it is vital. Its problems are by far the most pressing, serious, and perplexing with which the American people have to do (Grose 1906, 9).

The volume is temporally distant from the theories of Dewey, modern dramaturges and even more so from neuroscientists; although it is clear the desire to make sincere contact with newcomers abandoned to negative judgment and themselves in the great metropolises. Six years later Mrs. Clark proposed a theatrical exercise "in order that our young people may know more of the conditions under which the immigrants come to our shores, and may have a more sympathetic interest in their lives. All the stories here told are true accounts of real experiences of immigrants who have recently come to our country" (Clark 1912, Foreward).

The experience at Ellis Island as a visitor enabled the creation of this theatrical fiction to work on an empathic journey with young Americans who were absorbing the theories of the time about immigrants. The journey is structured as a relational experiment that invests the youth in the role of learner and actor, author and spectator. Playing the role of inspector and immigrant on stage allows a very high degree of identification and enhances the dialogic and communal dimension of the educational event.



The number of children who can participate is as variable as their age. The characters to be played are many, starting with immigrants who have passed or failed background checks. The authenticity of the exercise proposes the use of signs around the neck with pointed clarifications for the inspectors: F.I. (Further Investigation), S.I. (Special Inquiry), T.D. (Temporarily Detained), E. (Excluded), D. (Deported), O.K. (All Right).

The stage is divided into individual scenes so that it is possible to go through each officer and at all levels of inspection.

The disembarkation from the ship begins with the counting of people by the officer in charge. This is followed by entering in family groups or individually into the Ellis Island atrium to begin the inspections. First is the general inspection by the marine hospital surgeon who does a general check-up looking for contagious skin diseases or any disease or deformity. If he sees anything suspicious he marks the person with a chalk with the letters F.I. and sends him to the detention room for a closer examination. The second is inspection of the eyes by another uniformed doctor. Trachoma is a contagious disease that is immediately notified, the immigrant passes into the detention room and repatriated immediately. This is followed by inspection by a matron who interrogates all the women, looks them over carefully and detains those who appear to be of dubious morals or in need of special help. The immigrant women are escorted to the inspector's desk who asks specific questions about people, places and times to check that they are the same answers given by the men. If the answers are satisfactory and match those on the sheet, they are marked "O. K. for New York" or "O. K. for the railroad" or "O.K. for the West" or wherever they are headed. If any immigrants are unable to give satisfactory answers to the questions, the inspector assigns them the signs "F.I." (Further Investigation), or "S.I." (Special Inquiry), and they are sent to the detention room.

The second scene takes place in the detention room. Here the missionary talks to the immigrants and investigates their stories. He shakes hands with one after another and asks them if there is anything he can do to help them and if they are waiting for someone to meet them, and in this way bring out their stories. Meanwhile, he delivers religious materials.

The third scene takes place in the railway and refreshment hall. Here a special official helps the immigrants in buying tickets, sending telegrams to their friends, buying refreshments, exchanging money, and getting them to the right station for their train.

Divided into groups, the immigrants could go to the two ends of the stage representing the steps leading to the ferry to the train stations, and the other end for those who would remain in New York. New York acquaintances may bring new hats and jackets for their friends who have just arrived from Ellis Island.

Before leaving the room each group of people or family members must answer additional questions asked by the inspector who checks the answers given on the documents signed at the port of embarkation. If there is no match with the answers on the documents, the immigrants are detained and marked with the letters F.I.

Checking questions include name, age, place of origin and destination, occupation, knowledge of reading-writing, any pending court cases, political orientation, employment contract, name of the person who bought the tickets and people they will meet at the destination.

For each scene Mrs. Clark proposes a series of situation-types that can be the basis for developing various and different plots and ends with the station scene and the endless possibilities related to luggage or sending telegrams. Thus described, the stage space turns out to be a formative and didactic space that opens to knowledge, dialogue and the birth of sympathy feelings toward each other.

The body of the children is engaged in the acting, the child participates in the event and enters inside the scene to get involved. The ability to "feel into" someone else is the basis of cultural empathy and interpersonal neurobiology. The function of theatrical art is to break down individualistic and

conventional barriers, common feeling and compose differences, ceasing isolation and conflict (Dewey 1967, 292).

Despite the theatrical device, the experience, passing through the body, is perceived as real and the staged relationships provoke real emotions. There is authenticity and value in the theatrical performance that becomes an exploration of reality. The role of the educator also changes; he or she is an activator of meaningful situations from an existential point of view and also of reworkings that acquire new meanings each time.

## Conclusion

The theatrical experience is absolutely formative in educational contexts for the reasons already stated. Such training also acquires a political value because it is an act of empowerment. Being part of the scene and being a spectator activates a transformative process from idea to reality. The character of the scene intervenes in the construction of the knowledge and beliefs of both actor and spectator.

The character is alive and remains within the memory, leaves a trace of himself in everyday life, gets stuck in the time of personal memories and history, as the father explains in *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*:

“Nel senso, veda, che l'autore che ci creò, vivi, non volle poi, o non poté materialmente, metterci al mondo dell'arte. E fu un vero delitto, signore, perché chi ha la ventura di nascere personaggio vivo, può ridersi anche della morte. Non muore più! Morrà l'uomo, lo scrittore, strumento della creazione; la creatura non muore più! E per vivere eterna, non ha neanche bisogno di straordinarie doti o di compiere prodigi. Chi era Sancho Panza! Chi era don Abbondio! Eppure vivono eterni perché – vivi germi – ebbero la ventura di trovare una matrice feconda, una fantasia che li seppe allevare e nutrire, far vivere per l'eternità” (Pirandello 1921, 26).

Deprived of scientific explanations of empathy, motivated by a desire to combat indifference, theatrical experiments such as the one in 1912 are important and primitive examples of the transforming power of theatre in formal and informal educational scenarios.

In the cliché of the time, the immigrant is an outcast on the fringes of industrial and capitalist society, grotesque in appearance, uncultured and crude in behavior. The theatrical exercise proposed by Mrs. Clark works directly on the immersive experience to break down cultural barriers. A positive experiment that has continued to the present day.

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