


Emahnuel Troisi Lopez

Institute of Applied Sciences and Intelligent Systems, National Research Council, Pozzuoli, Italy

e.troisilopez@gmail.com

0000-0002-0220-2672 

Double Blind Peer Review

Citazione

Troisi Lopez E., (2023) Self and environmental enhancement through open-air theater, Giornale Italiano di Educazione alla Salute, Sport e Didattica Inclusiva - Italian Journal of Health Education, Sports and Inclusive Didactics. Anno 7, V 3. Edizioni Universitarie Romane

Doi:

<https://doi.org/10.32043/gsd.v7i3.985>

Copyright notice:

© 2023 this is an open access, peer-reviewed article published by Open Journal System and distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

[gsdjournal.it](http://gsdjournal.it)

ISSN: 2532-3296

ISBN: 978-88-6022-483-5

ABSTRACT

The human body serves as a medium for sensory experiences and plays a role in our engagement with public spaces and pedagogical processes. Open-air theater embodies this union, blurring lines between performers and spectators, encouraging self-discovery, and improving well-being. Several psychological variables were tested and analyzed in a group of young adults before or after participating in an open-air theater course. Results concerning improvement of well-being and the possible social-pedagogical benefits are discussed.

Il corpo umano è un medium per le esperienze sensoriali e contribuisce al nostro coinvolgimento negli spazi pubblici e nei processi pedagogici. Il teatro all'aperto incarna questa unione, sfumando le linee tra attori e spettatori, incoraggiando l'auto-scoperta e il miglioramento del benessere. Diverse variabili psicologiche sono state testate ed analizzate in un gruppo di giovani adulti prima o dopo la partecipazione a un corso di teatro all'aperto. I risultati relativi al miglioramento del benessere e ai possibili benefici socio-pedagogici vengono discussi.

KEYWORDS

Theater, self-esteem, socialization, environment, well-being

Received 20/09/2023

Accepted 26/10/2023

Published 07/12/2023

## **1. Introduction**

The human body, in its magnificent complexity, is more than just a vessel for existence. It is an instrument of perception, a conduit for expression, and a canvas for experiences (Malafouris, 2004). When we think about the interplay of body, public spaces, and pedagogy, we embark on a journey that delves deep into the essence of what it means to be alive (Schuermans et al., 2012). Our bodies are the first and foremost interface through which we engage with the world. Every sensation, every emotion, every thought is filtered through this corporeal frame (Gelder, 2016). It is in the public spaces, where we congregate and interact, that the narrative of our lives unfolds. These spaces carry the echoes of countless stories, imbued with history and meaning. But what does it mean to truly inhabit our bodies and navigate these public realms with intention and awareness? It begins with a profound realization – that we are not separate from our bodies; we are our bodies (Foglia & Wilson, 2013). Our experiences, our connections, and our perceptions are rooted in the physicality of existence.

In this exploration of self-discovery, the concept of pedagogy assumes a central role. Pedagogy extends beyond conventional teaching methods; it involves the awakening of an individual's self-awareness (Richards, 2009). It encompasses the process of learning to interpret the nuanced language of the human body, discerning the messages encoded within each muscle, breath, and heartbeat. This journey of self-education transcends the confines of traditional classrooms, extending into the broader arena of life (Rajala et al., 2016; Sandlin et al., 2011). As we delve deeper into the significance of using our bodies as instruments of comprehension and expression, the demarcation between art and existence blurs. The world transforms into a canvas, and our bodies become the tools through which we paint our narratives. Every step taken, gesture made, and interaction experienced becomes a choreography of existence.

Within the realm of open-air theater, these elements find profound synthesis. Open-air theaters serve as a testament to the potency of the human body, the vastness of public spaces, and the transformative capacity of pedagogy (Guarrera, 2020). The origins of theater can be traced back to ancient Greece, where playwrights like Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides used dramatic performances to explore complex moral, ethical, and philosophical issues (Brockett & Hildy, 2003). These plays often revolved around tragic heroes and served as a means to provoke thought and discussion among the audience (Ridgeway, 1910). Theater in

ancient Greece was closely intertwined with education, as it was seen as a way to teach citizens about their society's values and dilemmas (Puchner & White, 2017). It stands as a domain where actors fully embody their characters, inviting the audience to partake in a shared sensory encounter, all while eroding the boundaries between performer and spectator. In the open-air theater, the body takes center stage. Actors, unencumbered by the confines of traditional stages, use their bodies to traverse the landscape of emotion and narrative. In this context, the audience also actively engages in the experience, perceiving environmental elements such as airflow, auditory cues like leaf rustling, and adopting the perspective presented by the performance. It is here that the teachings of pedagogy find their fullest expression. The process of learning through the body is not confined to classrooms and schools but extends into the very heart of the performance (Pinkert, 2011). The actor's journey of self-discovery becomes a shared exploration, and the audience, in witnessing this, learns not only about the characters portrayed but also about the depths of their own physicality.

In conclusion, the union of body, public spaces, pedagogy, and open-air theater is a celebration of the human experience. It is a reminder that we are not spectators of life but active participants in its grand production. As we move through the world, let us remember the wisdom of the body, the vastness of public spaces, and the transformative power of pedagogy. And in the open-air theaters that grace our cities and landscapes, let us discover the magic that happens when these elements converge, inviting us to experience life in all its beauty and complexity through the art of theater (Cheney, 1918). In open-air theater, there is a strong emphasis on engaging the spectator's attention and managing their sensations effectively. The goal is to evoke emotional responses in the audience.

The utilization of space is essential in outdoor performances. Every location has its unique history and symbolic meanings, contributing to its identity (Waugh, 1917). The aim is to offer spectators a fresh perspective on the place itself. This requires careful consideration of the space and how it aligns with the scenes in the performance. The pedagogical approach in open-air theater involves mentorship. Masters pass down their skills to pupils and young actors, enabling them to develop their self-learning abilities (Jackson, 1993). Participating in theater activities was also showed to offer several beneficial effects such as anxiety reduction and the development of emotional, cognitive and behavioral awareness (Micera, 2015), development of healthy eating habits (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2009), improving social interactions (Guli et al., 2013).

In summary, open-air theater involves engaging spectators, creatively using space, empowering actors, and employing a pedagogical approach that explores the evolution of performance improving the general well-being of participants. This holistic approach creates immersive and impactful performances in diverse settings. In this view, the focus of this study was to analyze the effects of practicing open-air theater in a group of young adults that voluntarily participated in an open-air theater course. Several characteristics describing mood and psychological well-being were kept into consideration. In particular were evaluated: depression, anxiety, self-esteem, and different aspects of psychological well-being according to Ryff's scale (autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance) (Ryff, 2014).

## **2. Methods**

In this study, a group of young adults who had voluntarily participated in an amateur theater project was considered. None of the participants had previous experience in acting or theater. Initially, the group included eighteen participants. However, three of them drop out during the course, hence were excluded from the analysis. The final group, consisting of fifteen participants (age  $21 \pm 2.2$ , seven males, eight females), participated in an open-air theater project (OT), that lasted for six months and involved weekly meetings with the aim of teaching participants the fundamentals of acting, directing, and scriptwriting, and then culminating in the production of an amateur performance at the end of the course. The group was given questionnaires at the beginning and end of the project to assess their mood and general well-being characteristics. Additionally, all participants signed an informed consent, and the data were handled in accordance with current privacy protection guidelines.

Psychological assessments were conducted both at the beginning and the conclusion of the projects. Specifically, the Rosenberg self-esteem scale (Prezza et al., 1997; Rosenberg, 2015) was utilized to measure self-esteem levels. Additionally, the Ryff's test was employed to explore the six dimensions of well-being (autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance) (Ruini et al., 2003; Ryff, 2014). Furthermore, the Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI) (Beck & Steer, 1990) and the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) (Beck et al., 1996) tests were used to evaluate anxiety and depression, respectively.

Paired t-test was used to evaluate differences between before/after participating to the project. Only p-values < 0.05 after false discovery rate correction (Benjamini & Hochberg, 1995) were considered as significant.

### 3. Results

Mood and general well-being characteristics of the participants were compared before starting and after completing the project. The results, displayed in table 1, show the significant differences found after completing the open-air theater course. In particular, after the course, the participants exhibited significant lower depression and anxiety scores, and improved self-esteem, relationship with others, and self-acceptance. No difference was found in autonomy, environmental mastery and in purpose in life scores.

Test	t-statistic	Confidence interval	<i>p</i>	<i>p</i> FDR
BDI (depression)	6.31	[1.71 3.48]	0.013	0.024
Hamilton (anxiety)	9.72	[2.34 3.66]	< 0.001	< 0.001
Rosenberg (self-esteem)	-9.54	[-2.12 -1.34]	< 0.001	< 0.001
Psychological wellbeing				
Autonomy	3.39	[-1.61 2.14]	0.765	0.812
Environmental mastery	-0.79	[-2.23 1.03]	0.444	0.665
Personal growth	0.51	[-1.3 2.1]	0.621	0.799
Personal relation with others	-3.73	[-18.9 -5.1]	0.002	0.005
Purpose in life	-0.24	[-1.32 1.05]	0.812	0.812
Self-acceptance	-4.75	[-18.29 -6.92]	< 0.001	< 0.001

**Table 1.** Psychological comparison before and after completing the six-months open-air theater course. Paired t-test was used.

#### 4. Discussion

In this study, it was conducted a comprehensive assessment of various psychological variables in a cohort of young adults before and after their participation in an open-air theater course (Cheney, 1918). The aim was to investigate the course's potential effects on mood regulation and self-perception, employing a rigorous scientific approach. By scrutinizing these psychological parameters, the aim was to elucidate the nuanced mechanisms through which engagement in open-air theater might influence the emotional states and self-concept of young adults.

Open-air theater has a profound impact on those who take the stage. It offers a unique and dynamic experience that extends beyond traditional indoor performances (Rehm, 2020). As performers step into the outdoor venue, they often find themselves transformed in various ways (Curuțiu-Zoicaș, 2021). Firstly, open-air theater encourages enhanced self-expression (Lebedev et al., 2020). For instance, vast expanse of the open-air necessitates grander gestures and vocal projection, allowing performers to delve deeper into their characters and emotions. Moreover, the challenges posed by outdoor conditions, such as unpredictable weather and potentially noisy audiences, contribute to increased confidence (Puchner & White, 2017). Performers learn to adapt and face these challenges head-on, fostering resilience and self-assuredness (Osnes, 2017). Indeed, it was observed an increase in self-esteem and self-acceptance. Both these feature may be augmented by all these aspects, and by the act of challenging their comfort zones. Indeed, the young adults had to perform in public, in unpredictable situations, trying to learn new skills and improve their abilities (Jackson, 1993).

Another element to be kept into consideration concerns the sensory experience. Indeed, it is heightened in open-air theater, since performers become attuned to the feel of natural elements, the sounds of the outdoors, and the interaction with the audience (Anderson, 1993). This sensory awareness enriches their portrayal of characters and emotions. All these elements can generate a profound sense of connection is another notable effect. The outdoor setting fosters a deeper connection with nature and the audience (Cheney, 1918). Performers feel intertwined with their surroundings and their viewers, creating a unique sense of unity. This aspect is also supported by the collaborative nature of theater and this may explain our finding of increased scores of socialization (Hartigan, 2012; Sandoval Poveda et al., 2020).

Lastly, some performers find open-air theater to be a stress-reducing experience (Felsman et al., 2019). The combination of artistic expression and natural surroundings can have a calming effect, offering a respite from the hustle and bustle of daily life. This aspect was observed in the reduction of depression and anxiety scores of the participants (Micera, 2015). In fact, participation in open-air theater offers individuals a creative outlet for expressing their emotions and thoughts, which can help alleviate depressive symptoms. Furthermore, performing in front of an audience may boost one's self-esteem and provide a sense of accomplishment, countering feelings of helplessness associated with depression. However the relationship between performing and increasing self-esteem is still debated (Lewandowska & Węziak-Białowska, 2020).

Furthermore, the natural surroundings of an outdoor venue can spark creativity (Guarrera, 2020). Performers often draw inspiration from the environment, leading to innovative interpretations and unique performances. The quest to discover optimal outdoor performance venues not only enriches the cultural landscape of a city but also encourages a more active and engaged lifestyle among its residents (Cheney, 1918). In the pursuit of suitable spaces for open-air theater, individuals and communities inevitably become intimately acquainted with the nooks and “hidden places” of their urban environment (Vaugh, 1917). This exploration fosters a profound connection to the city, deepening one's understanding of its history, architecture, and natural beauty. As a result, it contributes to a heightened cultural awareness and appreciation of one's own surroundings, transforming the city into a vibrant tapestry of both artistic expression and communal understanding. In essence, the search for the perfect outdoor stage not only invigorates the performing arts but also invigorates the spirit of a city, fostering a more active, culturally enriched, and connected way of life.

## **Conclusions**

In summary, open-air theater offers a multitude of benefits. It encourages enhanced self-expression, builds confidence, and fosters self-acceptance and self-esteem in performers. The sensory-rich experience and collaborative nature of open-air theater create a profound sense of connection. It also serves as a stress-relief outlet, reducing depression and anxiety. Additionally, it promotes physical fitness and urban exploration. Moreover, the search for ideal outdoor venues enriches a city's culture and encourages an active, culturally enriched, and

connected lifestyle among its residents. open-air theater, in essence, is a transformative experience that extends beyond the stage, enriching the lives of those involved and the communities they belong to.

## References

Anderson, P. (1993). Breaking All Four Walls: Open-Air Theatre at the Caravan Farm. *Canadian Theatre Review*, 76, 8–12.

<https://doi.org/10.3138/ctr.76.002>

Beck, A. T., & Steer, R. A. (1990). Manual for the Beck anxiety inventory. *San Antonio, TX: Psychological Corporation*.

Beck, A. T., Steer, R. A., Ball, R., & Ranieri, W. F. (1996). Comparison of Beck Depression Inventories-IA and-II in psychiatric outpatients. *Journal of personality assessment*, 67(3), 588–597.

Benjamini, Y., & Hochberg, Y. (1995). Controlling the false discovery rate: A practical and powerful approach to multiple testing. *Journal of the Royal statistical society: series B (Methodological)*, 57(1), 289–300.

Brockett, O. G., & Hildy, F. J. (2003). *History of the Theatre*. Allyn and Bacon.

Cheney, S. (1918). *The Open-air Theatre*. M. Kennerley.

Curuțiu-Zoițaș, C. (2021). Theatre Games, Inventiveness and Creative Spontaneity. Blockage and Inhibition – Barriers in the Formation of Artistic Individuality. *DramArt.Revistă de Studii Teatrale*, 10, 127–136.



- Felsman, P., Seifert, C. M., & Himle, J. A. (2019). The use of improvisational theater training to reduce social anxiety in adolescents. *The Arts in Psychotherapy, 63*, 111–117. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aip.2018.12.001>
- Foglia, L., & Wilson, R. A. (2013). Embodied cognition. *WIREs Cognitive Science, 4*(3), 319–325. <https://doi.org/10.1002/wcs.1226>
- Gelder, B. de. (2016). *Emotions and the Body*. Oxford University Press.
- Guarrera, F. (2020). A reinvented archetype. The open-air theater on the edge of the city. In *Architecture tourism and marginal areas: Research and design proposals* (pp. 208–227). LetteraVentidue.
- Guli, L. A., Semrud-Clikeman, M., Lerner, M. D., & Britton, N. (2013). Social Competence Intervention Program (SCIP): A pilot study of a creative drama program for youth with social difficulties. *The Arts in Psychotherapy, 40*(1), 37–44. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aip.2012.09.002>
- Hartigan, P. (2012). Using theater to teach social skills. *The Education Digest, 77*(9), 30.
- Jackson, T. (1993). *Learning Through Theatre: New Perspectives on Theatre in Education*. Psychology Press.
- Lebedev, S. V., Voloshina, L. A., Buychik, A., Tomanek, A., Boldășu, R., Luneva, I., Adina, J., Naydenova, M., Popa, I. A., & Prvanova, A. I. (2020). *21st century: History and modernity of art: Collection of Scientific Articles*. Anisiia Tomanek OSVČ.

- Lewandowska, K., & Węziak-Białowolska, D. (2020). The impact of theatre on empathy and self-esteem: A meta-analysis. *Creativity Research Journal*, 32(3), 237–245.
- Malafouris, L. (2004). The cognitive basis of material engagement: Where brain, body and culture conflate. In *Rethinking materiality: The engagement of mind with the material world* (pp. 53–61). Cambridge: McDonald Institute Monographs.
- Micera, G. (2015). *An enhanced, simplified group therapy protocol utilizing theatrical methodologies* (3700777) [Dissertation, Capella University].  
[https://scholar.google.com/scholar\\_lookup?title=An%20enhanced%2C%20simplified%20group%20therapy%20protocol%20utilizing%20theatrical%20methodologies%20&publication\\_year=2015&author=G.P.%20Micera](https://scholar.google.com/scholar_lookup?title=An%20enhanced%2C%20simplified%20group%20therapy%20protocol%20utilizing%20theatrical%20methodologies%20&publication_year=2015&author=G.P.%20Micera)
- Neumark-Sztainer, D., Haines, J., Robinson-O'Brien, R., Hannan, P. J., Robins, M., Morris, B., & Petrich, C. A. (2009). «Ready. Set. ACTION!» A theater-based obesity prevention program for children: A feasibility study. *Health Education Research*, 24(3), 407–420. <https://doi.org/10.1093/her/cyn036>
- Osnes, B. (2017). *Performance for Resilience: Engaging Youth on Energy and Climate through Music, Movement, and Theatre*. Springer.
- Pinkert, U. (2011). The Concept of Theatre in Theatre Pedagogy. In *Key Concepts in Theatre/Drama Education* (pp. 117–123). Brill.  
<https://brill.com/display/book/edcoll/9789460913327/BP000020.xml>

Prezza, M., Trombaccia, F. R., & Armento, L. (1997). La scala dell'autostima di Rosenberg: Traduzione e validazione Italiana. *Giunti Organizzazioni Speciali*.

Puchner, W., & White, A. (2017). *Greek Theatre between Antiquity and Independence*. Cambridge University Press.

Rajala, A., Kumpulainen, K., Hilppö, J., Paananen, M., & Lipponen, L. (2016). Connecting Learning across School and Out-of-School Contexts: A Review of Pedagogical Approaches. In *Learning across Contexts in the Knowledge Society* (pp. 15–35). Brill. [https://doi.org/10.1007/9789463004145\\_003](https://doi.org/10.1007/9789463004145_003)

Rehm, R. (2020). The Play of Space: Spatial Transformation in Greek Tragedy. In *The Play of Space*. Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400825073>

Richards, C. E. (2009). Toward a Pedagogy of Self. *Teachers College Record*, 111(12), 2732–2759. <https://doi.org/10.1177/016146810911101206>

Ridgeway, W. (1910). *Origin Of Tragedy: With Special Reference to the Greek Tragedians*. Cambridge : University of Cambridge Press. <http://archive.org/details/OriginOfTragedy>

Rosenberg, M. (2015). *Society and the adolescent self-image*. Princeton university press.

- Ruini, C., Ottolini, F., Rafanelli, C., Ryff, C. D., & Fava, G. A. (2003). La validazione italiana delle Psychological Well-being Scales (PWB). *Rivista di psichiatria*, 38(3), 117–130.
- Ryff, C. D. (2014). Psychological Well-Being Revisited: Advances in Science and Practice. *Psychotherapy and psychosomatics*, 83(1), 10–28.  
<https://doi.org/10.1159/000353263>
- Sandlin, J. A., O'Malley, M. P., & Burdick, J. (2011). Mapping the Complexity of Public Pedagogy Scholarship: 1894–2010. *Review of Educational Research*, 81(3), 338–375. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654311413395>
- Sandoval Poveda, A. M., González Rojas, V., Madriz Bermúdez, L., Sandoval Poveda, A. M., González Rojas, V., & Madriz Bermúdez, L. (2020). Challenges and opportunities: Theater as Pedagogical Mediation for the development of social skills. *Revista Innovaciones Educativas*, 22(32), 65–77. <https://doi.org/10.22458/ie.v22i32.2821>
- Schuermans, N., Loopmans, M. P. J., & Vandenabeele, J. (2012). Public space, public art and public pedagogy. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 13(7), 675–682. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2012.728007>
- Waugh, F. A. (1917). *Outdoor Theaters: The Design, Construction and Use of Open-air Auditoriums*. R. G. Badger.