

5. Community Theatre Diversity: Connections Between Portugal and Brazil

Isabel Bezelga

doi.org/10.3280/oa-637-5

The desire to transform the scene into an interface of cultural inscriptions, of specific sounds, of loose impulses and of pluralistic corporalities has transformed theatre into a permanent research. Thus, participating in creative processes in community-based collectives becomes a powerful instrument of social mobilisation and political activism.

By pursuing the path of art desacralisation and the claim of its accessibility for all, the power of community theatre is the possibility of each man and woman to feel the unspeakable, through a collective experience that transcends one's lived experience.

Analysing academic production in the discipline, and despite the heterogeneity of meanings and the diversity of designations adopted (community-based performance, action theatre, social theatre, the theatre of the Other, etc.), the social and transformative function of the theatre is evidently present.

Social theatre is the art of the bodies that promotes the welfare of people, groups, communities. It strives to combine the care and well-being of the person, in which many disciplines such as medicine, psychology, art-therapies excel, and the care and well-being of the collective, in which politics, the entertainment world, social sciences, stand out (Bernardi and Innocenti Malini, 2017, p. 55).

Specialised approaches are introduced, either referring to the specificities of the groups that are the subject of action, or focusing on the political dimension, or placing the emphasis on sustainable development and good practices of human rights defence.

According to Prentki and Selman, theatrical processes:

deeply involve specific communities in identifying issues of concern, analysing current conditions and causes of a situation, identifying points of change, and analysing how change could happen and/or contributing to the actions implied (2000, p. 8).

Boal (1974) argued that the theatre allows simple people, traditionally voiceless and without rights, to reflect on their condition and thus become collectively aware, a condition for them to become protagonists of change and transformation. Many community theatre groups have in Boal the greatest reference for the development of theatrical processes using the methodologies that he bequeathed to us.

The Theatre of the Oppressed stimulates and propitiates self-discovery [..] the person realises that his body speaks and that he says more than he would imagine to be able to express (Santos, 2016, p. 362).

By adopting assumptions of Brechtian distancing as a reflexive and critical approach, it makes possible to examine issues of identity. It was grounded in the perspectives of Nogueira (2007) and Prentki (2009). In the specific case of the legacy of Boal, approaches have been reinvented based on the central idea of play and the use of other forms of communication, particularly in the interpellation of the audience through reflexive comicity (Bezelga, 2016). However, we must consider that this is not a simple cause and effect relationship, nor are theatre and art a panacea for social problems. Due the different natures of art and social demands, the permanent tense relationship between them must be considered (Bishop, 2012).

In recent research, the diverse approaches of community theatre have been analysed from the point of view of the questioning of contemporary theatre about its artistic, ethical and socio-critical assumptions. Some crucial aspects should merit our attention for further analysis (Cruz H., Bezelga and Menezes, 2020).

Nowadays, in these practices, local concerns coexist with global, ecological, aesthetic, cultural and political issues with diverse formats. According to van Erven (2019), some kind of demonstrations, as the «neo-parades», are proposals for reconfiguring the public space threatened by fear and terror which point to the existence, despite a global adverse context, of participative and intracultural artistic practices that show how reality can be approached in a questioning, constructive and positive way.

Several studies reflect on the performative presence on collective experience linked to political participation, considering the role of power relations in the processes of identity and difference.

There are reinvention paths where the theatre dialogues with and challenges communities. Prentki (2019) calls community theatre to act in a way that «supports grassroots efforts to take local stories as a journey in the rediscovery of “common humanity”» (ibid., p. 17). If the act of play is

inherent in human life in its individual and collective aspects, then let us use «play as an access to socio-political change» (ibid., p. 22).

The demand for space, the right to its use by citizens, has been proving to be a demand felt all over the world. From the occupation and resignification of spaces in uninhabited halls, in between and on the margins, possible dialogues are proposed with cities/territories marked by contradictions and intercultural relations in constant movement in contemporaneity.

The work on memory is one of the aspects that most contributes to the development of creative processes in community theatre. The personal memory articulates with the collective memory acting on naturalised perceptions. Prieto (2019) refers to «unsettled memories» and claims the powerful effect of documentary theatre in the development of artistic projects with the community. This makes it possible to create common docuperformative spaces, placing us in front of ethical and political dilemmas. Thus, the scenic memory is in itself an act of resistance.

Questioning the historical memory of disruptive collective events and incorporating different life histories and perspectives allow us to create new narratives that oppose institutional visions.

These affirmative forms of the invisible presence of common people guarantee the recognition of diversity in the contemporary world.

Despite all these discussions, we can outline some of the main features of current community theatre practices: the diversity of aesthetic proposals; the integration of elements from local and popular cultures; the fictional chain that ensures the presence of the imaginary despite the recognition of the real; the coexistence of the playful, ritual and festive dimensions; the multi expressive forms; the contribution of individual know-how; the use of craft, rhythm and chorus as group amplification; the use of humour and comicalness; the ethical focus concerning the expression of difference, collaboration and self-reflective co-participation.

The themes are selected by the groups, based on the perceived needs and following a participatory proposal with a focus on change. This approach can allow the emergence of momentary changes, a consequence of the poetic approach, of the power patterns installed in community relations, with the transformation of real roles crystallised in the community (Cruz H., Bezelga and Menezes, 2020).

In these participative processes co-authorship and co-creation are on the agenda. Thus,

the constitution of the collective is traversed by a productive act which is meaningful for those who make the collective, implying decisions,

responsibilities and a sense of interdependence (Cruz C. and Midori, 2020, p. 21).

But how are horizontal dialogues established and how is collective autonomy developed in the creative *search of the common*?

1. EIRPAC: The Need to Meet and Reflect Together

The systematic research on community artistic practices is incipient, especially in the Iberoamerican space, where, paradoxically, it seems to gain a relative preponderance (Bezлга, Cruz H., and Aguiar, 2016). It was following intense exchanges between Portugal and Brazil, which extended to other Latin and Latin American latitudes, that we desired and established International Research Meeting on Community Arts Practices (EIRPAC) as a meeting place at Oporto, Portugal, for the first time in 2015.

The EIRPAC is a space for meeting, sharing and debating experiences and academic research around community artistic practices. Since its first occurrence it has been part of the MEXE Festival and takes place every two years. The third event, in September 2019, just preceded the International Conference *Performing the Social. Education, Care and Social Inclusion through Theatre*, held in Milan.

These meetings are an established reference in the field of community art research, through the increasing number of different practices and the diversity of their approaches. The offer of postgraduate training and the research within these themes have also contributed to academic recognition mostly in Portugal and Brazil.

The partners include research centres and universities, artistic, cultural, social and community associations. The individual participation of artists, researchers, teachers and community leaders has contributed to the creation of a wide network of professionals and amateurs from these diverse artistic practices.

The consideration of the urgent need to enlist other artistic areas for reflection has led to a progressive interdisciplinary vision, believing that this search for what is common in the social arts will only be possible in an increasingly powerful transversal conception of participative action-research.

The deepening reflection on the role that such practices play in a world in rapid change is reflected in the most recently chosen themes: *Participatory or collaborative artistic practices?* and *In search of the common: Contributions of artistic practices to other possible futures*. It has been sustained notably by the contributions of Márcia Pompeo Nogueira (BR), Domingo Adame (MX), Claudio Bernardi and Giulia Innocenti Malini (IT)

in 2015, Tim Prentki (GB), Eugene Van Erven (H), António Stambaugh Prieto (MX), Evelyn Furquim Lima (BR), François Matarasso (GB) in 2017 and Jan Cohen-Cruz (USA), Wladimir Safatle (BR) in 2019.

Through the theoretical and methodological contributions of guests, panel participants and community groups, we have been challenged to look and question our own practices through a reciprocal informed dialogue. Sharing strategies through each other's practices has made a significant contribution to the systematisation of this knowledge, involving academia and communities. Several dimensions are highlighted in a transversal way:

- empowerment of participants throughout the artistic process as a key aspect;
- the need to build a consistent network in the field of theatre community practices reliant on the strong relationship between practice and reflection to advance the discussion of models in this area;
- strong affective and relational involvement in the projects by the participants that brings together people from the community, professional artists and researchers;
- creative research methodologies based on oral history, local and global events, memory, documentary or autobiographical statements;
- focus on a bodily voice that speaks and acts individually and collectively, becoming visible;
- works revealing a strong focus on social and political issues, showing a desire for social transformation and change;
- individual and collective reconfigurations as a feature of these practices in the face of the recurring themes of power relations and domination;
- expanded community concept, more connected to today's world, in which attention and dialogue with the Other appears as imperative (Cruz C. et al., 2020).

In a time characterised by sweeping generalisations about the “other”, I look for opportunities in the arts to remind us of the possibility of finding common cause amongst people erstwhile distrustful of each other. I am interested in how collaborative artmaking provides ways to shake up our misconceptions about groups of people with different identities than our own through direct and meaningful contact rather than through symbolic means, like representation in dramatic literature. Two other ways that artmaking offers this are by artists facilitating projects with people who are ostensibly “other” but with whom they find commonality, and by bringing together people with significant power disparities (Cohen-Cruz, 2020, p. 16).

2. Portugal/Brazil Network

Despite the international character of the EIRPAC, approximately 300 researchers are from the Portuguese-speaking world (Portugal and Brazil). The three publications resulting from these meetings, associated with ongoing research, allow the highlighting of some critical aspects related to theatre and community theatre in Portugal and Brazil.

In Portugal, most community theatre groups have links with professional theatre and academia, particularly with theatre training institutions which offer specialised courses in the area.

Current trends in Portuguese community theatre search for a collaborative space between professional and non-professional artists, where a community can be created, as a team that produces a particular artistic identity. In this context, successful experiments have been developed, supported by participatory models of co-creation (Cruz H., 2015; Bezelga, 2018).

The affirmation of difference (in its multiple spheres), the examination of identity and the connection to the place are a constant. Mainly these creative works «reflect on the local culture, the history of the people, and social transformation» (Cruz H., Bezelga and Menezes, 2020). This aspect seems relevant in the involvement of communities in different artistic processes.

The perspective of a micro gaze is forged in the experience here and now, in a territory permeated by the establishment of a web of complicit relationships between diverse participants. This has been a practice that identifies many of the Portuguese community theatre groups.

Intersubjectivity acts in the individual and collective resignification of actions and events that allow the identification of trouble situations in the personal or community life. Thus it is seen as a motto for the poetic construction that evolves in the desire for change. These are the premises for the development of creative processes that generate the public presentations, mainly in public spaces.

We mention some of the theatre groups with long experience in community theatre: PELE – Porto; Visões úteis – Porto; ASTA – Covilhã; ESTE – Fundão, Beira Interior; Comédias do Minho – Vale do Minho; Teatro Umano – Lisboa and Amadora; Companhia Maior – Lisboa; Teatro do elefante-Setúbal; Baal 17 – Serpa, Baixo Alentejo; O Bando-Palmela, Lavrar o Mar – Aljezur and Teatro de Vizinhos – Faro.

There are challenges still to be overcome. Most of these community theatre productions, besides being performed in the regions where they belong, especially in public spaces, are also performed in Municipal and National Theatres, traditionally reserved for professional theatre. They are funded

from public policies in favour of the arts and culture but have had very little support in the last decade.

The approach of community theatre still faces a problem of affirmation, as the aesthetic judgement of its productions is often – and out of step – based mainly on the standards and norms of appreciation of “professional theatre”. In Brazil the picture is as diverse as its enormous territory. The Brazilian deep social and economic asymmetries interfere with the urgencies and desires that drive the community theatre’s diverse approaches. We can affirm that, together with the popular performances that mobilise locally all the community, which continue to have a high expression in Brazil, the other artistic initiatives, namely those of community theatre, are the object of various kinds of support.

The Brazilian practice is classified as initiatives proposed by institutions from outside the community, initiatives proposed by artistic, political and social movements, and independent initiatives. The analysis of this mapping delineates the community theatre, in Brazil, as an extensive, diverse and alive practice, that continues to grow, and that is gaining visibility and articulation (Nogueira, 2017, p. 26).

From the research and exchanges with Brazil, we highlight some paradigmatic groups such as Teatro União Olho Vivo (Tuov) from São Paulo and Nós do Morro Vidigal from Rio de Janeiro. Also it is important to understand its enormous diversity revealed by the survey initiated by Márcia Pompeo Nogueira from 2005 onwards, with the community theatre *Database Project*, which through several case studies sought to understand the relation between popular cultures and community theatre practices. We also mention some more recent groups that either participated in the EIRPAC or are constituted as case studies in ongoing research.

Tuov is one of the oldest examples of community theatre in São Paulo, more than fifty years old, defined by an aesthetic composition based on the Brazilian performative traditions, in which the popular is totally included, from the cast choices, to the actor’s exercise training, close to the popular ways of doing (Carleto, 2009, p. 49).

Marina Coutinho, who develops community theatre research and knows the groups’ reality in the periphery of Rio de Janeiro states that they:

find in the theatre the means to utter their voice, their body, their stories, from their own narrative that speaks to their localities, their communities, but also outside them (Coutinho, 2019, p. 172).

The group Nós do Morro, with about forty years of activity, was presented to us in 2010, as an exemplary reference of theatre and community, reflecting

the mirroring and more recent examples of repercussion in daily life which, in this particular case, ended up, from the urgent themes lived in the favela, transforming their artistic creation.

The most recent examples are the Coletivo Estopô Balaio from the great São Paulo and the Cia. Marginal in Rio de Janeiro. Both participated and presented their shows in two successive editions of EIRPAC.

Like Nós, other collectives, like Cia. Marginal (Maré), throw themselves on the walls, creating fissures in the territories most attacked by the processes of neoliberal globalisation (Coutinho, 2019, p. 172).

According to its director, the Cia. Marginal:

has already transcended the boundaries of the site, regularly moving from the “community” context to ever wider scales of theatrical diffusion. [...] the Cia.’s trajectory has been marked by fundamental moments of transition, in particular, the passage from “social project” to theatre group and from “Maré theatre group” to the city of Rio de Janeiro theatre group and throughout this journey, a confrontation was (and still is) constant, the fight against the idea that the theatre produced from communities is based on welfarism and on an “aesthetics of need” (Penoni, 2019, p. 51).

In the big cities we are witnessing a strong contemporary trend of theatre dialogues with territories. Increasingly, groups from the periphery become visible and bring to the arena their scenic processes, challenging and asserting issues as: gender diversity awareness; black people rights, poverty and inequalities; feminicide, violence and precarity; democracy and freedom.

From what we have researched and observed in relation to the Brazilian groups referred to, the work proposals have some connections: collective work methods made up of professionals and non-professionals; daily lives subjects; use of improvisational theatre techniques to the creative process and the use of public space, which:

in this field, can be decisive, considering it as a central arena for the exercise of citizenship, accessible to all due to its endogenous characteristics of horizontality, creativity and dialogicity (Cruz H., Bezalga and Menezes, 2020, p. 21).

In Brazil’s rural contexts, most of these community theatre approaches find:

their own way of perpetuating traditional and popular culture, as well as offering new and diverse cultural references and identities in a movement

of cultural transmutation. [...] This is a clear action of cultural resistance (Aguilar and Souza, 2020, p. 70).

Theatre can play an important role in the renewal of local culture, helping to organise and structure the community. [...] Performing elements of their past is a way of “reconstructing” a silenced community, bringing strength, and empowering its members. [...] Form and content were linked. [...] The images also had powerful effects (Nogueira, 2006, p. 231).

Within community theatre with specific groups, one of the most interesting is theatre in prison. The «theatre is now recognised as a real possibility of change for the detainee and the prison environment» (Bernardi and Innocenti Malini, 2017, p. 58) and we can consider that in Portugal and Brazil theatre activities in prisons have been developing and sharing practices for more than a decade.

The experience of theatre in prison in Italy is very widespread and is presented in different forms and ways ranging from therapeutic and educational theatre to professional, classical or research theatre, involving different professionals with different outcomes, some unbalanced in terms of artistic production, others in terms of re-educational treatment (ibid.).

These practices are also widespread in Portugal and Brazil. We highlight those in Brazil inspired by Paul Heritage’s pioneering work, in the Academic Extension Programs at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UNIRIO) and the University of Santa Catarina (UDESC) connected with the University of Michigan (Lucas, Fiche and Concílio, 2020) and in Portugal those promoted by Pele Association through the work of Hugo Cruz (2012), Mota (2017), Sociedade Artística de Pouzos on Opera in Prison (Duro, 2019) and others significant experiences.

Since 2009 the Pele «privileges the development of projects in prison contexts [...] to expand the spaces of humanisation, citizenship and freedom within a prison» (Mota, 2017, p. 480). Over the years it has developed several projects in Portuguese prisons through partnerships involving the national authorities responsible for Reinsertion Services (DGRSP) and Social Inclusion European programs. Highlights include the performances *Entrado* and *Unforgettable Emilia*, this latest spectacle publicly presented outside prison.

This option is part of a perspective of opening up the prison system to society, not only making it possible for families and communities to enter the prisons and participate in the cultural and artistic events developed there by the inmates, but also opening the doors for these shows to be presented with full dignity in the cultural and artistic spaces of the city.

3. Final Notes

The search for the *common* has become increasingly “common”. A crowd of invisible people comes on the “scene” and makes their plural voices heard. In the last decades it has spread from the peripheries and has occupied the forums of cultural power.

In spite of this, the tension is in the streets, within families and in communities. We share on a global scale, a world shaped by a neo-liberal vision that accompanies the escalation of various “-isms” (totalitarianism, racism, populism, *machismo*, etc.) personified in rulers who show their contempt for culture. Extreme positions and open wounds. We turn our backs and close the doors to dialogue. And even together we feel alone. More and more, we only discuss with our peers, within the same little permeable circles and not creating space for the contradictory. Perhaps «we need most to seek commonality with those we previously saw as adversaries or, at the very least, *other*» (Cohen-Cruz, 2020, p. 17).

In their healthy diversity, many of the community theatre creations highlight the construction of aesthetic links as a result of contradictory qualities in the groups, welcoming and emphasising difference. «Heterogeneity and multiplicity evoke [...] new transverse identities» (Cunha, 2019, p. 489) and more than ever an aesthetics appears that rests on this crossover.

It can be said that:

This is a restless art, tense by conceptual, methodological and ethical ambiguities. Its best artists understand and value these ambiguities. They are stimulated by the tightrope walk, appreciate the crossing of disciplinary boundaries, have a genuine interest in the people and territories they encounter, and see this democratic way of building meaning as a hopeful path to a better life (Matarasso, 2019, p. 17).

Today we are at a crossroads and new challenges arise, where presence, collaboration and co-creation are carried out incorporating resources from the new digital platforms to which multiplicity will naturally be coupled (in new ways).

Today we are at a crossroads, uncritically incorporating the resources of digital media that allow us to have a sense of normality in a given innocuous performative transfer by the image projected in real time online communication. However, new challenges arise of political order when technological conviviality replaces face-to-face contact. We must be aware this represents an unsuspected interference of the market, in a model of neo-liberal control which takes all kinds of participatory and co-creative initiatives hostage.

I conclude by reiterating the question posed by Prieto:

What are the strategies of both personal and collective resistance that we can carry out today not only to survive the catastrophe, but to rebuild our society? The answers, it seems to me, depend on the forms of our collective action (2019, p. 462).

The time / space of collective resistance is more necessary than ever.

I put hope in finding our larger commonality in real issues, but such intersections must be activated so that all will gain, and the leadership must be shared between people with access to resources and those who have traditionally lost out. Because though we share common issues, we do not share common histories, resources, or degree of need to overcome them. I call on artists to reveal our nuanced commonality in such a way that no one loses, and I call on us all to reach across to others to generate ideas about how to bring such experiences to scale (Cohen-Cruz, 2020, p. 18).