

# Physical Theatre Stories

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COLLECTION OF THEATRE STUDIES  
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# Theatre in Society

*Research projects applied  
to the social sphere*

edited by  
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# **The value of the present**

*Theatre as an instrument  
of sociocultural participation  
in the third and fourth age*

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With a steadily increasing percentage of people over 65 in our society<sup>1</sup>, the issue of an ageing population demands ever greater attention, presenting a considerable challenge for the social security system and for the economy on both the local and global levels. The development of practices that promote and support the health and autonomy of the elderly, therefore, appears to be both a timely and prescient response. It is within this framework that the project “TeatroBenessereAnziani” (Wellness Theatre for Seniors): developing mental health, physical wellbeing and sociocultural participation in the elderly through theatre” was conceived and developed by the Accademia Dimitri in collaboration with SUPSI’s Dipartimento di economia aziendale sanità e sociale-DEASS (Department of Business Economics, Health and Social Care)<sup>2</sup>. Through the development and implementation of a series of workshops conducted with elderly people, the project’s main purpose was to highlight the potential of theatrical, performative, and narrative practices as an instrument for sharing experiences and emotions with an aim towards developing and enriching relationships in ways that strengthen social and communal bonds. Furthermore, these practices also sought to create and reinforce the “psychophysical” wellbeing of the people involved.

Due to its objectives and the implementation of innovative methods, the “TeatroBenessereAnziani” project obtained support from the cantonal action plan *Promozione Salute Svizzera* (Health Promotion Switzerland) and from the Oertli Foundation. The project also benefited from the patronage of a wide network of institutional bodies in Ticino such as the Servizio di promozione e di valutazione sanitaria - SPVS (Health Promotion and Evaluation Service), the Ufficio cantonale degli anziani e delle cure a domicilio (Cantonal Office for the Elderly and Home Care), and Pro Senectute, as well as of the municipalities involved in the practical workshops.

### **The “TeatroBenessereAnziani” Project**

The underlying assumption of the project is that theatre and performance practices, and, more generally, narrative and artistic work are effective tools for the development of mental health, physical wellbeing, and social engagement in the senior population. Upon what is this assumption based? What instruments from the actor’s toolbox are most effective in this context?

Thanks to the collaboration of its various partners, the project was launched in June 2019 and was able to implement a pilot phase of theatre workshops in February 2020. The workshops were conducted by actor and theatre pedagogue Daniele Bianco at the integrated day care centres in the Tertianum facilities of Bellinzona and Tenero, and in two nursing homes: the Centro Sociale Onsernonese in Russo and the Casa anziani Regionale San Donato in Intragna. A series of focus groups, curated by psychologist and psychotherapist Prof. Rita Pezzati, preceded the workshops. These focus groups were designed to provide a foundation for the final evaluation of the project's impact on the participants' wellbeing. For the purposes of this evaluation, it should be noted that the activities had no therapeutic pretences and that those who participated were not considered patients, but fully rounded people with individual physical and psychological needs.

The project envisioned a series of eight weekly meetings, which were unfortunately suspended in the fifth week due to the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent necessary sanitary measures. Despite the mandatory interruption, it is possible to state that the activities carried out were positively received both by the institutional project partners as well as by the participants. During the focus groups conducted by Rita Pezzati, it emerged that

the proposal of a theatrical activity evokes a festive atmosphere, a new dimension in which the facility opens up to people from the outside, eliciting feelings of *joy* and *curiosity* from the participants. In addition, the participants experienced a more personal relational dimension, the possibility of having someone close by, the desire to be attractive and have someone to talk to, *someone who chooses to be with me*<sup>3</sup>.

The sessions conducted also provided valuable insight into how to better adapt future programs to participants and places with different characteristics.

### **Sharing in theatre workshops**

Immersive theatre workshops are widely recognized as a means of promoting community interaction and individual engagement. This is because theatre is a dynamic activity that springs from feelings of togetherness and shared experience, creating a multifaceted and valuable social service. "Social theatre" aims to improve or revolutionize



existing conditions and socio-cultural frameworks by utilizing theatrical practices to create a shared experience within specific or mixed groups from various contexts (e.g., prisons, hospitals, schools, residences for the elderly, intercultural centres, etc.)<sup>4</sup>. The approach to the social theatre workshop does not change according to the group, age, or cultural background of the participants; instead, it is the specificity of each proposal, the tailoring, and the delivery of the theatre practices that change.

Adult day care centres and retirement homes play a key role in creating spaces suitable to the needs of the elderly while supporting their psychomotor wellbeing through various practices and activities. “TeatroBenessereAnziani” inserted itself into this context by proposing theatrical activities as a means of social engagement capable of giving value to the present state of each participant.

The shape of this work is characterized by various beneficiaries, each with distinct and diverse needs. When working with the elderly, one must consider their age-related conditions, their fragility, and their personal experiences. Often one is confronted with a variety of motor and cognitive challenges within the same group.

Nevertheless, in a theatre workshop, it is the group’s collective experience that is important. The emphasis is not on the result, but on the process, where the participant becomes both the “craftsperson” and the “raw material”. The group’s common denominators, those features that can be recognized and realized by everyone, should be sought out during the workshop activities. The focus should be on encouraging everyone’s progress, rather than exalting only the best. In other words, rankings should not be created. An attempt should be made to give value to each participant’s potential, creating a sense of satisfaction and fulfilment. The theatre work is, therefore, not only a means of psychomotor stimulation, but also capable of empowering the elderly individual by reinforcing a positive image of him or herself in the present.

A theatre workshop is the space and time in which a group makes itself available to theatrical practices guided by a “conductor”. The conductor is not a “master teacher”. Instead of a vertical hierarchy, there is a horizontal flow of continuous stimuli. To guide or to conduct means to propose a path and to accompany the group, to lead them towards horizons yet to be discovered. Of course, decisions are made by the conductor, but they and the participants quickly get to

know one another and establish together the rules of mutual respect and communication. Attention to the vulnerability of the individual and their needs is central. The conductor listens. They must continually interpret both spoken and concealed messages, actions and reactions, codified behaviours, and emotional responses. The proposal of an exercise is considered, accepted or not, and processed by each participant. Every individual reaction becomes part of the shared experience of the group. This act of personalization marks each specific path, making it unique. This is how the group entity is born, becoming an ensemble of individuals that is not just the sum of its parts, but one “body” that self-determines and manages the outcome of each proposal and of the experience as a whole. The group is the support



structure for the individual. It is the trust and comfort zone, the space for opening up and sharing personal aspects of oneself. It is a place for making mistakes and for accepting and understanding oneself and others.

This is the course the conductor must follow, or rather “navigate”, accepting the tides, the calm weather, and the storms, while attempting to lead the group towards an unknown island full of treasures to be shared.

### **Method**

The general direction of the methodology applied during the “Teatro-BenessereAnziani” workshops was based primarily on the concept of *meeting*, both in the practical and in the broader metaphorical sense of the word.

On the practical side, no attempt was made to establish a completely structured program for each appointment in advance because such a configuration would have clashed with the very concept of *meeting*, of getting to know each other, talking to each other, opening up, surprising each other. Instead, the program was prepared week by week according to the progress of each group and the general progress of the project. Each meeting had a component of spontaneity due to the dynamic and ephemeral aspect of theatre as a game where the rules can be changed while playing.

Several moments throughout the course fully exemplified this characteristic. For example, the conductor arrived at one meeting with a plan to begin with some preparatory exercises that would then lead to a more comprehensive and complex one. However, the first exercise, the “first link in the chain”, did not yield the intended outcome.

In this instance, the members of the group were asked to individually develop a simplified oral narrative of their morning routines that would lead to a mimed presentation. This exercise was proposed in two separate day care facilities and was received differently in each case. One group developed the proposal well beyond initial expectations and even utilized a combination of text and movement. The other group resisted the verbalization of their daily experiences, considering them futile or too intimate to reveal. For this group it was still too early to “perform” and share their personal lives.

What is to be done in such cases? Of course, the situation may be

remedied by relying on an ever useful repertoire of generic games and exercises. Or, by welcoming the twist, it may be possible to leverage the specific characteristics of each group.

In general, every group reacts differently to the proposals, often due to different tastes among the participants. For example, some groups in the project preferred to express themselves verbally through reading poems, proverbs, and aphorisms, while other groups were more suited to playing with gestures and sounds. Recognizing these dynamics can help the conductor find their compass when they seem to lose their way.

At the same time, an attempt was made to develop the concept of meeting on a much broader scale. In the protected space of the



workshop, the elderly person may rediscover him or herself while also discovering their “other self”, a new and unknown aspect that is reflected back to them by each individual in the group. It thus becomes possible to meet new versions of oneself and to do so thanks to the presence of the others, and vice versa. The workshop puts everyone on the same level, as if placed in front of a symbolic mirror in a game of continuous feedback, where the challenge of expressing one’s own potential is freed from the fear of mistakes and failure. This potential for a renewed sense of trust without judgement represents yet another value of meeting one another in a theatrical context.

Another fundamental feature of the practices involved in “Teatro-BenessereAnziani” was the sense of play. In our society, the necessity



of play is generally limited to certain contexts, like “leisure time”, and categories of people, particularly children. The theatre workshop, however, is a playful space in which everyone may engage and embrace the pleasure of play.

Exercises involving the use of a ball provided a very important example of this playfulness, since the ball is universally recognized as an object of play and sport. Everyone has some experience with ball-related childhood games. It is therefore an object that also stimulates deep memories and distant delights. In the workshop with seniors, the ball was used in various exercises to stimulate motor skills, establish contact, energize, and lighten the atmosphere by causing a bit of a commotion. The results were excellent. The ball became an effective and fun tool, present in every encounter with each group.

As this method developed, several participants felt truly liberated and their playful attitudes positively affected the entire group. Even the most reluctant participants forgot their fears and allowed themselves to become more involved, sometimes even laughing out loud as they rediscovered the pleasures of playing. Both great joy and great satisfaction arise when breaking free of restrictive social patterns (“playing is not appropriate for my age; it’s a child’s thing”) and surrendering to the flow of the game.

If the theatre workshop space can be inhabited with the freedom and curiosity of a first meeting, if one grants oneself the permission to play, thus escaping social codes and imposed frameworks or defined roles, this fresh, non-conformist attitude can eventually be applied to one’s present way of life. In this way, the freedom to express oneself, to simply be oneself again, is rediscovered and the concept of meeting in this theatrical context expands into real life. Tangible daily practices can be gleaned from the playful theatrical experience. By developing a different attitude towards life, thanks to the availability of different perspectives, the elderly person who manages to grasp these benefits, even unconsciously, may be able to face his or her present with more serenity and positivity. Cultivating this kind of attitude leads to a psychological, and therefore physical, wellbeing that is invaluable for dealing with the critical phases of aging and the challenges of preparing mentally for this state.

### **The practical workshop**

Participants in the workshop were in their third and fourth ages, but

this factor alone did not greatly influence their degrees of participation and involvement. Participation was more likely affected by each individual's specific geriatric condition. These differences were all accepted and integrated into the practice. In general, an attempt was made to equalize the group, at times simplifying activities with respect to the abilities of the various participants. This could have been limiting if attention had not always been paid to those who could and wanted to do more, seeking a balance between individual satisfaction and the maintenance of a level playing field.

The fact that most of the workshop participants were female was also a significant factor. The women involved approached the work with curiosity, lightness, and attention. They took risks, abandoning themselves to new practices even when their age and the socially conditioned ideas of gender seemed to prohibit it. This situation can be found in almost every play-based, social theatre activity where women participate and seek to change the society in which they live by facing judgment and prejudice head on.

The psychological and physical conditions of the retirement home residents influenced the progression of the meetings, which often became more like self-contained chapters. It was difficult, for example, to build on previously introduced exercises and begin again from the same point in the following meeting. Therefore, the strategy was to create independent sessions that could meet the intended objectives within an hour and a half. With this in mind, some exercises were adapted and transformed to be reintroduced to participants. This way of working opened up several parallel paths as each group developed its own appropriate trajectory. In general, the participants from the adult day care facilities demonstrated greater motor and cognitive capabilities and this allowed for a more rapid development of theatrical dynamics, an advancement of the program, and above all, the possibility of creating a certain continuity between the various sessions.

At the same time, the "TeatroBenessereAnziani" process was able to highlight the value of mixing social groups together. In three cases out of four, groups were composed of the residents of the facility (whether it was the nursing home or the assisted living facilities adjacent to the day care centres) and participants who arrived from the outside. For example, in Russo the activities of the day care centre and those of the nursing home are combined in the same facility. The integration of people living in the nursing homes with external

participants who led more independent lives positively disrupted the customs and internal dynamics of each structure in a way that nurtured their development and evolution.

In the meetings, the work was almost always practised in a circle formation. Beginning in a circle helps create the feeling of a group by forming a constellation that represents union, equality, and cooperation. The use of space is then reassessed to give access to other aspects of theatrical practice that concern the body (and bodies) in space.

In all the workshops implemented in the four locations, the participants began by sitting on chairs in a circle. Walking or exercises in movement were very rarely introduced in this initial moment. Frontal exercises, where some of the participants performed while others



watched, were occasionally proposed. However, the gaze and attention were practically always directed towards the centre, towards the others: the conductor, the social health workers who accompanied the sessions, and the rest of the participants.

Biography was chosen as the guiding theme of the “TeatroBenessereAnziani” project. The comparison between past and present was stimulated through interviews between participants, moments of storytelling, and movement exercises, always with a focus on sharing with the group.

These are some basic proposals for exercises that were utilized during the meetings:

- › Describe your typical day  
(use pantomime and / or tell a story)
- › Perform gestures typical of your work or other activities you have done in your life  
(the others must imitate and guess)
- › Speak about your mother and father  
(free monologue)
- › Recite or sing: poems, nursery rhymes, proverbs, songs, or sayings that you remember by heart

These and other exercises allowed participants to develop their biographies by applying them to formal or stylised theatrical exercises.

### **Why theatre?**

Elderly people often find themselves in an arduous confrontation with their own limits and the physical and cognitive transformations caused by aging that no longer allow them to be what they were in the past. Their narrative identities are then deformed by the social standards against which they are forced to measure themselves. In this context, theatrical activity can initiate a dialectical relationship with the present, enhancing its value and thus restoring dignity to the elderly person. To affirm one's dignity is to define a space for feelings of self-worth and personal satisfaction, for basic and individual needs, for freedom of choice and interpretation. As evidenced by Rita Pezzati, it is not surprising that one theme that emerged from the focus groups was that of the ability *to choose*.



Choosing which themes to talk about, choosing where to stay (in the day care centre, at home), choosing whether or not to accept stimuli coming from outside or to go out and look for them. Choosing theatre is an opportunity to jog the memory, *to live a little longer* because it makes one feel *younger and happier*, to rediscover *the age-old tradition of making theatre in small villages and communities*. For others, however, the theatre is about sharing what is inside; when people are unfamiliar with each other, *theatre can help people know each other better*<sup>5</sup>.

What theatre can do in the social context, then, is listen and give voice to the individual, create partnerships between people, seek different and shared points of view, provide creative strategies, and encourage positivity and joy. Generating joy, positivity, and self-esteem leads to a greater quality of life and has a positive influence on one's own community, which involves all the nursing home residents and day care centre guests in direct and indirect ways.

Theatre is play: a game that must be taken seriously in order to have a lot of fun. It could be compared to sport, but also to painting or gardening. Theatre, whether in a social context or not, is a creative act. It, therefore, has everything to do with life, enthusiasm, and energy. Since the later season of life is the closest to death, rediscovering oneself through theatre as a vital creator in the third and fourth ages allows a person to experience the ephemeral pleasures of joy, lightness, and laughter that are usually attributed to the season of youth.

Theatre is a game played in the here and now. Theatre happens in the present. For the elderly, the active choice to make theatre represents freedom. The freedom to renew their curiosity, to inscribe new pages in their life stories, to create something of lasting value for themselves and for the community in favour of a healthier society that, thanks to the power of these positive feelings, is able to embrace adaptation and transformation in everyday life. The elderly person who feels useless, outdated, unproductive, alone, abandoned by "real" life, and therefore only waiting for the end, returns to live the present moment with serenity by rediscovering their dignity and self-determination. Theatre, then, becomes a means of claiming the right to participate, to learn new things, to make mistakes, all in a spontaneous and light-hearted manner without worrying about the future and regretting the past, but instead with the pleasure of being able to invent a new sense of the present.

## Notes

1. In Switzerland, according to recent statistical data, there are currently more people over 65 in the population than young people aged between 0 and 19 (see the data published on the website of the Federal Statistical Office, [www.bfs.admin.ch](http://www.bfs.admin.ch)).
2. The project is the result of the joint work of Prof. Demis Quadri (project leader) and Veronica Provenzale from the Accademia Dimitri, Guenda Bernegger and Claudio Mustacchi from the DEASS-SUPSI, Prof. Rita Pezzati from the Centro Competenze Anziani of the DEASS-SUPSI, and actor and director Daniele Bianco.
3. Excerpt from the “Rapporto di valutazione pre-attività teatrali” by Rita Pezzati, written in the context of the interim report developed by the Accademia Dimitri for the consideration of Health Promotion Switzerland, 22.06.2020.
4. On the subject: A. Rossi Ghiglione, A. Pagliarino (eds.), *Fare Teatro Sociale*, 2007, Roma, Dino Audino Editore; A. Rossi Ghiglione, *Teatro sociale e di comunità*, 2013, Roma, Dino Audino Editore; C. Bernardi, *Il teatro sociale. L'arte tra disagio e cura*, 2014, Roma, Carocci.
5. Rita Pezzati, *supra*.