

The function of play in the first years of evolution

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Abstract: *Although it emerged from intuition, theatrical play quickly became a widespread instrument in actor training. Moreover, in recent years, it was adopted by certain branches of psychology such as play-therapy, cognitive behavioral therapy, and drama therapy respectively. More and more teachers use playful theatrical structures in working with their students, and theater is spreading as an alternative educational tool. In the context of the discussion regarding theater being introduced as a subject matter in schools, it is important to try and reveal the functions of play in human evolution, and why it has spread to so many different environments.*

Keywords: *game; evolution; education; theatre; play; function; development; psychological; biological;*

Introduction

Theater games are used in a large number of specialized universities all over the world. They have the quality of facilitating an experience for the player, through which a theoretical concept is then illustrated. Over the past 10 years, more and more psycho-therapists have adopted playful theatrical structures in the therapeutic process. Also, theater as an alternative type of education has spread among students. In this context, the present article is trying to explain why this phenomenon is a reality, and to draw some guidelines for how theatrical games can be, in the future, chosen for practice by students of various ages.

1. A brief history of play in theatrical pedagogy

The usage of games in theatrical pedagogy started intuitively. Stanislavski, in this famous book “The actor: Work on oneself”, often illustrates concepts specific to the art of the modern actor through games. He defines the magical “if” as a game to which the actor tries to respond through practical action. “If is a game, a figment, but it is perfectly valuable and achievable in real life.”² There is also a fragment where professor Torțov asks one of the students to imagine he is a tree. Illustrating the exercise contains many components of the sensory exercises practiced in numerous theater universities across the world. “This understanding develops lived horizon, relativizes perception.”³

Even though there have been playful formats described by many other theoreticians, such as Michael Cehov – in experimenting the psychological gesture, Vsevolod Meyerhold - bio-mechanical exercises, or Bertold Brecht – games that facilitate the distancing effect, the first actual manual of theater games belongs to Viola Spolin, “Improvisation for the theater”, drafted in 1963. Her work begins with the famous quote “Anyone can play, anyone can improvise”⁴. For the first time, theatrical art is no longer seen as a process only insiders have access to.

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² Stanislavski. Konstantin. 2013. *Munca actorului cu sine însuși*. București: Editura Nemira. 115

³ Michailov. Mihaela. Apostol. Radu. 2013. *Tearul educațional. Jocuri și exerciții*. București. Proiect Copiii Migrației. 17

⁴ Spolin. Viola. 2008. *Improvizație pentru teatru*. București: Editura UNATC Press. 33

Over the close to 60 years since the first publication of the games manual written by Viola Spolin, theatrical exercises have been adopted by vast branches of psychology, such as play-therapy or cognitive-behavioral therapy. There are also branches of psychology such as the one developed by Moreno, which operate a staging of a traumatic event within a group of people. Also, theatrical play becomes a more and more useful tool for teachers and professors in the primary and secondary academic environments, as well as high school. That which was somewhat born out of intuition has gradually become an instrument of analysis and a pedagogical tool as well.

When we look at the past with the eyes of he who knows how events play out in the end, a fair share of steps seem necessary, a natural continuity of historical facts. We may analyze the reason why theatrical play spread so fast in such varied environments. One will notice that play was always a vital component of the evolution of the human being.

2. The game in child development

In his work „The child and the game”, Jean Chateau emphasizes the fact that man is the animal with the longest infancy. Another aspect he illuminates is that game is inherent to the child, it is his or her way to translate the world. By bringing the two statements together, we may easily deduce that man is the one being who translates the world through game for the longest period of time. It is known that playing is not a man-specific activity. Both Chateau and other researchers such as Solomon Marcus in his work „Play as freedom” highlight the fact the multiple forms of playful activity are seen in the animal kingdom as well. It is enough to observe two dogs chasing each other in the park in order to demonstrate this simple idea. Many animal species include games in their activities. „The play of youth depends on the fact that certain instincts, especially useful in preserving the species, appear before the animal seriously needs them.”⁵ Still, man is the animal who translates the world through game for the longest period of time. A connection may be inferred between man’s level of evolution and play.

From the very first days of life, a child experiments with the first forms of playing. The repetitive movement of a body part, with no other reason than procuring pleasure, is a sign of playful activity. Groos calls this type of game „pre-exercise”. He suggests that the baby’s game is built on a strong biological foundation. By moving his/her legs repetitively, he/she unconsciously develops the muscles and practices walking. „The animal does not play because he is young, he has the period of youth because he must play.”⁶ The idea Groos proposes seems to apply to history too. Fights and fight simulations were practiced in the city of Sparta from early infancy. It very well may be that a good part of this city’s fighters’ abilities were in fact practices from their first years of life.

Modern psycho-analysts did not contradict the idea Groos pointed out in his works “The play of animals” and “The play of man”. Instead, they added to it significantly. Beyond the biological basis Groos mentions, games also build upon a deeply psychological foundation. Over the first few months of life, play is tightly connected to the trauma of alterity that the new born baby is experiencing.

According to the research of Jean Piaget, Sue Jennings, in the first few weeks of life the baby does not make the difference between self and the rest of the world. The sensation that he/she experiences is that he/she is everything and everything is he/she. “ in the beginning, subject and object are one, and primitive consciousness cannot distinguish the part played by

⁵ Groos. Karl. 2012. *The play of animals*. New York: Editura D. Appleton and Company. XX

⁶ Groos. Karl. 2012. *The play of animals*. New York: Editura D. Appleton and Company. XX

one from the one played by the other.”⁷ The trauma of alterity is the moment the realization dawns that he/she is a finite being. This awareness occurs over several months. Exactly during this period Piaget notices two complementary processes happening: the process of imitation and play. This causes Piaget to conclude that they have both the role of assimilating information, and a post-traumatic soothing role. By making certain movements, the baby soothes itself, goes through the trauma of alterity easier, on the one hand, and gathers information about its own body, practices new neural routes connected to new movements and develops its muscles on the other hand. “ Intelligent adaptation, imitation and play are thus the three possibilities, and they result according as there is a stable equilibrium between assimilation and accommodation or primacy of one of these two tendencies over the other.”⁸ One may also speak of a double function of these first forms of play, called „pre-exercise” by Groos and „functional games” or „practice games” by Piaget: biological function, and psychological function respectively.

As he/she grows older, play offers new value to the child. More and more often the pleasure to cause something manifests, to make that thing happen. For this reason, children of small ages usually throw objects, use their voice in various ways, often scream, to the exasperation of their parents or caretakers. It is the pleasure of causing something to be. “What the child likes is less the result itself, but the fact that he produced it.”⁹ Also, Freud finds that, during this period, play is a manner of releasing aggressive impulses. Noticing a child play with a small bobbin, Freud notices that the aggressiveness toward the mother is staged within the game. From this moment on, the game becomes a manner of knowing the player. The way we play a game says a lot about who we are.

At this point we must highlight certain similarities to acting games. Corporal games, called practice games by Piaget, include repeating certain movements because this repetition offers pleasure, and then associating movement with sound, experimenting with various ways of walking. All of these are extremely similar to many of the random group walk games initially proposed by Viola Spolin or an early phase of the bio-mechanical games described by Meyerhold.

Next, practice games become „symbolic games”, according to Piaget. Symbolic games are characterized by using an object with a different meaning than the one it usually has. The chair becomes a bunker, the stick a machine gun, the ball a bomb, the floor quicksand. Similarities to theater games continue. One of the most well known games proposed by Viola Spolin, played in numerous theater universities and even more amateur circles is the object metamorphosis game. The point of the game is to turn an object into another, by acting upon it. For instance, a pack of cigarettes can become a photo camera if the player holds it to his eyes and imitates a flash press. Object metamorphosis games are at the fine line between real and imaginary. The object used is concrete. Still, the player gives it another function. “The player is content with little. Therefore, the same object can have several meanings.”¹⁰ The player transforms reality starting from its very own features. At this point, we can see a relationship between the player and the toy. “A connection can be created between the toy or the object used, and the child’s well-being.”¹¹

Again, we notice that there are theater games corresponding to a whole stage of games that the child goes through. For this reason, we may assume that theater games were taken by

⁷ Piaget. Jean. 2000. *Play, dreams and imitation in childhood*. Londra: Editura Roudledge. 13

⁸ Piaget. Jean. 2000. *Play, dreams and imitation in childhood*. Londra: Editura Roudledge. 86

⁹ Chateau, Jean. 1967. *Copilul și Jocul*. București: Editura Didactică și Pedagogică. 16

¹⁰ Chateau, Jean. 1967. *Copilul și Jocul*. București: Editura Didactică și Pedagogică. 124

¹¹ Benga. Oana. 2012. *Jocuri terapeutice*. Cluj-Napoca: Editura ASCR. 27

many psychologists and adapted with a new purpose, because their formats are close to the natural process we all go through in our evolution.

Rule games, also called role-play by Sue Jennings, are the last to appear. One might argue that they also contain structures from the other games.” So it can be assumed that the role and the operations related to its realization constitute the component unit of the game.”¹² They often contain symbolic elements. Many times, the playing field is outlined by a few objects placed at the corners, the net is a piece of string etc. All these are symbolic structures. Also, we find elements from corporal games too, the “practice” games. Teams take names, create customized salutes etc. There are many examples of rule games. These are also what we, grown-ups, also understand by the term “games”. From sports such as basketball, football, to derived games such as „la mălai”, „pătrățica”, hide and seek, to gambling games such as poker, or strategy games such as chess or go. For these games as well there are many examples of correspondence to theater exercises. For instance, strategy games such as killer or impulse games such as hep.

3. The theatrical game – new directions, new functions

The pursued conclusion is that what was born out of intuition became a much wider phenomenon in human education and psychology. I don't think that these parallels between theater games and man's stages of evolution were dwelled upon by the theoreticians who formulated the actual games. They were more likely arrived at by intuition, on an unconscious level. Nevertheless, games that were used 60 years ago only by those wanting to approach acting are nowadays used in wide areas of education and psychology. In Romania, at least, there is a growing demand for theater in schools, as a method of alternative education. More and more teenagers' festivals are appearing in various cities around the country. Even in the pandemic period, there were many festivals and theater groups that maintained their activity. Sometimes online, sometimes outdoors, sometimes with projects that never came to life. Even considering all these difficulties, it is remarkable that so many amateur groups continue to do theater.

Moreover, it has been discussed over the past years to introduce theater as a subject matter in schools, as an optional one. Numerous manuals are appearing, with exercises taken from other theoreticians, a coherent syllabus is being attempted, one which would attract a modern day student. More than just taking over some games and structuring them into age groups, I think it is necessary that we consider, as trainers, why theater games migrated to so many other branches? What can theatrical education do and what specific functions does it fulfill for the primary student, then the secondary student and then for the highschooler?

Beyond general answers such as „theatrical games help their self development”, „theatrical games help them to open up”, the above mentioned parallels speak for themselves. We must understand that, when we speak of methodology, intuition must be at a minimum. It needs to be integrated into a coherent work system. For this reason, we must answer the question: Why are certain games necessary during a certain period of time?

The questions formulated in the last paragraph prove to be rather difficult seeing as games don't yet have a clear role even in the process of training an actor. Some method universities use only the exercises from a specific practitioner, such as universities working on Stanislavski or Viola Spolin type systems. Other mixed method universities use varied games, some even from unclear sources, over the first semester of the first year of acting studies. In our opinion, theatrical games are not yet part of a coherent learning system. Each university,

¹² Elkonin. Daniil Borisovici. 1980. *Psihologia jucătorului*. București: Editura Didactică și Pedagogică. 26

and each acting teacher, has developed their work style gradually, influenced by the various personalities who taught in that place at a certain time. For instance, The National University of Drama and Film Arts “I.L. Caragiale” from Bucharest often uses exercises derived from the research of the great teacher Ion Cojar who’s method focuses on recovering the natural elements lost in education and cultural evolution process. “Training is a delicate process of recovering the full human totality”¹³. Still, we cannot speak of a methodology where the game is perfectly integrated in a coherent training process, but more likely of the subjective adoption of playful structures.

While theater theoreticians and practitioners remained in an intuitive stage regarding their work process, child psychology and play-therapy evolved significantly. This does not mean that theatrical pedagogy has not evolved at all. On the contrary, a significant number of aspects have evolved. The cumulative method, by which each teacher brings his or her addition to the university they teach in has been and is useful for the study of acting. Romanian theater universities continue to shape remarkable young practitioners. Still, when we speak about opening up work perspectives, new environments where theatrical games are not only addressed to young actors, but also growing children, a more thorough gaze becomes essential. “The game is inherent in any search activity. The searcher needs more searching than finding.”¹⁴

Conclusions

In the new studies of psychology, such as Sue Jennings’ studies on game patterns, light can be shed on the way we treat the game’s functions. She identifies three patterns of players, closely related to the learning process. Piaget’s practice game is called corporal game in her research. Symbolic play becomes projective play. And rule games, role play. Each person, according to Sue Jennings, is attached to a certain pattern in the learning process. Moreover, each game is formulated on one of these patterns. Starting from this premise, we may begin to structure theatrical games so that their function is applied to the player’s level of development. Now, more than ever, in these times where theatrical games become a part of a much more complex educational system, it is our duty, as practitioners, to do so.

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¹³ Cojar. Ion. 1996. *O poetică a artei actorului*. București.: Editura Unitext. 33

¹⁴ Solomon. Marcus. 2003. *Jocul ca libertate*. București. Editura Scripta. 20

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