

GROW UP AT THE THEATRE AND THROUGH THE THEATRE DIVENTARE GRANDI A TEATRO E CON IL TEATRO

Claudia Chellini

Indire
c.chellini@indire.it

Alessia Rosa

Indire
a.rosa@indire.it

Roberto Frabetti¹

La Baracca- Testoni Ragazzi Teatro per l'Infanzia e la Gioventù
r.frabetti@testoniragazzi.it

Abstract

During their first three years of life, children develop important socioemotional skills that can find in cultural experiences an important educational support.

Among the possible cultural realities in which children can experience theatrical can boast a recent but structured tradition.

But what exactly is the educational role of theatre aimed at the youngest? Does it serve to train tomorrow's audience or rather to grow today's audience? And what kind of theatre should we offer to children between zero and three years old? Shows they can watch or workshops in which to play the theatre? The aim of this contribution is to describe some peculiar features of the theatre aimed at the very young children, starting from the experience of *La Baracca* di Bologna, putting them in relation to research on the development of social relational skills.

Durante i primi tre anni di vita, i bambini sviluppano importanti competenze socio-emotive che possono trovare nell'esperienze culturali importanti supporti educativi.

Tra le possibili realtà culturali di cui i bambini possono esperire quella teatrale può vantare una recente ma strutturata tradizione.

Ma qual è esattamente il ruolo educativo del teatro rivolto ai piccolissimi? Serve per formare il pubblico di domani o piuttosto per far crescere il pubblico di oggi? E che tipo di teatro è opportuno offrire ai bambini fra zero e tre anni? Spettacoli che possono guardare o laboratori nei quali giocare al teatro? Obiettivo di questo contributo è quello di descrivere alcune caratteristiche peculiari del teatro rivolto ai piccolissimi a partire dall'esperienza de *La Baracca* di Bologna, mettendole in rapporto con le ricerche sullo sviluppo delle competenze socio relazionali.

Keywords: theatre, early childhood education, body.

Parole chiave: teatro, prima infanzia, nido, corpo.

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Nursery, children's socio-emotional skills development and theatre

In the common imagination, especially by those who have not had direct experience, crèches are mainly attributed a role of care at the expense of a wider educational vision.

The educational potential of this preschool institution is manifold.

Beyond the aspects related to the progressive acquisition of autonomy, socio-emotional skills are a development area to which the kindergarten pays particular attention.

The social-emotional development begins with parental soldering with the child (attachment). This bonding allows the mother to respond to the child's needs timely and calm their newborn.

Kindergarten is the first social context that children experience outside the family.

The kindergarten environment is defined as the structural (physical) and process (psychological) features of early childhood programs (Ishimine & Tayler, 2014). The psychological environment of the preschool institutions can have a direct impact on children's experience and the ongoing development of their social and emotional skills.

We synthetically define the construct of socioemotional development.

First, it is important to defy the constructs of "social" and "emotional" separately, to start for a deeper understanding, and then will be defined together just as one.

The literature defines "social development" as learning the values, knowledge, and skills that enable children to relate to others effectively and to contribute in positive ways to their context of daily life (Kirk & Jay, 2018).

In order to achieve this complex goal, the knowledge and understanding of emotions is essential.

Emotional understanding means to recognize feelings and regulate strong emotions to maintain positive relationships with others.

Even before acquiring verbal language, babies learn to communicate through emotions in fact there is a rapid growth in social and emotional areas of the brain during the first 18 months of life.

Emotional understanding enables children to correctly interpret other subject's emotional cues and respond accordingly (Sprung et al., 2015). Later studies showed as learning emotional regulation and impulse control may support later scholar success (Darling-Churchill & Lippman, 2006; Blair & Diamond, 2008; Halle et al., 2012). In addition to relationship to others social-emotional development covers the development of oneself and ones' temper.

"Temperament is an innate attribute that defines the child's approach to the world and his interaction with the environment across 9 dimensions which are activity level, distractibility, the intensity of emotions, regularity, sensory threshold, and the tendency to approach versus withdrawing, adaptability, persistence, and mood quality. We can define temperament as the child's "style" or "personality," and it is intrinsic to a child. It influences child behaviour and interaction with others" (Malik & Marwaha, 2022).

In an educational contest child are enabled to gradually develop these important competences.

Through diverse experiential proposals children internalize a large set of social-emotional skills and strategies that enable them to understand and manage emotions.

The acquisition of these skills is crucial to achieve and grow more complex skills such as appreciate the perspectives of others, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain relationships, make responsible decisions, and handle interpersonal situations constructively.

This repertoire of social cognitive skills is also connected with positive communication behaviours that promote relationship management (Scorza et al., 2015).

Finally social and emotional development is introduced and reinforced through three coexisting classroom elements. Specifically, these elements are effective environments (physical and psychological), relationships (between child and teacher, child and peer, and child and adults), and play (Kirk, 2014). Kirk (2014) outlines that when one or more of these elements are ineffective or non-existent, opportunities for effectively supporting kindergarten children's social and emotional development can be hindered.

The development of these skills and strategies represents the internalization of culturally produced sign systems that bring about behavioural transformation and build the bridge between early and later forms of individual development (Vygotsky, 1978).

In the field of cultural productions, theatre deals with human experience in its whole expressions: mental, linguistic, bodily, relational (Brook, 2019). Within the theatre, processes closely linked to cognitive, communicative and emotional skills take shape (Oliva, 2005).

Recent studies (Usakli, 2018) reported that Theatre for Early Years (TEY) enable to improve skills, social and emotional development of preschool children.

In order to understand the potential of the theatrical experience in this age group, it is essential to outline the characteristics of Theatre for Early Years and its educational value.

The educational role of theatre in early childhood

"Children are not human *beings* in sociological literature, but only human *becomings*". (Qvortrup, 1985, p. 132). In the mid of the nineteen-eighties of the last century, the sociologist Jen Qvortrup found fault with the position of sociology about childhood. He emphasised that for society childhood is a structural form, even if for an individual it is only a moment in his life (he enters in it at birth and leaves it when he becomes an adult): children are a social group, regardless of the individuals that make it up (Qvortrup, 1985; 2004).

"Instead of considering children like passive containers, in which adults pour their resources and intuitions onto them, thinking that children will give fruition only in a non-specified moment in the future, our thesis is that children as such are collaborators, negotiators, producers and reproducers; in short they are agents who are not limited to helping carry out a series of tasks in the various areas of their life, but they are also co-producers of their personal development" (Qvortrup, 2004, p. 26). So, although children are very young, they behave actively in order to influence the context in which they find themselves, interacting with both adults and other children.

In particular, Corsaro, ten years after Qvortrup, proposed the concept of interpretive reproduction (1997-2017; 2003), focusing his train of thought on the fact that children behave like all the other social groups: "socialisation is not only a matter of adaptation and internalisation but also a process of appropriation, reinvention, and reproduction. Central to this view of socialisation is the appreciation of the importance of collective, communal activity - how children negotiate, share, and create culture with adults and amongst each other" (Corsaro, 2017, p. 18).

Children assimilate adult knowledge, they reproduce it in their peer group and reinvent it, adding some variants of previously acquired behaviour, giving new meaning to a gesture or a word, and such contributing to expand and renovate the contents of adult culture.

The change of position in the research perspective is obvious as it is disruptive: from a future dimension to a present dimension (Belotti, 2010). The child's limits are no longer at the heart of the reflection and research, but his capacities and competencies are. Sociologists now consider actions dedicated to childhood in a new way: they are not only an investment in the future, but they are actions that enable children to have better experiences today.

During the time in which sociology was living this shift of perspective, Italian theatre was developing a specific interest in childhood and especially early childhood. The companies of *Teatro Ragazzi* (Theatre for children and teenagers) started considering early childhood as a territory for exploration and research. *Teatro Ragazzi* is that form of theatre specifically designed for children and teenagers (Bianchi, 2009) and companies like La Baracca (Bologna), Tam Teatro Musica (Padova), Giallomare (Empoli) and Stilema (Torino) had begun a new and profitable activity intended not only for children from three to six years old but also for infants and toddlers. And the idea of introducing in Italy Theatre for Early Years (TEY) starts to take form, but it doesn't mean that the theatre professionals are moulding the public of tomorrow, but rather that they are growing the public of today. TEY is focused on the present, as young children are very much in the present as theatre is: it is in the here and now.

When theatre is introduced to infants and toddlers in Early Childhood Education (Indire, 2020), two matters are posed to both educators and theatre professionals: what is the educational role of theatre and what kind of theatre is suitable for early childhood?

The first matter had already arisen regarding theatrical education for primary and secondary schools during the sixties of the twentieth century and is still at the heart of the debate for teachers, artists, and researchers (Quazzolo, 2014; Giraldo, 2015). If we draw on the international research on artistic education in schools by Bamford (2006), we can formulate as follow: do schools offer education in the theatre art or through the theatre art? So, does theatre for infants and toddlers create a mean to learn verbal language, fine motor skills, and concentration or has it got a peculiarity not reducible to a specific learning area but instead touches all of these areas and makes a connection among them?

In these two cases, the type of theatre offered and the working approach is quite different. Although there is a wide range of varied theatrical experiences that can be proposed, we believe that theatre should be considered as a "complete and transversal experience" (Guerra & Militello, 2011, p. 43) that touches all the goals of the various educational pathways for infants and toddlers such as discovering themselves, their bodies, their affection and emotional dimensions but also their cognitive aspects, values, and the possibility to express themselves.

The theatrical experience of all these events happens through the encounter with either an adult who is performing or leading a workshop or with another child who could be in the audience or role playing. In fact, one of the main characteristics of theatre is fundamentally a "structural experience for two" (Innocenti Malini, 2009, p. 45).

As Jerzy Grotowski made clear (1970), and he made it the key point of all his work, theatre exists only when an actor and a spectator are in the same place and there is a relationship between the two: the actor consciously and intentionally orientates his actions to the spectator who connects with him/her through his/her silences, noises, motions or reactions. When it comes to *Teatro Ragazzi*, and above all TEY, one goes a step further because the whole performance is conceived for a particular age: drama, production, the choice of artistic language, costumes and scenes, all consider the rhythms, the attention span, the level of symbolization of the target audience. And this is what distinguishes *Teatro Ragazzi* from theatre for all.

Such a deep, relational experience is possible for infants and toddlers only if the concept of theatre itself is brought into question, reviewing the components that make it up and wondering "what actor, text, character, scenic space, costumes, music, lights and so on means when one refers to a theatre made up by and for children, particularly when children are so young" (Bricco, 2015, p. 61)

Deeming young children 0-3 years old as a fully-fledged audience entails a reconsideration about what theatre is: artists and teachers are thus requested to collaborate in order to re-discover its essence or anyway to reconsider it into the course of the research.

As stated above, theatrical education for infants and toddlers aims to detect and strengthen the potential to express oneself, first of all through the body. It is about bringing out the “pre-expressiveness”: Eugenio Barba (Barba & Savarese, 2005) introduced this word to indicate the stage that comes before intentional expressiveness. It is a prerequisite and a base from which to start.

Pre-expressiveness happens in elder childhood through theatrical workshops (Oliva, 2019) which “de-train” (Grotowski, 2016, p. 163) gestures, defences, stiffness and postures acquired through time and that risk becoming inflexible in the future.

Instead, before the age of three, the activities are very different: the baby or the toddler are discovering their bodies, the way it works and the internal and external consequences of its motion. There is a kind of direct drive with the pre-expressiveness that can be trained and refined while the child at the same time is taking their first steps of communication towards the exploration of their possible self-expression, affection and thoughts.

“This is what strikes us in the children. The fact that they live at the origins. The fact that everything is a first to them. [...] Being at the origins means being in the perception and being in what we do.

Being at the origins means saying *hic et nunc*, or better, – *hic stans* and *nunc stans*” (Grotowski, 2016, p. 162).

The theatre and the little ones²

If we want to explore the relationship between children from 0 to 3 years old and the theatre the expression “The theatre and the little ones” is appropriate. As a matter of fact, “The theatre for the youngsters” is incorrect because there is no specific way to make theatre for the young children: as the concept can be declined as dance, storytelling, physical theatre, image theatre and so on (Frabetti, 2016).

“The theatre and the youngsters” represents also the complex relationships between young children and adults in the performative dimension. This happens both when children live the theatre as spectators, and when they discover the richness of their corporeity within a laboratory. Performances and laboratories are central and complementary occasions while conceiving the artistic act as a place to share the many different sensitivities of the involved subjects. Infant and toddlers are deeply sensitive and very competent subjects both when they look at the theatre, and when they act it.

These beliefs have their roots in the long research “The Nest and the Theatre” (“Il Nido e il Teatro”) started in 1986 by *La Baracca* in collaboration with the City of Bologna, that aims at investigating the opportunities that the theatre can offer, so that adults and children, even the youngest children, can meet. The research focuses on the concept of “child as a spectator”: an active subject of an intense human relationship, as it should always be the one created during a performative act. The primary aim has always been to highlight how children from 0 to 3 years old can be considered complete spectators, with specific sensitivity and skills belonging to their age (Manferrari et al., 2000).

This can also be considered as a great innovation, since usually infants and toddlers are excluded from the cultural offer because they are considered not ready yet to live the active role of spectator. This assumption is based on the unnatural bond between access to the performing arts and cognitive development. This perspective, focused on the spectator of

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tomorrow, is opposed to that centred on the spectator of today, which instead enhances the quality of the sensitive relationship (Frabetti, 2021) established during a performative act between artists and the public, regardless of the age of the children. The project is based on three pillars. The first one is the pedagogical group of the City of Bologna composed of educators and *La Baracca* artists which collaboration has been fruitful both on the financial point of view and on the competence point of view where the common reflection has taken advantage of the different perspective.

The second pillar is strictly related to the previous and is the educators training, that is a very crucial aspect, since their professionalism and sensitivity is fundamental to build a true relational triangle between children, educators and artists. This applies both to the experiences in which children attend theatrical performances as well as workshops. In fact, since 2016 are held training workshops for nursery educators and kindergarten teachers in a 0-6 perspective.

The third pillar is the theatre itself in both its dimensions: the one of seeing, meaning the child as a spectator, and the other one of doing, meaning the workshop active participation. In the first case the reference is to theatre productions created by professionals and specially designed for children from 0 to 3 years old, characterized by different stylistic figures. Those plays last around 30-40 minutes during which an intense sensitive relationship can arise and be developed. The performances are structured with a fully spectacular dimension for 30/40 children when played in the formal educational structures or 15/25 children if it is held in the theatre.

The show can be both performed at school and at the theatre. It is important to underline how depending on the different location actors and children are hosted in a place that is “other” from their own.

If the performance takes place at the theatre children face a spatial dimension that suits them and eliminates armchairs and stage to create the necessary conditions of a proximity that is physical and emotional together. The experience of the theatre has to be considered in its whole dimension, starting from the small journey that 5 years old children have to face, up to the lights, the performative and scenic, it is a full discover.

When the performances take place in school is the artist that enters unknown spaces and dimensions unknown. In this case the closeness between actor and spectator gets even stronger, not only from a physical point of view, but also from a relational one, since children of all ages experience the theatre in a familiar place.

Performers can strongly perceive with children how the theatre is a language of proximity because it involves all the physical elements of body language (gesture, voice, breath, posture, look, listening). This language can be both very complex for techniques and structure, but incredibly simple for the naturalness of the relationships that can be created during the performative act, especially between adults and infants.

The very long and different experiences made within the project make possible assert that basically both the shows at school or at the theatre are equivalent in intensity and quality of the relationship, although there are some peculiarities in the diversity of the experience as previously expressed.

Another equally interesting topic is the relationship with the theatrical language of the children when they are involved in a laboratory dimension: in that case the focus is the richness of the theatrical alphabets and the gestural catalogue. The activity is structured through 4-5 meetings of 20/30 minutes: first the performer, or the trained educator realizes a brief gestural performance, after children are asked to interact. For instance, the adult makes a specific gesture or movement, and the young child responds in their own way, giving body to a model “stimulus-reaction”. The workshop thus becomes a place where one

can discover gradually the peculiarity of both the relationship between children and their own expressiveness and the use of their body as an instrument of symbolic expression (Schneider, 2009).

Working with infants and toddlers is a very formative experience for an actor, always in balancing between listening and telling. In order to make contact with young children, the actor should find within oneself the pleasure of using all senses to listen and then communicate it to his/her young audience. Approaching to children requires a learning path through which the artist can develop specific modes and sensibilities and share the delicacy of the composition with parents and teachers, the value of pauses and silences, of empty and full. The actor will have to deepen the research on the ritual, on the space, on the story: which room to choose, how to sit, how to stay, how to enter. A path that allows you to perceive how much empathy can transform a relationship, making it necessary.

Imagination, expression and creation are ancient and deeply human needs, art is the highest and most complete tool through which to respond to these needs. For this art must be close to the early childhood at the time when infants are collecting and selecting all the elements that will compose their personality. Children have the right to live fully the physical and mental spaces that art and culture can offer, to share them with adults and finally to have fully recognized the "cultural citizenship" (AA. VV., 2011).

Conclusion

The sensitive relationship that can be established during a performative act between performer and audience, regardless of age, culture of origin and status of the audience, configures the theatre as an important space for the development of socio-emotional skills. The reflections proposed in the article and the experience of *La Baracca* explain how the conviction that young children should be excluded from the cultural offer of the theatre is unfounded, because they are cognitively immature with respect to the role of the spectator. On the contrary, theatre as a language of proximity, capable of involving all the physical elements of body language, finds in the socio-emotional skills of children a space of contact and mutual contamination.

Considering children from 0 to 3 years old as a full-fledged audience allows to identify the multiple educational potential of early childhood theatre.

Moreover, the spaces of the theatrical experience both inside and outside the kindergarten ask children and performers to recalibrate their role, to experiment in contexts far from everyday life, trusting each other.

In this "meeting play" children have the chance to grow at the theatre and through the theatre.

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