

**ART IN ITS MYSTERY CONFUSES THE DIFFERENT BEAUTIES TOGETHER.
(TOSCA, G. PUCCINI)
DIVERSITY, INCLUSION, BODIES. THE EXPERIENCE OF OPERAH**

**L'ARTE NEL SUO MISTERO LE DIVERSE BELLEZZE INSIEM CONFONDE.
(TOSCA, G. PUCCINI)
DIVERSITÀ, INCLUSIONE, CORPI. L'ESPERIENZA DI OPERAH**

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Abstract

The OperaH project, active for over a decade within the Pergolesi Spontini Foundation in Jesi, represents a virtuous co-construction between the foundation, local authorities, health, school and private social sector. Originally created to offer the cultural experience of theatre and opera to new audiences, it gradually takes on inclusive existential connotations, supported by a network logic that deserves to be told as a good practice.

This work, part of a broader research on the role of inclusive processes in adulthood, aims to investigate the theatre, in its configuration as a territory of inclusion, the founding place of the possible experience and self-narration starting from the body, and in its contribution to the making of identity and support to subjective self-determination of the person with disabilities within a collective path.

The pedagogical reflection highlights the great potential that the theatre conveys, soliciting in the actors and the public, inside and outside the stage, the constant possibility of questioning their own desires, needs, abilities in meeting others. The construction of meaning in the regulation of the theatrical experience is analysed through qualitatively driven narrative mapping (Morse & Cheek, 2014).

Abstract

Il progetto OperaH, attivo da oltre un decennio nell'ambito della Fondazione Pergolesi Spontini di Jesi, rappresenta una virtuosa co-costruzione tra fondazione, enti locali, sanità, scuola e privato sociale. Originariamente nato per offrire l'esperienza culturale del teatro e dell'opera lirica a nuove fasce di pubblico,

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gradualmente assume connotazioni esistenziali inclusive, sostenute da una logica di rete che merita di essere raccontata come buona pratica.

Il presente lavoro, parte di una ricerca più ampia sul ruolo dei processi inclusivi in età adulta, vuole indagare il teatro, nella sua configurazione di territorio d'inclusione, luogo fondativo della possibile esperienza e narrazione di sé a partire dal corpo, e il suo contributo alla formazione dell'identità e supporto all'autodeterminazione soggettiva della persona con disabilità all'interno di un percorso collettivo.

La riflessione pedagogica vuole evidenziare la grande potenzialità che il teatro veicola, sollecitando negli attori e nel pubblico, dentro e fuori dalla scena, la possibilità costante di interrogarsi sui propri desideri, bisogni, capacità nell'incontro con gli altri. La costruzione di significato nella regolazione dell'esperienza teatrale, è analizzata attraverso la mappatura narrativa *qualitatively driven* (Morse & Cheek, 2014).

Keywords: Theatre-inclusion-body-movement-coevolution

Parole chiave: Teatro-inclusione- corpo-movimento-co-evoluzione

1. The theatre experience as an inclusive setting. A pedagogical interpretation

Complexity is one of the founding features of our days, a key to understanding the human through multi-disciplinary and interdisciplinary scientific paths, allowing new views and new hermeneutics.

Special pedagogy proves to be a scientific space for dialoguing and interacting with various sciences, from neuroscience and medicine, to anthropology, psychology, sociology, political and communication sciences. Each of these discipline offers resources to environmental and social policies: educational action and training represent the most concrete challenges to a change that complexity makes increasingly inevitable.

The structure of society is quickly changing and interbreeding through migration processes, sudden changes in technology, globalisation, the voice of minorities that require active participation and citizenship (Giacconi, 2015).

The disorientation due to world pandemic experience, increasingly numerous and aggressive wars, climate change and the underlying economies raises unsolvable questions for the micro-contexts of school and family: pedagogy can drive a global rethinking based on research, maturation and growth to support the co-construction of inclusive skills.

Humanity must be recognized and valued by placing each person at the centre. This focus on the person should be pursued in every phase of life, regardless of his physical, cognitive, social characteristics; above all, regardless of the production aspect closely linked to the market rules.

In the field of media communication special pedagogy conveys a perspective of openness to the other, overcoming stereotypes, enhancing diversity and differences as opportunities to enrich personal and collective growth, and embodying the concept of citizenship, beyond categorisations, as a challenge (Del Bianco, 2020).

The operating mode of the theatre becomes an instrument of discovery and knowledge by focusing on self-awareness, embracing a physical, psychological and cognitive space, shaping an experience where body, breath, emotions and sound act in synergy through a collective rhythm shared, co-constructing the relationship flowing in the here and now (Carlomagno, 2022).

Every diversity takes on an original and proper role through the languages of art, giving space to the construction of true and authentic relationships between peers, overcoming skill categorizations to make room for individual expression synergistically harmonising with the context.

Meeting special pedagogy, theatre creates an environment of inclusion and learning beyond the formal aspects: the singularity and uniqueness of the person is central in the experience within the choral dimension of the group. By "person" we mean every protagonist of the process, with and without disabilities, in different roles and in the co-evolutionary perspective, enhancing diversity as a dialogic connection, highlighting the always possible and synergistic complementarities (Salis,

2019).

The gaze of special pedagogy, from an ecological-systemic perspective, marks the stages of an authentic educational relationship which, through theatre, shapes existences through recognition and acceptance of each one with his peculiarities, in an existential path that crosses the way of autonomy, responsibility and self-determination (Caldin, 2016).

Theatre, as an inclusive pedagogical device, re-ties existential threads, seeks cognitive skills and restores meaning to cultures and educational practices neglected in the existential stage of frailty, too often characterising the experience of adulthood in disability.

This hermeneutic pedagogical perspective allows complexity and its metabletics, overcoming the deterministic, rational-linear drifts, which risks to deny the centrality of the human and its value in every life.

This work analyses the OperaH project in Jesi, targeted to young adults, between 18 and 40 years old, with different types of cognitive and behavioural deficits.

OperaH is a theatre group that every year stages a show linked to the programming of the opera season. The show is engaging and inclusive, students and operators together transform the stage into powerful beauty, each one playing his role with his original possibilities: clumsiness becomes poetry, rigidity becomes boundary and openness.

The bodies, magnificently enhanced by the rhythm, speak without words, the lights drawing a symbolic reality. The gesture, stereotyped in everyday life, is offered as pure art. The lights, as well as the scenes, beautifully created by the students of the artistic high school, enhance the messages of chiaroscuro, colour, shape and light, restoring the centrality of the body in its essence.

The work of the current year is centred on Puccini's *Tosca*, scripted respecting the plot but enriched by a value message updated to the global collective experience: the horror of war that exalts the worst of the individual and of the group, tenderness of playing, a language of peace, for children but not only. The opening scene represents a simple and ancient but always current game that however needs harmony and peace to be played. The rhythm of the military march, the destruction as an end in itself, the uniform which means oppression, makes a painful counterpoint. And there is room for love, represented by *Tosca* and *Mario* in its immortal eternity, sweet kisses and languid caresses but also jealousy, suspicion, distrust. And death, cancelling a life of art and love.

In all of this, what does it matter if the actor has a form of autism or a cognitive deficit? The somatic aspect and slightly lopsided gait of Down syndrome is not at the centre. At the centre is the person with their infinite potential and value regardless of any label. And here the paradigm is overturned: no welfare drift but enhancement of each individual that brings value to the entire experience.

Constant monitoring of critical issues and resources aims at following the needs that gradually arise, even in change. Starting from the difficulty of some actors to communicate verbally, the opportunity arose to introduce movement and dance in order to enhance expressiveness, not only with the gesture and the theatrical word but also with movement in space and with the body.

we worked on balance and fall (work on weight, I hold you, I leave you, I help you to get back on your feet), which was not only useful for training purposes but also for group relationship purposes because sometimes small disagreements arise in the group : through the work on the body, in the balance and in the spaces, the relational dynamics are also settled. The work focused on the hands, hands that create beauty and hands that can destroy. The work on empathy, on respecting the space of others starting from the gaze, being able to move together without touching each other and creating a relationship (I know your space first with the gaze and then the contact arrives and the intertwining arrives) has involved a series of educational as well as artistic steps. (Sara L., choreographer)

The research focuses on language as a vehicle of very deep meanings: dance, body work, motor

skills are fundamental and powerful evolutionary tools for everyone, but they must not be confined to the rehabilitative, therefore medicalising, territories of therapy. The enabling function is much more powerful than rehabilitation.

Body and movement reading cards trace the path taken and the type of movement (central or peripheral, structured or formless, intensity, motor flow, trajectory of movement: without generalising, in autism the movement is more directed in a linear trajectory while in Down's syndrome it is curvilinear) and monitors times, congruence between verbal delivery and activation of the motor scheme, ocular motor coordination. One of the goals is to create a dance-based motor alphabet together, activating mirror neurons and thus pursuing body awareness.

The entire path implies a global taking in charge: bodily, affective, emotional, social, cognitive flowing into the scenic outcome as a product, representing a piece of the life project of every single actor, disabled or not, and a professional growth for operators.

2. A good practice: OperaH's story

University of Macerata has awarded in the current year OperaH project with the 3.0 Inclusion Award, as a reality daily engaged in projects for inclusion.

This research presents the project activities through the narrative approach, the collection of narrative interviews and the observation of the staging of the show.

The educational project of Social Theatre and Dance Movement therapy, named OperaH, by the Pergolesi Spontini Foundation of Jesi (AN) (for short, FPS), involves adult disabled people, in a dimension of listening to differences; it represents a meeting place of life stories, in continuous osmosis between theatre and education, which takes place as a set of inclusive good practices.

The project, born in 2011 to promote new forms of accessibility for opera, sees a virtuous network between ASP - Area 9 of the Municipality of Jesi, in collaboration with UMEA - Adult Multidisciplinary Unit ASUR MARCHE AV2- JESI, COOSS Marche, Teatro Giovani Teatro Pirata Association and Nuovo Spazio Studio Danza.

The synergistic and participatory concertation between the parts of the community enhances the inclusive perspective in the logic of the network, representing an example of good practice: sharing enhances objectives and tools, resources, formal and informal collaborations between public and private social entities.

Authentic participation consists in the relationship between the parties, not intended as a summation, but as an effective interaction in a decision-making logic, generating new forms of governance by creating a widespread social responsibility that overcomes the passive attitude of delegation in favour of a new welfare model that promotes empowerment and strengthens and enhances the distribution of resources.

The plural comparison opens to a holistic and dynamic vision capable of detecting and interpreting changes of and in the process, through constant monitoring of the evolution of design, professional, emotional, expressive and relational skills and elements of participation and context (WHO, 2001).

OperaH involves a group of young adults with cognitive disabilities and autism from different municipalities in Vallesina, identified by the health and assistance services; the mission is to promote the well-being and health of the participants through the emotional, creative and socialising experience of theatre and dance, which supports the process of self-recognition-acceptance, promotes self-esteem and awareness, implements communication, expressiveness, the perception of the body in space-time.

The workshop provides weekly meetings of about two hours in the premises of the Nuovo Spazio Studio Danza school and in the presence of a theatre operator, with the involvement of the FPS, and two educators, thanks to the agreement with the ASP and the COOSS Marche. The project annually

produces a scenic outcome whose artistic theme is taken from the programming of the opera season by the FPS. The story of the opera is experienced by the participants through the sharing of values related to the chosen theme.

Support for the OperaH project comes from the wise contribution of the socio-health institutions, through the competent return of professionals and professional educators regarding the well-being of the people involved as the main element of a general overview.

In 2014 the experience expanded by involving another educational project by the FPS, Banco di Scena, an innovative PCTO project (paths for transversal skills and orientation) aimed at students of the 3rd and 4th year of the Liceo Artistico "E. Mannucci", IIS "Marconi - Pieralisi" and IIS "Galileo Galilei", all from Jesi. Banco di scena proposes an experiential path through four workshops: scenography and stagecraft, tailoring, lighting, theatrical pedagogy and dance movement therapy.

The students involved collaborate in the staging of the final OperaH show; in addition to the technical knowledge, the students can value the relational and emotional pedagogical experience of the theatre especially by meeting the participants of OperaH. Many students intervene as backstage assistants to support the actors and educators on stage during the performance. Thanks to the successful coordination between the two projects, during the restitution meeting held at the end of the 2021 show, the opportunity emerged to integrate the OperaH group of actors with the participants in the PCTO in theatre pedagogy and dance movement therapy.

The preparatory work and the theatrical experience are documented and communicated by audio and video made by the students, thus expanding over the years the audience involved and interested in the OperaH project, to such an extent that it is essential to include the outcome of OperaH as a fixed appointment, available for a fee, within the program of the Pergolesi Spontini Festival, the main theatre review organised by the FPS.

OperaH's innovative profile emerges, among the copious educational projects based on the experience of social theatre, in the construction of a network path based, to use an expression of Canevaro (2021), on widespread support. Inclusive education requires a pedagogy that takes charge of the plurality of educational needs in the harmonisation of their peculiarities, generating interesting evolutions in the construction of the educational path of the laboratory, as the fragments selected from the narrative interviews return.

3. Open curtain, voice to the actors: perception and narrative fragments

This research is based on the tool of the unstructured narrative interview, within the idiographic-qualitative research; it allows to analyse and understand the phenomena and meaning connections reported by narrators, reconstructing social events from their point of view (Junqueira Muylaert et al, 2014). The narrative interview can therefore be defined as an "interview aimed at collecting stories" (Atkinson, 2002) rather than quantifying and generalising the findings (Poggio, 2004); therefore it can be considered as "a qualitative, ethnographic and field research method to collect information on the subjective essence of life experience" (Atkinson, 2007, p. 225).

The voices of the protagonists recall their perceptions, hermeneutic processes and the attributions of meaning and value generated by experience, in order to understand their meaning and value principles. The theatrical laboratory of preparation for a performance on stage can make the participant feel fragile, vulnerable.

Exposing yourself can be very uncomfortable, excluding the profound transformative experience that theatre can offer. (Arianna B., director).

Accompanying and welcoming emotions and expectations can help deconstruct anxieties and prejudices and promote a positive relational climate.

I try to put myself at ease first, transforming a first impact, which could cause distrust, rigidity, embarrassment or compliance, with irony and lightness. The laboratory must be a pleasant place to stay and learn with others, as it is in the authentic relationship that inclusion occurs: inclusiveness is a way of thinking. (Arianna B., director).

The role of the director and the choreographer, not attributable to a medicalizing approach, presents the burden of taking charge of the educational, training and enabling care. The basis is the awareness of the diversity brought by each one, and of how much diversity and differences help us to grow and stay in the world, to develop acceptance and respect for the other.

The intentional construction of a welcoming and inclusive climate and the choice of irony and lightness promote the well-being of the participants and facilitate the freedom of expression, which allows the dramaturgy to take shape in the co-construction of the experience evolves in relation to the emergence, sometimes disruptive, of specific features, leading to the constant review of the work.

Performativity in social theatre starts from what there is: from movement, energy, rhythm, posture, and begins to tell, create, weave a new plot. The dramaturgy of the bodies is activated in a given narrative frame: everyone brings out his own way of playing, it's up to us to draw around those lines. (Arianna B., director).

The show is built hand by hand, during the year we work on movement, but also on learning to express ourselves in a different way from everyday life. (Ilaria S., educator).

The inclusive vision of the laboratory conductors allows them to welcome everyone with their skills, specificities and attitudes, and also to know how to use them in the show. The elements of motor fragility, such as clumsiness or stereotypical turns, turn to be very powerful scenic elements.

In a climate where we are all equal, each one, with its own characteristics, finds a role within the show, and vice versa can not play others; for each one is the key of activation and enhancement for which it is an increase, a composition, never a subtraction. (Arianna B., director).

We need to create a homogeneous group that finds functional pleasure in movement and theatre and that has an education in culture. (Sara L., choreographer).

Creativity therefore emerges thanks to the spaces of expressiveness, facilitated and accompanied.

In the show, the synergy, the energy, the power that emanates from the stage are tangible, a pleasant and positive atmosphere is perceived, with the expression of singularities and, in the choral scenes, the coordination within the group.

The choice to work on the climate, in a collective situation, seeking rhythms, attitudes, rigidity and fluidity has allowed recognition in the group and, to different degrees, a work between the inside and the outside of the narrative. (Arianna B., director).

The magic of the theatre also lies in the possibility of entering and exiting a character; working with actors with even complex disabilities entails a reflection on the interpretation, which can be experienced as a mechanical act or internalised action, as a game of imitation or identification.

The three actors who narrated the founding core of the work managed to enter the character with awareness, in a role distinct from other roles although related, they also showed it through their bodies. The narration allowed the creation and sharing of an imaginary: interrupting the closeness that was created on stage, and then recreating it, entailed effort for them. On the contrary, other actors have struggled to be different from themselves. (Arianna B., director).

The vision of the show, moving and tender, poetic, with fragility that affirms identity, restores the sense of a process, which is exquisitely relational.

I am very happy, I like it, I enjoy doing theatre, acting. I would like to act every day. The thing I like the most is being together with the others, I got along great with everyone. On the night of the show I was a little excited! I like this show we do, I would like to repeat it and show it to more people, I think others would like to repeat it too. (Valentino C., farmer).

being on stage, acting, the exchange with these guys through words, eyes, signs, the body makes you feel a deep emotion. (Aurora M., student).

One of the things that pushes me to move forward in my work is this relationship with the guys, which is hard to describe, the total suspension of judgment on their part takes the relationship to a completely different level than the other relationships you have in life. (Ilaria S., educator).

The participation of students, both as actors and as set and costume designers,

gives a very important added value, it has always been a positive and very spontaneous interaction, apparently in the absence of any prejudice. There is no concern about how they can interact. (Ilaria S., educator).

The students embraced the activity by making themselves available not as help or support but by actively participating in their show. This is, in my opinion, very important also for children with disabilities who feel part of something that is not only special for them but it is something that involves more reality. I believe that the work was done in full dignity, I am very satisfied with the growth of this path since at the beginning working with the body is difficult and embarrassing. (Sara L., choreographer).

The students involved in the course report the relational and guiding value of the experience:

If there was a chance to do it in the next few years I would continue as a hobby to act with these guys, it would be great. (Aurora M., student).

It was nice to see the desire they have to do these things, I thought I could become an educator, this experience has marked me a lot. (Silvia F., student).

Conclusions

The use of the narrative approach draws the sense of the path and the research itself becomes an act of awareness and diversified configuration to report the experience.

Focusing on the narrative of personal and professional experiences highlights the reticular connections of logical thinking and verbal and non-verbal communication, of bodily expression, of

the relationship, and help us focus on the ways through which the person shapes himself and the things of the world, an intrinsic purpose to any educational project (Bruner, 1996). The pedagogically oriented narration through the theatre represents a transformative element of intra and heterosubjective reality, configuring itself as activation of the self efficacy process (Bandura, 1995). The experience of OperaH is configured as a unifying element in the integration of local resources in the network logic, a meaningful activity in terms of social inclusion and a virtuous example of community welfare, a challenge in innovation that generates new meanings and other possible realities.

The theatre is a space of crossed reciprocity, between operators, actors and audience. One of the aspects to be investigated consists precisely in the perception that the audience expresses in front of the show.

It would be important to understand whether participation is authentic and free from forms of pietism, if the cultural, artistic and poetic aspects, as well as the inclusiveness of the project is perceived. But this aspect also concerns collective co-evolution: the conscious maturity of the audience can be implemented, as well as the different perception of opera, a cultural niche considered elitist until today.

Common thinking claims opera as something difficult and boring for young people, far from their interests: to convey it through an emphatic diversity, such as that of disability, is profoundly innovative from the perspective of culture and social inclusion, in a stimulating synergy.

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