

THE ROLE OF THE MEDIATOR WHEN THE SCHOOL GOES TO THEATER

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The aesthetic education of children depends on their opportunities for artistic enjoyment. The teacher has a decisive role as mediator in the theatrical event, from the choice of pieces, to the accompaniment of works during presentations. The actual involvement of the adult with the theatrical event is fundamental in the child's perception of this experience. The recurring lack of criteria in the choice of plays for children is the result of a failed education in the development of sensitivity and critical assessment. An adult artist is evaluated by an adult spectator, which results in the fact that, often, theatre plays full of moralizing discourses or didactic contents presented in abstract texts can please parents and teachers, without actually talking to children. Theater for children requires specific knowledge about the ludic logic of infantile thinking, which are fundamental for the construction of spectacular speeches that respect the child, without underestimating it, offering sensorial, perceptive, affective and cognitive challenges. Artistic and pedagogical foundation are necessary to propose theatrical experiences that could contribute, deeply, in the educational process of autonomous, critical and ethical persons.

In contemporary theater for children, on a professional basis, there are many different aesthetic languages and proposals on the scene. If on the one hand, many artists search for different possibilities of staging, valuing playfulness and seeking a form of effective communication with the child, without underestimating it; on the other hand, there are heirs of the "schooling theater", which results in plays created based on a kind of *imposed didacticism*. They reproduce formats of theatrical proposals in which the child must learn the established social norms to obey them without having the incentive to develop critical thinking and creative autonomy to seek their own conclusions. According to Gil, in the 1970s, in schools, *technicalism appropriates theater to apply efficient and productive teaching methods* (1999, p 123).

In technicalism education, the child is excluded from the creative process and is trained to be conditioned to see the world from pre-established truths without being invited to rethink, evaluate and transform. Thus, theatrical scenes are multiplied with speeches and moral lessons constructed by languages full of abstractions, in a form of communication quite alien to the child's way of thinking.

In childish thought, fantasy and reality coexist harmoniously, for it is through playfulness that the child finds the basis for understanding the world. Maria Lúcia Pupo, based on interviews with authors and directors who work with theater for children, concluded that, *according to them, the school institution seeks, first of all, to reproduce the current social system and it is not interested in highlighting the potential for questioning present in the artistic manifestations* (1991, 40). In her analysis of theatrical texts for childhood, this author affirmed that *simplistic didacticism has triumphed over a vision of theatrical art as a potential for knowledge* (1991, p.11).

On the other hand, Clarice Cohn warns that *children are not only subject to teaching, even in their most disciplinary and normative ways, but also, they constantly create meaning and act on what they experience* (2009, p.41). Thus, it is also, and

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primarily, from the reactions of children, that theater professionals, committed to children's development and pleasure, seek to construct performances that actually interact with the kids.

A theatre play for children may have no intention of giving moral lessons, teaching how right or wrong it behave or intends to pass some specific knowledge from the speech. However, when artists choose a way of speaking, moving, dressing, singing, using light and scenery, all these elements bring with them innumerable meanings. Everything on the scene communicates and needs to be created with art and responsibility. Unfortunately, in my experience as a theater for children award judge, I have found that there are "just for fun" shows that reinforce behavior patterns and prejudices which are disguised in alienated, but politically committed, laughter that ratifies ready-made common-sense truths without instigating the autonomy of critical analysis of them.

Addressing or not specific educational content does not determine the artistic quality of the work and is an option of the artists. However, having a pedagogical conception is not an option, it is a fact. To say that a spectacle has no pedagogical character is an untruth. Qualquer pessoa que pretenda fazê-lo não assume a sua própria responsabilidade a este respeito. As Vygotsky says, the absence of philosophy is itself a well-defined philosophy (2007: 89).

Thus, although the play does not elucidate a specific content, does not cite precise information and does not tell a specific story, it will always have a pedagogical and educational character, independent of the creator having the dignity to assume his options or to be aware of them. All signs that are placed on the scene will be seized by the child. At the same time, if the child perceives an extra-ordinary movement, it will begin to seek those possibilities in its own body; if the child appreciates a song, it will be encouraged to sing; if the child realizes that an actor turns into different characters or figures, it'll can identify itself and seek transformations in its own self.

The infantile universe is ludic and it is through the symbiology of playfulness that the child relates to the world, discovering and constructing the different meanings. According to the psychologist Lev Vygotsky, *the child's thinking approaches more of a set of attitudes linked to both action and fantasy than adult's thinking, which is a conscious thought of itself* (2007, 243). Carrying out a thorough analysis of the various stages of development of thought, the author concludes that only in adolescence does the human being begin to think through concepts. Thus, only in this period can abstract explanations be truly understood. Vygotsky explains that children and adults use the same words to refer to the same objects. However, the author warns that these words *refer to the same circle of phenomena. However, they do not correspond in the meaning plane* (2007, page 188).

In this way, the child is able to decorate words and speeches. The child may repeat some sentences that it realizes are pleasing to adults or that prevent reprisals. However, the distance between repeating and understanding is enormous. When the adult shows difficulty in understanding the process of infantile thinking, the child realizes that it will not be valued if it does not repeat the speech. When adults listen to children saying something fixed by memory, they feel satisfied because they believe to be contributing to the formation of the child. In this respect, Bettelheim asserts that the child recognizes that the adult is the one who holds the power and who subjugates it, so, the child agrees, even without understanding, being forced to seek his own way. The author claims that *this gives the child a hopeless feeling that there is no point in trying to reach a common understanding* (2012, 171). Bettelheim further states that where there is excessive realism, there is opposition to the child's intimate experiences.

According to the author, *the most important experiences and reactions of the young child are mostly subconscious and should remain so until it reaches a more mature age and understanding* (2012, 27). Concerning theater, artists need to develop knowledge about the children's universe so that they can make clear choices and perform plays that really dialogue with the child. Psychoanalyst Alba Flesler (2012) recalls that Freud places the birth of the child as *a place in the Other*. That is, it is when an adult recognizes that this human being deserves special care because it is at a different time of life that the toddler has the right to exercise childhood and to be a child.

The recognition that the child acts based on the relationships that the system enables makes evident the responsibility of society in relation to child development. A favorable community environment allows the child to develop its individuality, recognizing its own self as an integral and fundamental part of the social movement. The child constructs its action in the world based on different cultural references that are accessible to it. Through these references, children become producers of culture, elaborating meanings, values and perceptions. As Cohn says, *they do not simply "gain" or "inherit" a position in the system of social relations and kinship, but act in the creation of such relationships* (2009, 30). From the above, it is evident the need for aesthetic and pedagogical qualification of the adults who, responsible for the children, act as mediators of their relations with theatrical spectacles.

I have already had the opportunity to watch pieces for all audiences, which communicate with the different age groups, through the plurality of perceptions that their resources arouse, resulting in different levels of communication. Most of the time, the good plays performed for children enchant people of all ages and it is possible to happen that a spectacle aimed for the adult audience pleases the children for their color, movement and musicality. However, one must know how to assess whether this reality is on the scene or only in the text of the program.

I have seen in my experience as a spectator, and in declarations of other artists and spectators, that several plays for children present adult narratives, full of abstract and conceptual speeches, being inaccessible to infantile thought. As the child is not able to understand what happens and claim an adequate language, the evaluation of the work is done by other adults who, in general, approve moralizing discourses and didactic contents. Mesmo em peças irrealistas, de acordo com Maria Lúcia Pupo, existem textos que usam referências para adultos para criar efeitos cômicos, propondo mensagens subliminares que não serão entendidas pelo pensamento infantil. For her, the pretension to reach all ages *transforms the theatrical texts for children into a message that contains allusions that can only be decoded by the adult individual* (PUPO, 1991: 36).

Alongside spectacles with inaccessible messages and narratives, the "performing arts market" for children, serving economic interests, produces montages that underestimate the child and always reproduce the same formulas, inciting a mechanical participation, in which children respond to obvious questions, usually encouraged to scream all the time. This issue is of such relevance to the area that has been present in the discussions of artists, repeatedly, for many years. On this subject, Maria Clara Machado, director and playwright who developed, in Rio de Janeiro, the most significant children's dramaturgy work in Brazil, already stated that what she wants and demands *is sensitivity and not hysteria* (1986, p. 19).

Machado argued that the plays which invites the child to participate all the time, responding to questions with clearly predictable answers, leave its mind so busy in answering commands, that there is no room for sensibility to act. The author argued that when a play incites unbridled participation, it causes an excessive excitement that makes impossible the exercise of understanding and enjoyment. This *climate of hysteria*

prevents the development of *true poetic communication, language of the senses, means of culture, emotion and pleasure* (1986: 47).

How can this kind of work contribute to the development of the child's autonomy of thought and to the development of its personal expressiveness? In this theme, it is important to think about how parents or educators understand what it is to participate actively in a play. A child in silence or manifesting itself at some moments in relation to the scene demonstrates a deep involvement with the spectacle. The child's mind, its senses and all its possibilities of perception are involved with this happening, in full activity.

The importance of adult involvement in plays for children is not only in their choice but also in the accompaniment of the play during the presentation. Unfortunately, in so many years of theatrical activity, I have often seen the same scene: a group of students watches the play. Something happens on the scene that excites the child. She makes a comment out loud, talks to the next colleague, or just moves around and is vehemently reprimanded by an adult. After leaving the child subdued in its chair, the adult resumes its conversation with a colleague, with its clear conscience, because in its vision, the activity's goal is to entertain the children and the adult does not need to get involved with it.

How many misunderstandings! The rebuke of a genuine manifestation of the child results in the perception that it is wrong to express its own self. It is also necessary to reflect on the excess of silence that is often required of children. Neither shouting nor repression are the proper means for the child to enjoy an artistic spectacle. In this sense, Maria Clara Machado warned that it is natural for a child to express their emotions aloud, according to the proposed scene, such as the pursuit of a thug or the danger of a hero. For her, *what should not be allowed is a free provocation of the actors to create an atmosphere of excitement* (1986, 47).

The best way for teachers and parents to promote good children's behavior is to set an example. However, the adult who rebuked the child, in the description above, is not paying attention and makes noises that hinder the concentration of others. These attitudes interfere in the relationship of the child with the play and make it impossible for it to realize the real importance of that event, since the adult is always a model for the little apprentice. The psychoanalyst Simone Moschen warns of the enormous responsibility of those who work with children, because the child present a discursive collage with the adult linked to it. According to her, it is extremely important that the adult reflect on what is anticipated as possibilities, demands and senses to the children, *because what the child receive from adults has an impact that is not possible to neglect* (2011, p.93).

The actual involvement of the adult with the theatrical event is fundamental in the child's perception of this experience. At the same time, if the theatre play is good, it will also be a moment of delight for those responsible and, if it is bad, it will enable a better evaluation in the next opportunities. In this respect, Pupo points out that *the adult in general also has the prerogative to decide when to take the child to the theater and which play to watch* (1991, p.19).

There is a recurring misconception in this regard. In some cases, children are subjected to poor quality works, and parents or teachers justify with the statement: "But they like it!". What was expected? That children were born with aesthetic sense and critical awareness? Sobre esse tema, Machado alertava que a criança é muito receptiva, mas que não tem as ferramentas necessárias para discernir, captando tanto as coisas boas como as ruins. She argued that *it is therefore necessary to do things as well as*

possible, really the best, especially because children have no critical sense. Child is like radiography, captures and gets it (1986, p. 18).

The child needs to be guided in this beautiful process, which should give it much pleasure and joy and, at the same time, is fundamental in its aesthetic, emotional, cognitive and social formation. The adult must enable the child to have access to quality work. After all, who can like something which one does not know? In this sense, Fabiano Grazioli exposes the need for an aesthetic education that makes possible the selection of cultural products for children, so that *those who really contribute to their growth will be chosen* (2007, p. 31).

The adult cannot be exempt from the responsibility of guiding and, to guide, needs to qualify its own self. The adult must be a cheerful and present companion, both to enjoy a play, to watch a movie, read a book or listen to a CD. The complete involvement of the adult, in any kind of artistic enjoyment, values this experience for the child. It can be used in the theater of what Bettelheim says about reading fairy tales when he explains that *the adult's sense of active participation in narrating the story makes a vital contribution and greatly enriches the child's experience of it* (2012, p. 219). For the psychoanalyst, the fact that the adult shares the experience with the child, appreciating their feelings and reactions, causes an affirmation of this infantile personality.

Sometimes parents and teachers mistakenly believe that enabling the child to choose is a way of respecting its opinion. On these occasions, works that reproduce easy formulas have several advantages, since people, in general, and children, in particular, tend to seek what they already know. Thus, the marketing advantages of reproducing characters and known stories of the great mass make possible a greater probability of financial return, which makes this type of initiative multiply in a vertiginous way.

If the adults want the child to participate in the choice of the show, they can offer it some options they deem appropriate. The security and joy with which the parents or teachers will present the proposals to the children will determine the receptivity of the invitation. The lack of criteria of certain responsible adults in the choice of plays for children is the result of a failed education in the development of sensitivity and critical evaluation. On occasions where plays with no quality are presented to children, Machado used to question the aesthetic education of the parents, who don't have knowledge about the importance of the theater, and, because of that, they *THINK that what they give to children are things that only fit for children because these plays are very boring and uninteresting* (1986, p. 46).

In this direction, reflecting on the differences between proposals that reproduce easy formulas and proposals that seek to stimulate creativity may be one of the relevant criteria in the artistic and pedagogical evaluation of the spectacles. The works that reproduce easy formulas depart from the logic of the desire of the capitalist universe, selling an idealized image that should be reached by all. By valuing the automatic reproduction of characters, narratives, languages and movements, they promote the standardization of behaviors, suffocating the authentic individual expressions. In this way, a distance from the creative act occurs, since what matters is to reproduce the final result, creating a multitude of replicas, without individual expressivity. At the same time, there is a sense of sadness and impotence in those who cannot be within the imposed standard. The differences between people appear in a competitive relationship, in which certain characteristics are valued besides the detriment of other ones.

On the other hand, the creative proposals present innumerable possibilities of transformation and invite the viewer to participate sensorially, sensitively and cognitively, thus awakening the creativity of each one. Here, there is no purpose to

provoke the desire to achieve a predetermined result. In this case, what matters is to multiply the perceptions of creation, resulting in the demystification of the "ideal result". Thus, identified with the creative process and not with its final formatting, the recipient is instigated to use his or her own creativity. In this way, the valuation of diversity happens, allowing each one to seek their personal expressivity, based on their individual characteristics and the culture of their people, their family, etc. Therefore, the limitations are seen alongside the potentialities, in a process that proposes a permanent transformation movement, in a collaborative way.

The need for qualification of knowledge related to theater for children is also present in higher education, where the absence of studies on this specific form of spectacular creation reaffirms the lower status of theater for children in relation to theater for adults. Do the professors who minister classes for theatre teachers, of course, approach the subject, focusing on teaching, but, and the qualification for aesthetic composition? Where is the necessary studies for the specific needs of child theater creation by professionals? Surely, this is a fruitful and important field to be explored.

In turn, the "market for theatre play activities" with schools in the last decades has been an economic alternative, sometimes dangerous. Lots of plays have been produced whose qualification of the team is doubtful. According to Nazareth, *this lack of professionalism and, more than that, of ethics, is one of the bastions of the perverse aesthetics of theater for children* (2012. p. 86). For Maria Clara Machado, the lack of artistic knowledge results in *poorly rehearsed scenes where the actors are often only trying to survive economically, without actually engaging in the roles they represent* (1986, p. 46).

Thus, certain low-quality productions reaffirm the prejudice of thinking that theater for childhood is a minor art, made to "teach" something "useful" or, in reverse, a moment of pure relaxation, with no educational characteristic. In addition, certain current practices require a questioning of how easily some people decorate artistic-pedagogical discourses that do not appear in the aesthetic result of their works. Unfortunately, in some cases, the adults responsible for the children are not prepared to evaluate and they continue to reproduce the same speech, without realizing that they are words in the wind, without any relation to what happened on the scene. Based on decades of experience, Maria Clara Machado complained that the apparent ease of performing theater for children attracted many professionals who have trivialized the scene for children. For her, the realization of bad assemblies, full of distribution of gifts to compensate for the lack of artistic quality, results in the increase of the diseases of the sensibility and the loss of *the wonderful opportunity to develop in the child the capacity to capture, through the spectacle, the mystery of life* (1986, p. 65).

It may seem unnecessary to say that theater for children is art and that it needs the same qualification as theater for adults. I warn, however, that the prejudice prevails in many ways in the works of the area, either by the acceptance of poor quality plays or by the secondary space that the theatre for children occupies in the schedule of professional house shows or by the absence of opportunities of promotion and sponsorship. In this sense, Maria Lúcia Pupo (1991) denounces that the absence of adequate spaces causes a lot of difficulties for directors of theater for children, preventing a full artistic realization of works dedicated to children, which are conditioned to the needs of the plays for adults which are staged at night.

Even if it seems obvious, it is still necessary to affirm that theater for children is as much art as theater for adults. The technical, formal and production requirements are the same regardless of the age group of the audience for whom the play is intended. Professionals qualified to perform theater for children must have the same technical

enhancement as actors, directors, producers, playwrights, costume designers, set designers, and stage light designer qualified to theater for adults. The fact that the play is aimed at children, young people or adults is not a qualitative question, but a classificatory one. That is, a play is not better or worse because it is for children, for adolescents or for adults.

There are many artists and researchers interested in the quality of artwork for children. It was as a reaction to the lack of quality and neglect of the area, that professionals seriously dedicated to childhood began to claim the use of the term theater for children and no more children's theater, defending that children are infantile and not the artwork for them. However, this is a statement that brings with it a prejudiced perception of the term infantile, when trying to refute it. The artist and theater teacher Marco Camarotti affirms that the exchange of the term does not reach the root of the problem which is *the pejorative and minimizing tone that the adjective "infantile" has unfortunately acquired in our culture*. For him, what needs to be combated is *the distorted view that society in general and theater professionals in particular have of the child and what is pertinent to it* (2005. p.13). In this sense, Augusto Nazareth exposes that, *etymologically, infantile is known in Latin "infantile" and infantile is the adjective that refers to everything that is related to childhood ("proper for children")* (2012. p. 84).

Certainly, it is necessary to draw attention to an area that is still lacking in reflection. Whether it is classified as a children's theater or a theater for children, what is important is to affirm that theatre plays for children should be an expression of the Performing Arts, performed with the same aesthetic rigor as any other work aimed at different audiences. Pedagogical responsibility must go hand in hand with fun and joy. Making or choosing a good play for children is also a gesture of love.

In the last decade, many teachers and parents have shown great interest in understanding the educational potential of theater, in the aesthetic, ethical, cognitive, affective, social, perceptive and sensorial development of children. The qualification of the mediating adults is fundamental in the construction of a theatrical scene that presents plays that instigate the children, dialogue with the ludic logic of their thought, allow moments of pleasure and opportunities of elaboration to subjects genuinely present in the infant universe.

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