

Implementing Devised Theatre with Teenagers: Methodology and Design

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Abstract: The paper presents our pedagogic approach for implementing device theatre principles in working with teenagers. These principles converge to our research of the innovative concepts in the pedagogy field that emphasizes the role of the spontaneity and improvisation in the teaching process. This way of exploring the Drama Art allows to the subject-students to discover and to become aware of their most intimate thoughts and to integrate them into an artistic message. The defining principle of our pedagogic approach is the construction from the perspective of a finite artistic product which should be the transmitter of a message born from a personal stake, intimate, emulated in the consensus of the member of the group. In this way it is provided an adequate motivation of participants having a well-defined common goal. Also following this approach there are created pertinent occasions for accessing the training specific to the actors².

Keywords: Teenagers, education, pedagogy, didactics, methodology, creativity, improvisation, devised theatre.

Teaching requests exploring experimental didactic activities, new and diverse, in developing workshops for Drama Art. Adapting the teaching process to the cognitive, physical and emotional particularities specific to teenagers the use of the Devising Theatre means is inevitable. As outlined in a previous paper³ our actions aimed developing a method for teaching Drama Art in vocational high schools.

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 3. Iulia Ursa, "In Search of a Didactic Method for the Study of the Actor's Art by Teenagers," *Studia UBB Dramatica LVIII* (1/2013): 125-130.

The result of our initial research represent a formula based on procedures inspired from various theatre methods, adequate to our approach of building moments in which the subject-students can explore the process of expressing scenically a message personal and with real stake. In his book, *The Actor and the Target* Declan Donnellan remarks the existence of the message profoundly human contained in any artistic act: „... even the most stylized master piece talks about life and the more the life in a master piece the biggest the value of the work.”⁴

Our methodical approach converges in the sense of the research of the innovative concepts in the pedagogy field that emphasizes the role of the spontaneity and improvisation in the teaching process. This way of exploring the Drama Art allows to the subject-students to discover and to become aware of their most intimate thoughts and to integrate them into an artistic message.

The main particularity of this way of approaching the pedagogical method for exploring the Drama Art considers the stake put in game by the subject-student himself. His actions are directed towards a target with a personal stake, “when we act we tell stories”⁵ therefore he doesn’t play merely a role but he is the teller of his own story, is the messenger. of his own manifest he is the creator of the role that can tell his story or the story carrying the message he wants to convey to the others.

General Aspects of the Method

The principle of the collective message

The defining principle of our pedagogic approach is the construction from the perspective of a finite artistic product which should be the transmitter of a message born from a personal stake, intimate, emulated in the consensus of the member of the group. In this way it is provided an adequate motivation of participants having a well-defined common goal. Also following this approach there are created pertinent and inevitable occasions for accessing the training specific to the actors.

For developing such a product, there is stimulated the original composition generated by an idea or feeling born from “impulses, dreams and emotions” of the members of the group. The process is similar to the one of the original

4. Declan Donnellan, *The Actor and the Target* - Romanian version (București: Unitext, 2006), 16.

5. *Ibid.*, 185.

project presented by Anne Bogart and Tina Landau in the chapter dedicated to *Original Composition* from the work: *The Viewpoints Book: a Practical Guide to Viewpoints and Composition*⁶.

We can observe also similitudes with what it is identified as Devising Theatre, i.e. the method of performing without a text and with the collaborative participation of the entire team in all the aspects of the development of the performance.

Convergent to these currents and methods it is positioned the method of *auto-courses*, specific to the pedagogy of the theatrical creation of Jacques Lecoq presented by him in his work: *The poetic body: a pedagogy of the theatrical creation*.⁷ The *auto-courses* represent a form of exploration outside of course hours of what has been learned during them. They benefit from the total freedom offered by the absence of the pedagogue and the support of the group that participates actively to the creative process and its evaluation from the constructive perspective of the feedback. This way of organizing and doing the activity it is retrieved in our approach also.

The principle of the heterogenic means for generating the material

From the perspective of how the teaching activity is structured and it takes place this method of theatre implies the teacher to be open towards the permanent adaptation and diversification of adopted procedures.

In the *The Routledge Companion to Theatre and Performance*⁸ related to Devising Theatre it is made reference to the ways of generating the material, ways diversified that can include from theatrical exercises and improvisations to writing, drawing, filming, research and discussions.

Similarly, in the *Viewpoints*⁹ technique, the material collection stage, it is found the same generosity in accessing as much sources as for creativity stimulation as possible. In this respect it is suggested the process to be approached from the perspective of accumulating of materials coming from the universe of: complementing arts (visual arts, music, dance etc.); diverse techniques (video, audio etc) or ordinary areas (food, domestic objects etc.).

6. Anne Bogart and Tina Landau, *The Viewpoints Book: A Practical Guide to Viewpoints and Composition* (New York: Theatre Communication Group, 2005).

7. Jacques Lecoq, *Corpul poetic: o pedagogie a creației teatrale* (Oradea: Artspect, 2009), 105.

8. Paul Allain and Jen Harvie, *The Routledge Companion to Theatre and Performance - Romanian version* translated by Cristina Modreanu and I.T. Todoruț – (București: Nemira, 2012), 312-315.

9. Anne Bogart and Tina Landau, *The Viewpoints Book*, 160.

Going further in the direction of this way of generating the material and building the specific universe it is to be mentioned the non-limitation characteristic of the accessed dramatic genre. In this way as outlines also Augusto Boal in the rules of the drama specific to *the Theatre of the Oppressed*¹⁰, it can be accessed any genre from realism to symbolism but less surrealism and irrealism.

The principle of collective creation

From our pedagogic perspective this is a principle of the method with the purpose of exploring the entire approach from the stand point of the importance of coexistence and cooperation of the team and the free creation.

In *The Routledge Companion to Theatre and Performance* it is outlined the aesthetic role of the *Devising Theatre* resulted from his functioning mode by questioning the usual hierarchy from conventional theatre: the script, the director the result.¹¹

Subject-students can access a complex experience regarding the dynamic of the theatrical group and individual's functions in this group. From this perspective the co-lucrative proceedings we propose are retrieved within the phenomena of transposing the creative accent from the area of the ludic in case of improvisations in area of directing, drama, technical direction etc. in case of collective moments specific to the method of auto-courses of Jaques Leqoc.¹²

The principle of the side coaching

"Side coaching is the process of giving direction to actors when they are involved in working on a scene. The suggestions are usually simple and may take the form of actions, emotions, playing styles, concepts or other forms of suggestion which the actors take and utilize in the scene. The actors must keep the scene going and are to react instantly to the coaching."¹³

10. Augusto Boal, *Games for actors and non-actors* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 242.

11. Paul Allain and Jen Harvie, *The Routledge Companion to Theatre and Performance* - Romanian version translated by Cristina Modreanu and I.T.Todoruș – (București: Nemira, 2012), 312-315.

12. Jacques Lecoq, *Corpul poetic*, 105-107.

13. June 1th, 2016, <http://broadwayeducators.com/side-coaching-exercise-for-actors-how-to-use-it-benefits-for-actors/>

It is created this way a new dynamic of the relationship pedagogue-student and the delimitation of the role of the pedagogue who this time cannot be assimilated to a director. He has the purpose of tuning the activity of the group within the theatre workshop by determining the process of creativity stimulation. From our research perspective the way in which the activity of the animator is positioned in *the Theatre of the Oppressed* is ideal for being extrapolated into the role the pedagogue-coordinator has in our pedagogical approach. In this way the pedagogue-coordinator of the theatre workshop should commit to a dialectic attitude; he is a generator of questions¹⁴. Using as main didactical method the different perspectives, he coordinates the direction of the actors both the subjects approached (content of the scenes) and the technical solutions for their scenic transposition. In his didactical approach the coordinator of the theatre workshop should avoid manipulative attitudes, statements or unilateral decisions regarding the individual activity of the subject-students as regarding the group as a whole.

The principle of the theatrical intrinsic creativity

Our pedagogical approach is based on the axiom of the existence of the theatrical intrinsic creativity specific to the human being. This postulate it is retrieved within the majority of the analysed theatrical methods but it is particularly explored and developed by Viola Spolin and Augusto Boal.

From Viola Spolin's perspective every individual is a potential theatrical creator: "Everyone can act. Everyone can improvise. Everyone who want can act and can learn to become apt for the stage"¹⁵. In the same way Augusto Boal observes pertinently the essence profound human of the theatrical language. Substantiating *the Theatre of the Oppressed* Augusto Boal outlines: "...is theatre in the most archaic application of the word. In this usage, all human being are actors (they act!) and spectators (they observe!). They are spect-actors."¹⁶

14. Augusto Boal, *Games for actors and non-actors* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 262.

15. Viola Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theatre – Romanian version* (București: U.N.A.T.C. Press, 2008), 49.

16. Augusto Boal, *Games for actors and non-actors* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 15.

The principle of using theatre as didactic method for knowledge

The influence of the theatre on pedagogy is an area explored and developed since forever the pedagogic valences of the theatre being one of the underlying reasons for this art's development. In modern times we assist to the theatre substantiation as didactic method specific for teaching literature or even exact sciences.

This principle it is found in most theoretical works of great theatre practitioners. From our perspective Augusto Boal has an adequate positioning in this respect; he is substantiating his method as follows: "Theatre is a form of knowledge. In the same time it should be a mean for transforming the society. Theatre could help us to build our future instead of waiting it."¹⁷ Specific to the Boal method it is the harmonious union of pedagogic and artistic valences of the theatre in view of developing of an ideal social model of the individual who can express publicly his opinion and who can, through his contributions, to influence the future of the society to which he belongs.

In a complementary approach Viola Spolin explores the play and theatrical improvisation from the perspective of pedagogical valences on the facilitation of intuitive knowing of the immediate reality through spontaneity stimulation: „The objective on which the player should concentrate constantly and toward which should directed any action creates spontaneity. Spontaneity triggers personal freedom and the entire being awakes from the physical, intellectual and intuitive perspective."¹⁸

The play-exercise method

The main specific didactic method used in our pedagogical approach within the Drama workshops was the training method based on exercises and play: we experimented the introspective valences of exercises developed for the exploration of the personal universe specific to subject-students so that to combine afterwards this approach with interactive valences specific to theatrical playing done within the group.

17. Augusto Boal, *Games for actors and non-actors* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 16.

18. Viola Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theatre – Romanian version* (București: U.N.A.T.C. Press, 2008), 52.

We adopted in this respect the exercises-and games proposed by Augusto Boal in his fundamental work: *Games for actors and non-actors*. Exploring the system created by Augusto Boal we noticed similitudes between his conception regarding the meaning of theatrical act and its educational values and the goals proposed by our pedagogical approach.

The method has been developed in order to develop the specific theatrical activity's scenic competencies of actors and non-actors. It is composed of a series of exercises, games and drama forms that function within a construction interactive and dynamic.

Integrating and exploring Stanislavski's research Augusto Boal succeeds in creating a series of exercises and games meant to prepare actors and non-actors for developing the structures specific to *The Theatre of the Oppressed*, *The Image Theatre*, *The Forum Theatre* and *The Invisible Theatre*.

Adopting the Stanislavski's theory Boal starts from the hypothesis of the necessity actor's de-mechanization preparing him for the specific process of impersonating the character. This System¹⁹ supposes 3 implementation steps:

1. De-mechanization of the actor – here we have 5 categories of exercises and games:
 - Re-establish muscular functions for feeling what we touch (general exercises, walking exercises series, massage exercises series, integration games series, gravitation exercises series);
 - Senses development (blind man series, space exercises)
 - Listening what we hear (rhythm exercises, melodic exercises, sounds and noises series, exploring breathing's rhythm, development of inner rhythm)
 - Seeing what we watching (mirrors series, sculptor's series, puppets' series, image games, masque and rituals games, imagining object etc)
 - Senses memory (reconnecting memory with emotions and imagination)
2. Exercises for animating and optimizing rehearsals (applicable for any play)
3. Exercises for facilitating the process of impersonating the character.

19. Augusto Boal, *Games for actors and non-actors*, 29.

These exercises can be found also within other methods in similar or different forms; in this respect we can exemplify the existence of the recognizable series of exercises generically named *The Mirror* which we have identified also in Viola Spolin's method, first chapter dedicated to exercises from her work: *Improvisation for theatre*.²⁰

The proposed exercises have been selected because of the polyvalence of the objectives touched all of them as they are efficient methods for warming-up, for knowing the member of the group and for animating the relationship among them and last but not least as they are an excellent way for developing for accessing and developing the imagination of the subject-students.

The method of exercises and games has been used during our entire pedagogical experiment and it was efficient both in conducting the drama workshop and in developing the main steps for building the final scenic product. In this respect the exercises and games have been selected for their specific and the compatibility with the target proposed. For example the same exercise can be used in the warm-up stage and as a starting point in the stage of generating the script or an act.

The Improvisation Method

Improvisation is the gravitational point of the Drama workshop.

Detailing the way in which improvisations developed during the intervention with the experimental group delimitate themselves several particular characteristics can be outlined.

In this type of project, the main function of the improvisation is to generate authentic scenic material, acceptable from the drama and aesthetical point of view for the final performance. Accomplishing this function improvisation is modelled by the main principles and technical aspects of the method

For a start it can be outlined the characteristic of the autonomy in regards with a given script. Not having a script as base for our approach participants can choose various improvisation topics function of the general idea of the target message.

From a different perspective there are no pre-established conditions regarding the number of participants; it can be individuals, couples or groups.

20. Viola Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theatre*, 110-111.

Referring to the characteristic of verbal or nonverbal communication methods within improvisations there is the freedom of accessing the convenient variant from the standpoint of aesthetic expressivity or legerity with which each individual can develop on of the variants.

Practical Implementation

Our method implementation followed the three stages specific to the construction of an original project as they are presented in the Viewpoints²¹ method:

1. Concept definition – topic identification;

This is the defining stage for the way of conducting the activity later on. The topic should be interesting, acute and actual for all group members and it should motivate them.

2. Writing stage;

This stage targets the identification of those stories, events, news, characters that can illustrate the chosen topic. It supposes writing scripts but doesn't exclude oral presentation.

3. Scenic transposition;

This is the biggest stage and consists of building the scenic moments which will compose the finite product. In this stage it will take shape the structure and the staging modality. The main exploring methods used in this stage are exercises - games and improvisation.

Each workshop was conducted following a pattern relatively constant and developing several specific moments:

- Preliminary stage for preparing the space and specific costume;
- Warming up through specific exercises;
- Exercises with objectives correlated to the three stages of general development of the project (exercises for de-mechanization of the body, exercises for generating the topics to be explored through improvisations);

21. Paul Allain and Jen Harvie, *The Routledge Companion to Theatre and Performance* - Romanian version translated by Cristina Modreanu and I.T.Todoru – (București: Nemira, 2012), 408.

- Improvisation module on topics proposed and consensually adopted by group members (image of the topic; improvisations by individuals, by couples or group);
- Exercises specific for animating the rehearsals;
- Discussions and conclusions (subject-students will take notes in their work journals).

The project took place 24 weeks meaning 24 drama workshops. At the end of this module students presented an original performance of 30 minutes on one day from the teenager life outlining the types of human interaction specific to this age; the parent-child relationship; the teacher – student relationship, teenager-group; lover couple.

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