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THE PEARL DIVER

the designer
as storyteller

DESIS PHILOSOPHY TALKS:
STORYTELLING & DESIGN
FOR SOCIAL INNOVATION

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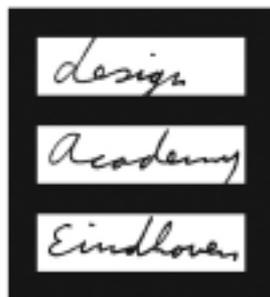


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About the Editors

Performing Arts as Storytelling, a Way of Acting and Telling in order to Understand the World In-between Good and Evil

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ABSTRACT

Storytelling is a particular kind of action because it is made up of words. So it seems to bring together the different principles of doing and knowing. I try to approach storytelling to other performing arts, in particular theater, because I think it is a peculiarity of performing arts to hold together mind and body, praxis and theories, and to overcome old categories and fictional opposition between them.

Theater is a meeting between actor and spectator with a language made up of signs and symbols, performed by a body-mind. In this sense performing arts are sweeping and advanced fields in which theoretical and philosophical theories can become wider.

The roots of theater are the same as those of religion and rituals. Theater was born as a way to represent the conflict between opposite forces and opposite gods, Apollo and Dionysus, as Nietzsche taught. The birth of theater was involved in the relationship between good and evil, as a way to understand and represent them, in order to tell and to act, this kind of cosmic conflict with performances. In this sense I think theater could preserve an ancient, but still actual, way of social innovation. Theater and its forms, tragedy and comedy, and its deep research in active culture, could help storytellers to deeply penetrate the negative aspects of a social concern, in order to represent it, act it and lay the foundation to draw forth the best part of it.

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1. Introduction

Storytelling is mainly an action. And a particular kind of action because it is made up of words. So it seems to bring together the different principles of doing and knowing. I try to approach storytelling to other performing arts, in particular theater, because I think it is a peculiarity of performing arts to hold together mind and body, praxis and theories, and to overcome old categories and fictional opposition between them. Ancient wisdom, not limited to Greek ideas, did not separate telling and making, thinking and doing, understanding and performing; they were constantly tied together in theater and poetry. Theater, as a performing art, marks the differences between ordinary and extraordinary time and space (Barba, 2004) because it gives a rhythm to experiences and tends to separate this space from all the others. In theater it is necessary to concentrate the experience in a brief timeframe, the time of the performance, and the space of actions in the space of a stage.

Theater is a meeting between actor and spectator (Grotowski, 1968) with a language made up of signs and symbols, performed by a body-mind. It is known, according to cognitive science theories, that body, mind, emotion, cognition, soul and spirit are dynamically interrelated and connected. Thus, it is impossible to split only one of these categories and use it, as it is distinct in theoretical understanding (Maturana & Varela, 1984; Varela, 1991). In this sense performing arts are sweeping and advanced fields in which theoretical and philosophical theories can become wider. Researchers in

studying storytelling can learn from authors who master theater research and avant-garde theater, in order to better understand the deep connections between actions and words.

The roots of theater are the same as those of religion and rituals. Theater was born as a way to represent the conflict between opposite forces and opposite gods, Apollo and Dionysus, as Nietzsche taught (1994). The birth of theater was involved in the relationship between good and evil, as a way to understand and represent them, in order to tell and to act, this kind of cosmic conflict with performances.

In this sense I think theater could preserve an ancient, but still actual, way of social innovation.

2. Performing Arts as Storytelling

2.1 Theater

Theater is an encounter between actor and the audience (Grotowski, 1968), "it cannot exist without the actor-spectator relationship of perceptual, direct, live communion" (p. 19).

Theater is an encounter of bodies, minds, imaginations, memories, emotions, all of them mixed together, and all of these aspects are deeply interrelated. An actor has to learn to master all of these faculties and to use them dynamically. Theater researcher of the last century with Stanislavskij, Dullin and Mejerchol'd understood that an actor must constantly practice a process of self-education in order to control these faculties, a process called

actor training. This training is inspired by every kind of renovation and enhancement process, as in Eastern Ways (Dō), as in Eastern martial arts, because these are ways of transformation, of transfiguration, of infinite improvement of the human being. For this reason an actor has to educate himself, before being able to transmit meaning, before even thinking of educating others. "Even though we cannot educate the audience - not systematically, at least - we can educate the actor" (Grotowski, 1968, p. 33).

Grotowski speaks about a holy actor, not because of his connection with religion, but refers to an attitude of self-sacrifice: "The essential thing in this case is to be able to eliminate any disturbing elements in order to be able to overstep every conceivable limit." (p. 35). This meaning of holy is related to mastering oneself, more than a way of salvation or redemption. This is described as a negative way, a "via negativa - not a collection of skills but an eradication of blocks. [...] The requisite state of mind is a passive readiness to realize an active role, a state in which one does not want to do that, but rather resigns from not doing it" (p. 17).

In Western traditions only performing arts have preserved this kind of heritage, enshrining this particular idea of mankind, made up of body, emotion, cognition, imagination, and memory that have to be mastered in order to renew and transfigure oneself, to give completely of oneself, as a gift to the spectator.

If theater is an encounter, the relationship between actor and spectator is revealed in a contact that gives a transformative boost to both of them. However, this sharing process is not one of content sharing. Contents are only a medium between subjects involved. Relationship is a live process that concerns dynamics, actions, emotions, images, and not only information and words. But only words, written words, are fixable. Only a text can store the meanings, even if it does, perforce, in a reductive way.

In order to amplify this forced reduction different arts use symbolic language to enrich the words using words to create images instead of concepts. Only symbolic language, poetic language can shape complex meanings. It is important to focus on sharing meanings in this symbolic way to avoid sharing of feelings (like in soap operas or mass contents or mass arts), and to avoid sharing reductive concepts. In theater one can share meaning using words and actions that are combined to represent symbolic meaning, in a performance.

2.2 Education

Education analogously is an encounter of human beings, not a content sharing process; otherwise you can talk about the information process and not the educational one. Education is not a matter of content because contents are in books, in web sites, in objects. Education is the act of extracting (Latin *ex ducere*) a person from his particular way of life, with a view of carrying life outside, to changing prospects and aims.

Everybody has an expressive layer and a pre-expressive layer of expression (Barba, 2004). The pre-expressive level is the actor presence before sharing a content, before a word or sign is expressed. To control this elementary layer an actor must work hard, practicing and training every day to control every aspect of expression. It is an aim also for educators because they teach while they live with their behavior and their signs more than with their explicit speeches. Thus, an educator has to educate himself before trying to educate others.

A teacher should not transfer a content (for that, a newspaper is enough), but should create an encounter in a particular zone, in a potential, liminal (Turner, 1982), transitional (Winnicott, 1971) area in which people can share symbolic powerful meaning; this area is more similar to art than other fields.

Theater is a special place for the education of human beings, in which the attention of this potential, transitional, liminal area is preserved, since it is close to the ritual form of experience because of its roots close to the sacred part of experience. We have to remember that theater's birth is related to sacred dance and rituals for Dionysian festivities. And theater provides an ideal place to understand a kind of education that is not limited to the mind, or limited to rationality, but is widespread in the whole person.

When someone tries to teach something, to give information, to decant a content, this is not education, nor art, nor storytelling. Otherwise, when a teacher, an actor, a storyteller tries to express a meaning with symbolic language (performance, music, poetry, images, movies and so on), he makes change possible because he touches the whole pupil. Meaning is not a thing; it is the process to reproduce visible things in order to make it comprehensible, as in a famous quote by Chagall, "Art does not reproduce the visible; rather, it makes visible".

2.3 Imagination and Cruelty

Imagination is the organ of the capacity of understanding; it is a connective faculty that keeps together body and mind, desires and memories, emotions and cognitions, soul, spirit and matter. But it is not a spontaneous form of creativity: without the training process, without mastering oneself, imagination is only fantasy, whim, fancy. Only with self-education and self-training an artist, an educator, a storyteller can master imagination in order to express meaning and produce effects in the real life of others; only in this way can sparks of transformation be produced.

Words like holy, or gift do not indicate a religious practice, but a practical way to connect spirituality and materiality, to talk about empirically of invisible and intangibles, things such as changing, transformation, transfiguration. These are invisible forces, but they produce real effects in real life.

"The true purpose of the theatre is to create Myths, to express life in its immense, universal aspects, and from that life to extract images in which we find pleasure in discovering ourselves" (Artaud, 1998, p. 230-31).

Performing arts have opened the gate to an important kind of research, in which matter is not a reductive prospect or a nihilistic perspective, on the contrary a perspective in which it is possible to find an animated new kind of materialism or a material kind of spirituality. But is necessary for us to learn the language of poets, performers and artists because they are capable of also handling the dark side of experience in order to understand it and make it more comprehensible.

Imagination is a faculty that holds together the contradictory aspects of experience because it uses symbolic language, the language of connections (from the Greek verb *syn ballo συν βαλλω* that means keep together), the language that preserves the ambivalence and richness of words. Thus, it is the best way to face the negative side of reality. Storytelling is an ancient practice, born to dare evil with poetry. The audience, listening to the tales of heroes can understand that evil is a natural part of life and can accept its presence. This is the first step to deal with it and not be dominated and defeated by it.

Nowadays it is possible to learn this ancient wisdom from theater because thanks to radical authors like Artaud, we can radically think art as a resource for the transformation of the present reality.

"In the same way, theatre is a disease because it is a final balance that cannot be obtained without destruction. It urges the mind on to delirium which intensifies its energy. And finally from a human viewpoint we can see that the effect of the theatre is as beneficial as the plague, impelling us to see ourselves as we are, making the masks fall and

divulging our world's lies, aimlessness, meanness and even two-facedness. It shakes off stifling material dullness which even overcomes the senses' clearest testimony, and collectively reveals their dark powers and hidden strength to men, urging them to take a nobler, more heroic stand in the face of destiny than they would have assumed without it" (Artaud, 1998, p. 150).

3. Conclusion

Too frequently social innovation projects, good social innovation projects, are at risk of failure only because they do not also consider the negative aspects of experience in depth. They are at risk of failure because they focus on the positive aspects that are necessary, bringing innovation, improvement and new ways of doing things.

Theater and its forms, tragedy and comedy, and its deep research in active culture, could help storytellers to deeply penetrate the negative aspects of a social concern, in order to represent it, act it and lay the foundation to draw forth the best part of it.

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