

## SOCIAL THEATRE: PRISON EXAMPLE

Since the end of the 50s in the area of theatre, various experiences at a European and international level begin, that characterise and point out how theatrical practice, rather than the show, is an interesting phenomenon.

It is at this stage that, adopting differing expressive forms such as: happening, performance, stage, workshop, theatre departs from that exacting theatrical space and enters into others: mental asylums, prisons, hospitals, streets, piazzas, the city in general.

Following a long and deeply felt journey, throughout Italy as well, theatrical practice is tout court recognised as an interesting activity of intervention within the social field. All the time, the originality and peculiarity of the theatre as direct communication is recognised, distinguishing it once and for all from that polished commercial theatrical product, or from the mere reflection of relating poetics, from the interpreter scene, from that theatre that is rather like a faithful illustration of ideas written down.

My professional experience in the field of art and stage began in 1978 at the Festival nazionale dell'avanguardia in Formello (Rome), and following various differing experiences, I have worked with many Penal Institutions since 1994.

In particular, I have presented workshops, seminars, put on stage shows, photograph exhibitions, art exhibitions beginning with the Roman prison of Rebibbia Femminile, then working in other penitential institutions, among which is Regina Coeli, Civitavecchia N.C. and finally at Rebibbia Reclusione, trying to put the world of prison and theatrical culture into a close and profound social relationship, one meant to "improve" the other and vice versa.

The shows were presented both within and outside the various Institutions and the inmates were also often directly involved in a supervisory capacity, as well as being in charge of maintenance in the case of art exhibitions or theatrical and musical stage productions, and/ or in charge of planning photographic exhibitions and educational communication.

Within the Institution of Rebibbia Reclusione in Rome, from the year 2000 onwards, an important collaboration has grown even stronger between ArteStudio<sup>1</sup> and the Institution itself. What sort of theatre can be attempted inside a prison? I would say that it very much depends on the type of prison it is. I mean, what sort of management does it have? Type of detainees, educationalists, agents, as well as the type of city itself, the timing, - and fortunately, it is impossible to establish rules and judgements.

The characteristic point of my work, which forever depends upon a large group of collaborators, is that this does not intend to establish - with the inmates - a professional theatre company that can put on shows outside, even though it is this - the professionally produced end show - which appears to be, is, so to speak, "the most obvious result", especially when the group, the Company, exhibits on the outside. I still do not do the work of a "director" of a group of inmates/ actors that are more or less able to play. Even if, still in this case, this is what immediately hits your eye upon seeing the show. But prison does not get out of prison to go and make theatre, drawing up rules and behavioural patterns, tensions and skills, regulations and systems of culture and society precisely on the theatrical show scene.

My job, mine and the various other collaborators', both within and outside the Institution, is all in the workshop preparatory phase.

Beginning from going beyond the frontiers of the word 'Theatre', into the more open term 'Performance', it is possible to retrace the essential reasons for our activity carried on in the prison. The conclusive show is, in fact, an operating-directing mix, an artistic as well as educational tension. In actual fact, my work departs from the identification - not choice - of the group: inmates with and without talent, inmates organised and recognised as groups of power within the Institution and new arrivals, subjects with psychiatric difficulties or problems with

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communication and relationships with the outside world, and people from Calabria and Rome, Neapolitans and Sicilians, immigrants.

Usually, inmates who are “good at acting” were suggested to me by the people in charge of the Institution; but I then asked myself: to act how? And what? According to what idea of theatre?

Inside the prison, the good actor is considered more or less so according to the stereotype of the comic, dialectal actor: mnemonic skills, “own” management of the stage in the Italian way, strong histrionic gifts, in short an actor that is expressive in keeping with consolidated 19<sup>th</sup> - century theatrical models and forms. To those models and forms the vast majority of the theatrical and television audience refers today in order to recognise the “good actor”, especially in the modern and accredited conception that clearly divides actor and spectator, theatre – theatrical trade and business – and existence.

The concept of ability modelled on a less evident and mysterious expressiveness, which turns to one’s own interior sensitivity more than to sneering, is rather unknown both inside prison – among inmates throughout the whole penitentiary system – and outside – amongst both the public who are used to official theatre, and university students reading relevant subjects or else compulsory-school teachers – just to make a few examples.





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The theatre, which ends up “being” repudiating “pretending”, the theatrical experience that coincides with existence doubling the contemporary concept taken from the artistic avant-garde of Art equals Life, the theatre that opens up its own doors to the experiences of musical and pictorial performances and which destroys every relationship obstacle between actor and spectator, in short the theatre that favours the creative phase compared to that imitative one, belongs to a series of 20<sup>th</sup> - century experiences, from Artaud to Cage, to Brook, Living Theatre, to Grotosky, to Bene, to Nekrosius, to name but a few, who, if they have enormously influenced the thought and reflection about the stage and not only the stage, have not managed to reach the public at large, in the sense of accrediting, so to speak, a “natural vision” of the theatre event, which is precisely what it is. While on the other hand, Theatre over this last ten years, a theatre which has been seized by new forms and speeds of communication, has undergone a rapid fading away of its ability to make an impression, to shape or to shake society. Just think of the - political - attention that the theatre aroused in the 70s with conferences, scandals, debates, or even compare the pages of a newspaper given to things theatrical during those years and those of today. But precisely this crossing the frontiers has brought the theatre out of the theatre: into the mental institutions, into the prisons, into the hospitals, into the streets, into the piazzas.

The creative ability of the theatrical practice has been tried to be remoulded, dividing the theatre show, the imitative theatre, the parody theatre and the theatre of the many performances of the same play from the creative theatre, from the authentic theatre which “is” and “does not pretend to be”. This thought has permitted an interesting and useful relationship between theatre and psychiatry, between theatre and sociology, between theatre and education, between theatre and anthropology, between theatre and philosophy. This thought has connoted the theatrical experience, the preparation phase, as a moment of deep and interesting relationship between the subject and the others, between the subject and the outside world, thus transferring a founding relationship of the theatre into sensation, in this case, into an educational founding relationship within the place of confinement.

Theatre adapts itself, turns itself around and tries to understand the systems as well as reasons behind prison, why it is part of our society, and rather it imports fresh rhythms and manners of expressing one’s self while renewing possibilities and interests of the theatre itself. Prison steals the moment of artistic creation as system of relationship and readmission from the theatre, in an exchange that may help to understand new relationships both in and with the modern city. In this complex regeneration theatre work, leaving the show to one side, we all – actors, directors, inmates, workmen, citizens all – we may recognise our activity inside the prison walls, the need for it.





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For an educational and social theatre: notes on the “Port Royal”<sup>2</sup> project

Theatre as place of tracks, a chart of particular people and places who are in need of a relationship regeneration. But the concept can – and must – be extended to the reality of the city in all its aspects, where the territory has been deprived of a precise urban as well as human identity.

On the one hand the tradition of the predominant western renaissance theatre, otherwise called vision theatre, which privileges a representation intended as autonomous object that is far from the vocation of profound relationship among participants and which favours that relentless dichotomy of stage and audience, of time and space, of whoever acts and whoever watches, and which through repetition, reducing experience to mere consumable goods, takes you hostage and dissolves fully mature relationships.

On the other, theatre intended as group experience which does not need to show itself, rather, the conclusive show, should it alter the experience characteristic of the preparatory work, is absolutely inadvisable.

In social theatre expression, education and interaction mechanisms come to life. In the first case, theatre action gives suitable voice and tools to who generally, owing to a situation of deprivation, is not able to express himself in a condition of communicativeness. Secondly, it becomes a way for the maturing of individual and collective identities. Thirdly, it arouses new actions which unfold in reciprocity and in the sharing of the experience.

The tools are the performing activities and the stage must not be the end onto itself, as in bourgeois and judicial theatre, rather, a pathway. Education needs a territory where education takes place and does not need an idea to which education is directed.

Instead of locking itself up in the place of theatre, repropounding dependences, delegations, divisions and partitions, the theatre has to storm into the social space and act as a protected relationship area.

Central themes of social theatre are three: institutions, territory, action.

By institution, we make out the myriad of needs at stake and the tools to be suggested: therefore the plurality of the actions of social theatre, which also include work of a socio-educational, therapeutic nature, etc., is emphasised. Therefore, we figure out the need for a team effort as well as delimiting the territory of action relapse.

In this sense, the theatrical workshop organises its work depending on its subjects' needs and not before.



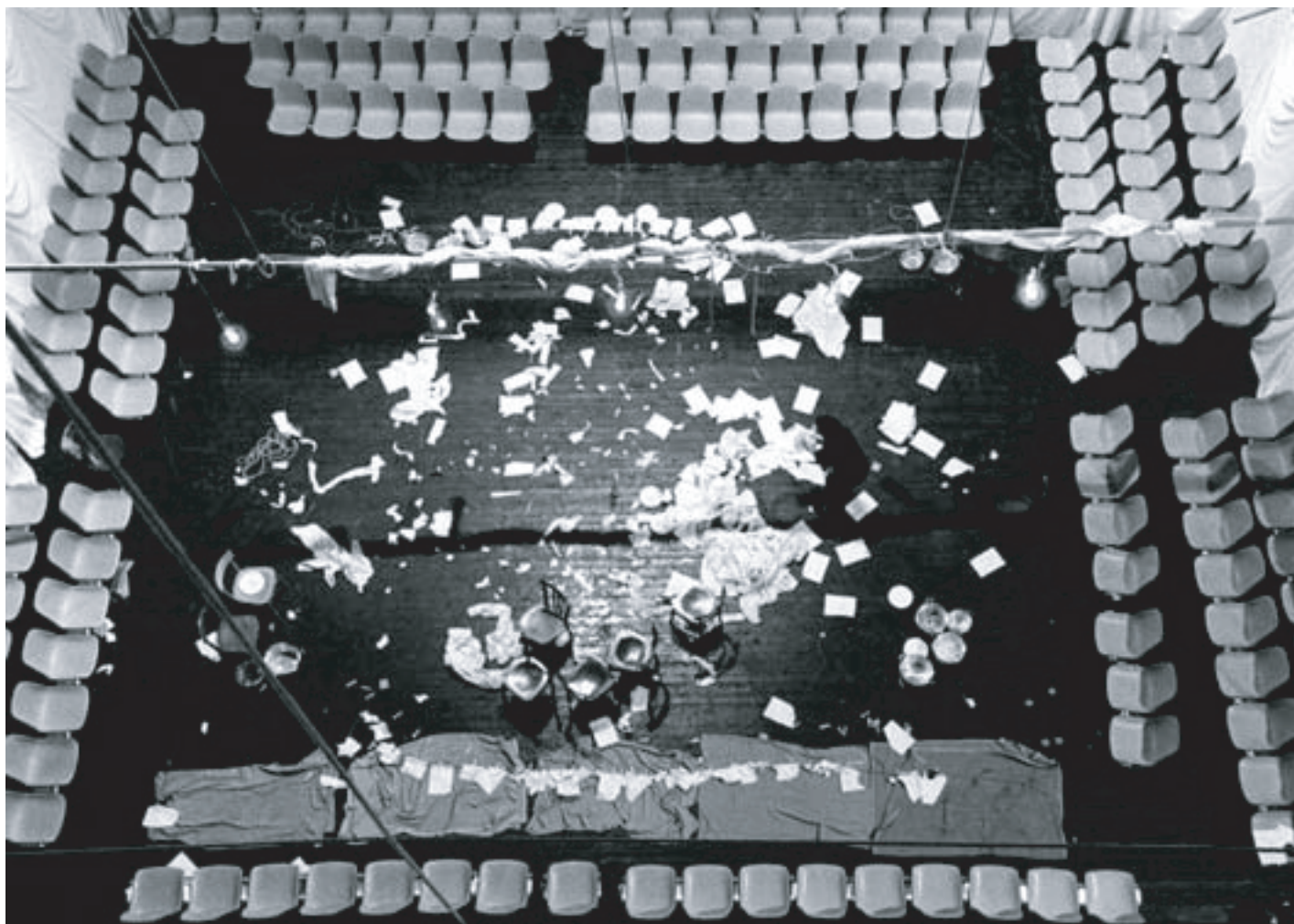


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the relationship with and participation of the audience.

The stage as event: extraordinary, communitary, unrepeatable, inscribed in the realms of rituality. The place, by no means chosen by chance. The event produces meaning in that it is the construction of social actions.

Not a self-celebration but a fracture, a suspension, an overturning where another world is demonstrated as being possible. In such a manifestation, beauty becomes civilisation.

On the one hand, the aesthetical theatre and, on the other, a theatre which has the aim of forming a communitarian relationship system, which in an educational, ritual and playful dimension is led by a team of experts, which goes by the name of social theatre, and which principally wants to respond to the existential needs of Man in the Third Millennium. The aesthetical theatre concludes with production, the revealing work of the art of truth and beauty. The ethical theatre is concerned with putting individual experience at stake, with particular attention paid to the theatrical procedure which comes before the event. The event is the reprocessing of those experiences in the workshop and may be recognised

as the new ritual of the new millennium being able to oppose social and cultural fragmentation, and interpret, invent new forms – times and ways – of deep relationship between people.

Social theatre, owing to its close relationship with the rite and its relationship goals, looks carefully at the path which is at the basis of the event, at the expense of making the show seem less well-defined.

Art is the scenographic continuation of the world. Theatre, therefore, does not imitate the scenography of life, but in a different and new scene, just as life works and is beside it and in the middle of it, between those holes tracked down in language, deliberately omitted words.

The theatre is the profound experience of existence, it goes along with it going up and down in an emotional summary which runs it to ground, or rather it displays the holes, the words lost, the silences, the wasted gestures, the non-finished things.



Photo: FRANCESCO GALLI

Doing without the mimesis and the re-presentation, the theatre does not make shapes evident, the illusory duplication of the real, it does not separate the real world from appearance, the theatre is the world lived to the full. But in place of transparency, the shadows of uncertain outlines; nothing to do with the artist who captures and reveals, if anything we find ourselves in the place of doing things taken in its course of things, where things are always about to happen or disappear. Life which transforms itself, a world that moves from the visible to the invisible in a constant exchange. And the visible finds room within the invisible, the speakable within the unspeakable, the presence disperses in the absence.

The aim is not to evoke something, rather to show things being done. The actor-monster shows and withdraws and tries to place himself in harmony with the event.

We do not make, theatre, we unmake it; it is in the holes of the script and the scene left to breathe, that the energy of life-giving experience passes through.

We experience and look for, try, the vacuum between the words that hold the poetic sense of it all in the balance. The vacuum between gestures and the trail; the clue then, is not the shadow, the sign of a sign, a postponement, a symbol, but it signals a passageway in the living, a transformation, and places us on the threshold.

Theatre must be genuine and not in place of something else; theatre as a lesser art which is not fully-formed, in that the great avoids happening. The undescribed fullness instead waits for the relationship to come about and preserves the richness of the undefined.

Look for an unexpected place with poetic fearlessness. Not to make theatre but to be theatre.

Remember oneself, the ups and downs of your very self. The clear set alongside the dark.

Know your own interior topography well, or rather, the roads that lead from one state to the other, what caused the fall and what was the procedure for getting up again.

The script represents the name of an experience and the experience is tried and tested not in but above the script. Repeat without imitating, reproduce without simulating. Redo everything from the beginning and for the final time. Theatre escapes counting and calculation, the assessment of reason, you cannot meet it in the market-place, it does not postpone existence until later.

Relationship with the other is the holding structure of existence. We can only assess our aptitudes if we enter into a meaningful relationship with others. Multiple relationships fed from humility, lightness, respect and attention.

Theatre is not a backdrop to arguments between acculturated people.

Theatre is like a ball of rice: it needs organic, not intellectual, absorption.

Scenographic action is meant to be a contradictory tension. Scenographic action (de)composed has to rise up, tear itself from the dispersion of the many, push it back, reduce it, it must grasp itself by itself, with a clasp of the hand, a clutching action or clasped by forceps, starting from nothing, from this non unity which initially given as the partes extra partes of a scattered outside. It also has to refer to itself in itself in order to present itself and so doing has to put itself outside shutting out of itself that which it is not and which it must not be: the illustration of a subject. Scenographic action is not the presence "for a subject" but "the presence in the subject" exactly in the (in the subject) precise movement of going outside and giving oneself. "To give oneself", not just like giving oneself to oneself, but to give "oneself" to the outside, and therefore also "to be given", thrown out without first having made sure of the landing area.

Stage, not as a demonstration in public, but, as a trial for a relationship, among actors and with the audience.

Social theatre, not as an adapting process, rather, like one of the practices where developing what could be defined as taking care of oneself.

Theatre therefore without a show.



Photo> FRANCESCO GALLI

Common entertainment space as aperture and system. The group, and not the individual.

Against the fear of still being judged, once again on the stage as in life, a hypothesis of another possible community by way of a construction of one's own identity.

<sup>1</sup> ArteStudio is a cultural association that has worked in cultural and social matters for almost thirty years. It puts on stage shows, holds seminars, conferences and workshops, stage exhibitions and performances, organises periods of work experience. Together with the Regione Lazio, the association inaugurated the "Port Royal" project.

<sup>2</sup> Port Royal is the project of a home dedicated to the cure of the self with the theatre. This project includes workshops, periods of work experience, shows, conferences between philosophy and theatre, with an activity that witnesses the weak citizen at the centre of new creative explorations.