



Finding Assistance, Delivering Outreach

Project Reference number: 2024-1-FR01-KA220-ADU-000255033



| Module 3 |

Role of socially engaged theatre

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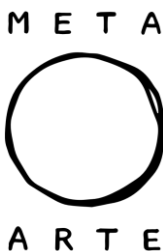
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Description of the module

Socially engaged theatre merges art with social action, involving communities in creative processes to inspire change. Rooted in Greek catharsis and modern activism, it fosters inclusion, dialogue, and empowerment. Through workshops in diverse spaces, it transforms participants into storytellers, promoting cohesion, reflection, and active citizenship.

What will I Learn ?

1. Understand the concept, history, and purpose of socially engaged theatre.
2. Recognise its role in promoting social cohesion, inclusion, and empowerment.
3. Identify key figures, movements, and methods in the field.
4. Explore how theatre can be used for activism, education, and healing.
5. Learn about skills needed to design and facilitate socially engaged theatre workshops.
6. Explore creative methods to engage diverse and marginalised communities.
7. Use theatre as a tool for dialogue, empathy, and social reflection.
8. Reflect on the impact of socially engaged theatre on individuals and communities.



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1. Socially Engaged Theatre-Short History

1.1. Gender

Socially engaged theatre is a term that describes various theatre forms addressing certain social issues. Historically the theatre by its nature has social aspects as a public performance and a reflection of society. But it doesn't automatically mean it's consciously working towards a specific social or political goal. As Centre for Socially Engaged Theatre (C-SET, University of Regina, Canada) describes their mission: *"Socially Engaged Theatre is envisioned as an ethical space of possibility, drawing upon applied theatre methodologies - with the understanding that individual and community health can be sustained by people's capacity to imagine."*¹

It fosters the active participation of citizens and it mixes social issues with artistic creativity. It aims at carrying out theatrical activities through the work of artists and professionals that promote the art, the culture, the empowerment of people, groups and communities, in the perspective of an enduring social transformation and innovation of cultural productions. It is a kind of theatre where artists also work together with non-actors and where common people could become protagonists of the theatre action. Everybody, no matter their age, origin or condition, in fact can contribute to the theatrical efforts with their creativity.

In Socially engaged theatre the emphasis is on the process in order to enforce personal transformation and relationships, dialogue and sense of community; individuals' stories become part of a common experience. Socially engaged theatre is an effective tool to promote social cohesion, inclusion and active participation. That's why it also takes place in different contexts such as streets, prisons, immigration centres, schools, and so on.

¹ www.cset.ca/home



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1.2. Ancient Roots & Early Theories

Theatre as a mean to promote a healing process in the community roots in ancient times. **Aristotle, in his 'Poetics'**, speaks about the cathartic function of a theatre representation; individuals can elaborate their dramatic experiences and anguish by living difficult and dramatic situations again.

As Pontremoli² states:

'The tragic situation presents the hero with a choice: either surrender to the inevitable or ignore it and go against it with a transgressive action against the limit, objectified in law, taboo, and tradition... Transgression entails responsibility... the hero makes a mistake... yet his error does not dialectically impede the fruitfulness of the gesture... The outcome is the tragic sacrificial death of the hero... The hero is a scapegoat, a ritual sacrificial victim... In the protected space of the ritual, the group experiences death painlessly: through a mechanism of identification, the victim is delegated to undertake the group's journey to encounter the divine and helps the community overcome the experience of crisis'.

² A. PONTREMOLI, *Teoria e tecniche del teatro educativo e sociale*, UTET Università, Novara, 2007



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As a form of healing, theatre allows individuals (actors and spectators) to give form to their life experience within a symbolic context where they can build relationships and express emotions which could be transferred in real life. To play a character allows people to experiment new roles which determine

and solidify their identity.

Winnicott says there is a similarity between theatre and a child's game; theatre is a transitional space where desire can be transformed into reality. At the same time, props, masks, costumes are transitional objects which allow individuals to play different roles and eventually choose one which it is suitable for the self³.

1.3. Early 20th Century Approaches

However, the idea of socially engaged theatre has its origins in the last century, when the **avant-garde movements** consciously started to intervene in society. For example, in the 1920s and 1930s political theatre and agit-prop were used to influence social and political changes.

³ Cfr. C. VALMORI BUSSI, *Artiterapie*, 2-3, 2003



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Another example where theatre is used for social purposes and as a healing means is psychodrama, envisaged by **Jacob Levi Moreno** at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Moreno's techniques are based on the group (contrary to Freud who isolates the patient): in his Theatre of Spontaneity he makes people stage real life situations which could be later discussed by the spectators. Moreno believes that any real life facts can be represented; also those unspeakable, therefore people can experience a cathartic and therapeutic setting.

There are two approaches to **psychodrama**: an open and a closed setting. In an open setting, psychodrama takes place in a place known by the group (for example, in a firm or business context), whereas in the closed setting, the context is specifically created and real life is set outside. There are five elements characterizing a psychodrama: the scene, the individual (who represents himself/herself), the director (a therapist who leads and facilitates the work session), some auxiliary selves (who help the director, function as secondary actors or as alter egos of the individual and analyses dynamics from within) and the audience (the public observe the action from outside but they express their opinions because what happens on the scene applies to the whole group).

1.4. Mid to Late 20th Century Experimental Movements

In the 1960s and 1970s social and political issues exploded and theatre was used as a means to convey a political and social message in order to analyze and change society. In the US, **El Teatro Campesino** was founded to give voice to Southern American agricultural laborers whereas the **Bread and Puppet Theatre** became famous for its parades against the Vietnam war. Actors and directors no longer use a traditional theatre building for their protests but they act on the streets and use theatrical means to fight against injustice. In a

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similar way, Julian Beck's and Judith Malina's **Living Theatre** became famous for the performances orientated to tackle social and political issues in order to change society.

In 1959 the Polish director **Jerzy Grotowski** founded theatre-laboratory, a place where actors can explore and experiment in order to realize him/herself, to search for truth as an anthropological need to reach knowledge and beauty. Truth can break stereotypes, external impositions and oppose mass culture; it can reach the deepest essence of individuals⁴. What it is important is encountering the other (a colleague or a spectator); that's why, in the 1970s, Grotowski stops producing performances in order to dedicate himself to para-theatre⁵, a practice which involves non-actors using performance techniques from various traditions to explore the inner self of each individual.

Eugenio Barba, in the same years starts the 'barter' practice⁶, a moment of celebration where professional theatre groups encounter another group of non-professionals in order to exchange songs and dances. With the barter practice Barba and his group Odin Teatret visit prisons, old people homes, youth organizations, psychiatric hospitals, small villages around the world and so on.⁷

With a similar approach, **Giuliano Scabia**, in Trieste is called by the psychiatrist Franco Basaglia to start a workshop with professional artists and psychiatric patients in order to build a giant blue horse (called Marco Cavallo)⁸, which

⁴ J. GROTOWSKJ, *Per un teatro povero*, Bulzoni Editore, Roma, 1970

⁵ Cfr. J. GROTOWSKI, *Dalla compagnia teatrale a L'arte come veicolo*, in T. RICHARDS, *Al lavoro con Grotowski sulle azioni fisiche*, Ubulibri, Milano 1993.

⁶ Cfr. E. BARBA, *Teatro. Solitudine, mestiere, rivolta*, Ubulibri, Milano, 1996

⁷ Cfr. the video '*The book of dances*' produced by Odin Teatret and RAI (the Italian National Broadcast TV) documentaries where Barba and his actors visit Pisa's psychiatric hospital soon after Basaglia's law is enforced in Italy (Basaglia's law changes the way psychiatric patients are treated).

⁸ Cfr. N. PITRELLI, *L'uomo che restituì la parola ai matti. Franco Basaglia, la comunicazione e la fine dei manicomi*, Editori Riuniti, Roma, 2004



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opens up the doors of the psychiatric hospital in Trieste and leads a colorful street parade.

Following these experiences many theatre groups of the 1970s onwards (which Barba defines as Third Theatre⁹ groups) start working in marginalized contexts, either with an educational approach only or with both an educational and an artistic approach. In some cases, the educational approach becomes a therapy of its own.

For example, **Walter Orioli** in Italy envisages a method which combines Jung's psychoanalysis and transactional analysis with the techniques of the research and the third theatre; he calls this method theatre therapy and its aim is looking for a harmonic relationship between mind and body and voice, both with the self and with the others¹⁰. According to Orioli, everybody is unique and the individual can stage what he/she experiences using some actors' techniques such as improvisation¹¹ and explore his/hers a pre-expressive level¹². The theatre therapist leading the work is an actor, a director and a therapist at the same time.

Another technique where theatre is used with a therapeutic approach is **Robert Landy's drama-therapy**¹³. According to Landy, each person has to play different roles in different contexts. Drama-therapy helps the individual not to stiffen in a single role. Using body language, this technique uses theatre to

⁹ The third theatre groups do not identify themselves with prose traditional theatre; as Barba states:

'the third theater... is the set of all those theaters which are, each in itself, constructors of meaning, ... each theater autonomously defines its own personal meaning of the action of making theater... defines the meaning and the legacy by embodying them in precise activities, in a very distinct professional identity' (E. BARBA; *Ibidem*, 1996)

¹⁰ Cfr. <https://www.walterorioli.it/teatroterapia/>

¹¹ In order to stage a set situation, the individual draws on his/her own life experience and memory; it is possible to build a state of mind and thus a way to act physically in space.

See how T. RICHARDS (*Ibidem*) describes Grotowski's work on physical actions.

¹² Eugenio Barba refers to pre-expressive level as the actors scenic presence before they start to convey a specific message or meaning. See E. BARBA, *La canoa di carta. Trattato di Antropologia teatrale*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 1993

¹³ D. TEDESCHI, *Drammaterapia e teatroterapia a confronto*.



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give sense to 'dramatic mechanisms in psychiatric disorders'¹⁴; for example, theatre can help psychotic patients to break with his/her role of excluding others.

Drama-therapy includes five phases: warming-up (where theatre techniques help the patient to choose a role in relationship with space and the other patients), focalisation (where themes to be staged are determined), dramatization and deroleization (that is going back to everyday life). The last phase is completion (where a verbal and symbolic restitution of the work done allows individuals to finish the activity).

In South America, at the beginning of 1970s, **Augusto Boal** founded the Theatre of the Oppressed (inspired by Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*) which is one of the important precursors of socially engaged theatre. Boal involves marginalized communities in the theatrical creation, developing participatory theatre techniques such as the image theatre, the forum theatre and the invisible theatre. In forum theatre, for example, the spectator interacts with the performance in order to modify the story and generate alternative solutions to the political and social issues presented to the audience. Theatre becomes a language to modify reality and society.

A new wave started in the **1990s** when professional actors were on stage together with marginalized non-actors such as people with disabilities, prisoners, and psychiatric patients. Artists confront themselves and work together with people who represent a real life fragment; the spectators are confronted with a complex situation where what is socially marginalized and hidden is shown on the stage. This conveys a strong political message; marginalized people experience a new status and a strong possibility of a new life. They have the chance to tell their story with their body and voice and interact not only with professional actors on stage but also with spectators (who represent society)¹⁵.

¹⁴ A. PONTREMOLI, *Ibidem*

¹⁵ F. FIASCHINI, *Per-formare il sociale. Tomo I: Controcampi. Estetiche e pratiche della performance negli spazi del*



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An important experience is Armando Punzo's Compagnia della Fortezza¹⁶, a theatre company composed of professionals and prisoners who are now paid to be on stage. The company has received numerous prestigious international awards and stages their performance outside the prison of Volterra where it is based. In this case, the prison is transformed into a cultural and developmental space.

1.5. Contemporary Examples (1990s – 21st Century)

In the XXI century non actors are more and more integrated in theatre companies, becoming performers. For example, Good Chance Theatre¹⁷ originated in the refugee camp known as "the Jungle" in Calais, France, in 2015. Two British playwrights built a large theatre dome ("The Dome") where they

sociale, Roma, Bulzoni, 2022

¹⁶ <https://www.compagniadellafortezza.org/new/>;

<https://www.doppiozero.com/armando-punzo-la-mente-e-unesplorazione-di-gioia>

¹⁷ <https://www.goodchance.org.uk/domes>



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facilitated months of artistic workshops and performances for migrants stranded at the border, along with international volunteers. The experience later extended to Paris and London, involving refugees in collective theatre-making. One of the most recognized outcomes was *The Jungle*, a production staged in London by a mixed cast of professional actors and refugees, which portrayed life in the Calais camp. Good Chance Theatre exemplifies transnational community theatre, drawing Europe-wide attention to the power of theatre in giving voice to migrants and fostering authentic encounters across cultures. Their work in refugee camps offered moments of relief, self-expression, and solidarity—creating, literally, a “good chance” for shared humanity through art.

Theater of Witness is an innovative form of testimonial theater developed by founder and artistic director¹⁸Teya Sepinuck in 1986 in which the true stories of people whose voices haven’t been heard in society are shaped into original theater and films performed by the people themselves. The performers share their own true stories of trauma, marginalization, resilience and transcendence. The purpose of this work is to open the hearts of audiences to humanize ‘the other’ and bring people together across divides of difference. Theater of Witness is authentic, raw story-telling that cultivates compassion and understanding while celebrating the resilience of the human spirit and fostering empathy and understanding.

Theater of Witness invites audiences to put a face and heart to complex societal issues, cultivates empathy, and celebrates the power of the human spirit to grow and transform.

The Antigone Project¹⁹, promoted by Fondazione Aida, is an example of social theatre applied to the prevention of gender-based violence. Created to raise awareness and prevent such violence, the project works in schools with

¹⁸ <https://theaterofwitness.org/about/about-tow/>

¹⁹ <https://www.fondazioneaida.it/progetto/progetto-antigone/#:~:text=Il%20Progetto%20Antigone%20nasce%20per,attraverso%20laboratori%20scolastici%20di%20teatro>



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theatre workshops targeted at teenagers. Guided by theatre professionals, participants enact scenes depicting various relationship dynamics (friendship, love, jealousy, conflict) and, through forum theatre and role-playing, learn to identify psychological and physical abuse, deconstruct gender stereotypes, and develop empathy. This experiential approach emotionally engages young people and proves more impactful than traditional lectures.

2. The Socially Engaged Theatre Workshops

2.1. Characteristics of the socially engaged theatre workshop



Theatre workshops are usually the core of the socially engaged theatre practice.



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There are many different approaches to those workshops, nevertheless there are some common characteristics²⁰ :

1. Participants act rather than watch theatre plays; people take part in the theatrical actions as actors and authors.
2. It is a group work where participants explore, experiment and develop skills both related to performing arts (theatre, dance, singing and music) and to interpersonal and social processes.
3. The dramaturgy of the work session is led by a leader but the contents and the topics of the workshop are chosen by the group. The leader proposes physical and vocal training exercises, role-playing exercises, improvisation techniques, rhythmic and space explorations, creation of creative materials and so on, according to the different practices of performing arts.
4. The leader chooses these practices in order to stimulate the active and creative participation of the group and of the single individual; the choices the leader makes are, nevertheless, subject to changes according to the reaction of people involved both on a level as performers and a social level.
5. The workshop activities can include performing arts, visual arts and moments of celebration and games.
6. Feedback on the activities proposed by the leader is essential; there are sharing moments where emotions and the well-being of the participants are made explicit.
7. There is a group "ritual" at the beginning and at the end of the session.
8. Socially engaged theatre workshops could also take place outside formal theatrical spaces such as theatre venues and auditoriums; the context can be a classroom or the gym of the school, a corridor in a prison, a conference hall in a firm or a room in a rehabilitation community.

²⁰ G. INNOCENTI MALINI, Caratteristiche e ricorrenze metodologiche nelle esperienze di teatro sociale, in Teatro sociale in Italia: linee di sviluppo, ricorrenze metodologiche e istanze valutative, *Rapporti ISTISAN 24/7*



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9. Generally, there is a final result of the workshop open to external people; it can range from performances to presentation of exercises, from celebration moments to installation of artistic products made during the workshops.
10. The text is chosen according to the needs and possibilities of the participants; generally, texts are created by the group itself. When a text by an external author is chosen, usually this functions as a pre-text, a starting point.

2.2. Methods of the socially engaged theatre workshops

When the socially engaged theatre workshops take place, actions are performed with, for and in the actual social context of realization.

The first step is to map information, materials and impressions by meeting people who live in a certain context. Mapping can range from some witnesses' formal and informal interviews to online research, from meetings to an active presence in the context.

Next, the workshop leader meets those who want to participate in the workshop (teachers, educators, psychologists, volunteers, institutions, inhabitants and so on). The workshop is defined together with them because the workshop involves not only the group chosen for the action, but the entire community. Changes and the behavior of individuals are thus related to real life situations.

This method enhances the social dimension of the human being, underlining the belonging of the group and its members to a reference community, whether chosen or real.

The playful component of the socially engaged theatre methodology is an essential element in the learning process and in the promotion of well-being. "Playing by doing" implies a mental attitude free from result-oriented purposes and distant from the conventions of traditional acting. Through



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pleasure and the creation of a space free from stereotypes and prejudices, commitment and active participation are promoted. The "as if" element, characteristic of theatre, allows participants to review their past, explore scenarios different from those of everyday life and discover innovative solutions. The activity carried out is not subject to evaluations, since there are no rigid rules, but only the freedom to explore according to one's own inclinations and collective interests. Socially engaged theatre, therefore, is not just an art form, but a true practice of active and participatory citizenship, capable of generating profound changes in society.

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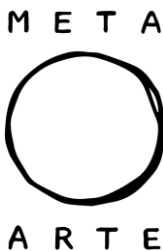
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