

ROBERTO MAZZINI INTERVIEW FOR MIGREAT ARTICLE POST TRAINING

After the conclusion of the event foreseen by the MIGREAT project, in which Giolli Cooperative facilitated an online training on the construction of a Forum Theatre script on the theme: **DOMINANT NARRATIVE OF MIGRANTS AND MIGRATIONS AND POSSIBLE COUNTER-NARRATIVES AND ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVES.**

We have with us an expert facilitator who, over the years, worked with many groups on various topics of social interest: Roberto Mazzini.

First of all, we ask him what it meant to work online with a group that never had the opportunity to meet before?

"It was not the first time for me, fortunately. For example, I worked online with a group from Morocco that I never met live and the same happened in other experiences I had with groups of teachers.

The experience of theatre for me, and not only for me, is the encounter between human beings face to face, that you can see and touch, not mediated by any system. Otherwise, it is another kind of experience, cinema for example. The fact of being mediated by the screen and other online systems, also bring technical issues such as delays, connection problems, static posture, and framing within a fixed frame, somewhat distorts the very essence of theatre.

However, it can have interesting peculiarities, you can also make interesting discoveries."

What were the differences with respect to the usual situation in which you have always worked, what were the tricks and, possibly, the surprises, the positive or negative discoveries with respect to the medium?

From his 30 years of experience Roberto says:

"Even Giolli Cooperative was faced with an initial dilemma that almost led us to decide to give up everything and postpone it until when it would be possible to do it live. Eventually, on 3 October 2020, we presented our first online Forum Theatre and convinced ourselves that something was possible. It must be said that it was done with a group of experienced actors with whom we often work, and this certainly made it possible to do the rehearsals, also online and at a distance, in an effective and fertile way. So I would say that there is definitely a difference between a group that is known, trusted and trained in acting and theatrical performance, and a new and unknown group whose level of experience is not clear.

A fundamental element that changes the way actors act is that with the camera you see yourself immediately, something that does not happen in live performances, the actor perceives himself according to the reactions of the audience, he is mirrored in them. This is an element of immediate and continuous feedback with which we can play and which we can take into account to adjust and self-correct. I found the most critical points in the quality of the voice and the tones, the live voice and the electronic voice... they are incomparable!"

How was the training set up in the time available, i.e. three days of 6 hours each? The group of participants had to go through the whole process of creating a scene suitable for a Forum Theatre. Did the phases and the links between one phase and another really lead to the creation of a meaningful product with respect to expectations?

"Every TO process is introduced by a phase dedicated to the formation of a group atmosphere, in which play, touching and seeing each other is central. In short, feeling that the other is there and responds. In this case, these dimensions were not present, so the creation of the group was a bit penalized and perhaps the subsequent path risked being less inclusive. The degree of involvement can be different and this depends on various factors: the type of device, the environment in which each one is, the quality of the connection... all this has an effect with respect to feeling more or less part of something..."

Generally speaking, online it is difficult to really put into practice the concept of "gamesercises"

coined by Boal, in which the two dimensions are united: the individual dimension typical of exercise and the collective dimension typical of the game. Online, for example, the whole dimension of physical contact is lost. There are exercises that have been even more successful than live, because the screen can protect you from embarrassment, you remain at home, we are all less directly involved.

As far as the setting of the training is concerned, we included between the initial phase of the **group creation/de-mechanisation** and the subsequent **search for the nodes** (problems), two phases that seemed to us very important for MIGREAT specific focus, that is the search for dominant narratives, counter-narratives and alternative narratives. The exploration of the dominant narrative was really interesting and inspiring, in the sense that for example also working on other oppressions, let's take bullying or gender violence, we could start by asking ourselves "what is said about...? And what is not said or what could be said?" This phase is very useful for the following ones and allows us to focus on the micro-macro and social dimensions of these problems and not reduce them to psychological issues or interpersonal misunderstandings. Nonviolence distinguishes between direct, structural and cultural violence, the dominant narrative represents precisely cultural violence and is the one that justifies the other two.

Then we moved on to identifying **nodes** and critical situations that have to do with immigration, trying to derive them from the previous phases.

The subsequent process was more or less the classic one, the one we normally use for the construction of a Forum Theatre on a given theme: the aggregation of the nodes into **thematic nuclei** that give life to **theatrical embryos**, the **cleaning of the theatrical embryo** and the **staging of the Forum Theatre**. We have also experimented with some rehearsal techniques to improve the theatricality of the scene, as well as the actual Joking (facilitation) so that the experience possibly leads to some transformative solutions."

As far as we know of the project, the training proposed by Giolli had a double purpose: to prepare the participants to carry out autonomously a similar course in their own territories (Italy, France, Hungary, England), but also to ask the participants to get involved in the first person in the experimentation of the activities... to do "**as if...**", an essential practice so dear to the theatre people. Also in relation to the many other experiences Giolli has in this field, how did it go?

"I am afraid that this aspect did not work very well. In the planning of the days we had foreseen time slots that we called META, devoted to group reflection. Ask yourself, for example: *do I understand? Have I not understood? Is what is proposed suitable for the path I am planning to follow? How can I make adjustments? What consequences could I have?*

But in reality these opportunities have been used very little. One factor may be fatigue, because in the evaluation phase the participants told us clearly that to be online six hours a day is heavy and tiring. It could also be that each person had a creative idea in mind and concentrated on that, postponing adaptation with their working group until later. The assimilation of information may have taken place at an experiential level and then, depending on the role the participants will have to play in their local production work, things learned will come out. Or, again, it could be that not all participants had the objective of proposing the workshop to someone else, and therefore were not interested in doing a META reflection."

For those who will really have to replicate the experience of the workshop and also facilitate the moment of public performance of the Forum Theatre, it is fundamental to focus also on the figure of the Joker. The Joker is an essential figure for the Forum Theatre session at the moment of public performance. She or he facilitates, observes, accompanies with maieutics the emergence and clarification of important and transformative themes, and encourages people to try and find solutions coherent with the scene and with the characters. Given the many Forums he has conducted, we asked Roberto Mazzini, what tools has he gradually filled his Joker toolbox with?

"I am increasingly convinced that the most important aspect is the **maieutic attitude**. It is a posture to hold that is worth more than any other specific skill or competence. Don't judge, ask questions,

be curious, investigate and give space to opinions that are different and contrary to your own. This is not very easy to teach, it is a matter of changing one's attitude from judging to **suspending judgement**, if one is not able to do this there could be problems in conducting and in the relationship with the audience. If you can do this, the rest can be learned by doing, experimenting and making mistakes. There are general indications to facilitate the process of activating the audience towards possible interventions, for example, at the end of the first vision of the model, ask the audience the classic questions: is it real? What is the problem? Can something be done? Just as at the end, after the audience has intervened, ask: What happened? Did something change? Did you get what you wanted?

In this specific Forum Theatre, on this specific issue, a good advice could be to conduct it in two people, the first one more in close contact with the audience and always live on the interaction, while the second one more dedicated to researching what is of interest for the focus of our MIGREAT project: that is to identify the three types of narratives (Dominant, Counter, Alternative) as they are expressed and developed in the scene. In general, however, having someone on staff to keep track (writing them down so that they are visible to everyone, like a route map) of the interventions is very important, to really evolve consciousness and build a collective research path."

In the past year, with almost 100% of the activities being transferred online, what particular tool or support has had to be added to the toolbox?

"For online theatrical performance, technology has given us a few possibilities, some of which we at Giolli have experimented with and some others we have seen from colleagues working with TO around the world.

-Cameras on for the actors on stage only.

-If possible, use the option SHOW ONLY PARTICIPANTS WITH VIDEO ON.

-Turn off the microphone of the actors on stage with the camera on and have sounds and music coming from a staff member with camera off and audio on.

-Construct the scene together with the audience, showing for example first each actor in a static and mute image, then in relation to each other, then with the addition of a movement or a sentence ... gradually asking the audience to imagine together what the scene is, in what context it is and who the protagonists are.

A critical issue, which is more difficult to resolve, concerns the Joker and his ability to see the audience. By not seeing them, he misses all the information from the immediate feedback that normally guide his steps. Faced with a screen that gives no signals, with an environment that is generally colder because the initial activation and warm-up games were only played virtually, even the Joker's gaze is a glimpse into the void, and he will necessarily have to load and reinforce other aspects (safety, frequent questions and interruptions, a few stories to tell...)"

Speaking of stories to tell, do you have any anecdotes to share that might say something about Forum Theatre from a narrative rather than directly didactic point of view?

"The one that immediately comes to mind is very indicative of the power of Forum Theatre as a detector of mind-body unity.

We were in Turin, about twenty years ago. The theme was AIDS and the scene was very simple: disco, an HIV-positive SHE is approached by an HIM, first they talk, then they drink together, dance... in short, he asks her to leave the club and invites her to follow him home to finish the evening together. The scene is interrupted as she is about to go with him.

The audience was unanimously against this situation in which there was no mention of protection for sex, in which she had not warned about her health situation, a great debate was created. One girl in particular from the audience intervened with great decision, saying: *it's simple, just tell him! I'm HIV positive, then he will decide what to do...clearly there is a risk of losing him, but there are things that are too important not to be told.* So she was called upon to replace the protagonist by bringing this solution which was very clear to her. The scene started again and repeated itself in all its parts: the two of them are having fun, they get to know each other, they dance and drink together,

they leave the club... and when he, looking her in the eyes, invites her to his house, she says: *yes, all right!* and goes with him.

The audience burst out wondering why, if the solution was to expose herself and say everything, she had omitted to say that very important thing. The girl who had done the substitution answered sincerely saying that, from sitting and watching the scene to being inside the scene itself, the world had changed completely. Involved body and soul in what was happening in the disco with the boy who was courting her, she could only say: *yes, that's fine!*

This is a good example of how Forum Theatre has the quality of highlighting our ability to achieve what we think or want, of how the emergence of forces of which we are not always aware can prevent us from achieving what we think is right.

Another significant story about the effectiveness of Forum Theatre in overcoming useless divisions and conflicts between oppressed groups is more recent and concerns a work carried out in Modena. In an apartment building with 280 families, Giolli intervened because of the difficulties related to drugs, prostitution, police arriving at all hours of the day and night, searches... in short, a difficult and infamous condominium with very strong conflicts at all levels, multicultural and popular. After studying the context with interviews and questionnaires, the performance was built on all the relevant information from the inhabitants and on the strongest themes and was staged in the apartment building. All the inhabitants were invited and about 50 people came to see the performance, more or less half of them Italian women of medium-high age and the other half younger foreigners, all male. The audience was also physically split in two, with Italian women on one side and foreigners on the other. After viewing the model, the two sides confirmed that it was indeed a snapshot of reality and they did not hesitate to blame each other for the various problems: *of course, it's just like that because THEY... while WE...* The debate was intense and, perhaps for the first time, was mediated by our presence, so it was possible to go a little beyond accusation and offence. In fact, we overcame the barriers and from that collective moment, various collaborative proposals were born: for example, using someone's skills to maintain the building in exchange for an economic reward, i.e. a saving for all; resulting in a reduction in rent for those who would do the work and in the building being in better conditions. Or the involvement of foreign women together with Italian women to exchange knowledge in the kitchen, to lower mistrust, bring cultures closer together and... learn new recipes. The problems of that condominium have not been solved, it is still a difficult area, but the objective of that day, that is to put two oppressed groups on the same level and to open the vision to common points as strengths, has been achieved. A change of dynamics, new alliances and the possibility to see things differently than before."

Regarding the specific theme on which the work of the three days focused, was there any particularly problematic or difficult element to focus on?

"I come back again to the difference between COUNTER-NARRATIVES and ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVES, I think this point is not easy to assimilate because the difference is not clear and the definitions are not clear. During the three days of training we managed to offer some activities to clarify this difference, but it is a point of attention that I would like to keep going. I don't want to say that alternative narratives are better, but perhaps they have more lasting effects in the medium to long term than point-to-point rebuttal. Not least because counter narratives are often based on rational arguments, which have to do with truth, and are defensive, whereas the alternative narrative, which almost forgets the dominant narrative, seems to me to have more to do with creativity, imagination, possibility ... with nourishment and fertility. With this, however, we should not forget the question of power, which probably gives a different weight and resonance to the narrative sphere in which it is placed.

Another difficulty encountered, despite the fact that the working group had both theatrical experience and knowledge of the theme, is that of clarifying WHAT IS THE QUESTION, WHAT IS THE PROBLEM. We could reflect a lot on the difficulty we have in clarifying the core of the question, it could have something to do with our time, with the culture to which we belong, or even with the concern for the aesthetic and artistic performance which risks distancing from the central

message we want to communicate".

The individual partners of MIGREAT project have the task of working with a mixed group of migrants and activists, thus a community strongly involved in the issue of DOMINANT NARRATIVE ON MIGRANTS AND MIGRATIONS, as well as strongly motivated to promote, propose and (who knows) produce a COUNTER-NARRATIVE or an ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVE on the topic. For the participants, the training has been a sort of "laboratory simulation"? Or perhaps they too had a similar composition to that which they will find in the near future in their groups in their own countries?

"In fact, the community that worked together for the three-day training is a mixed community, made up of migrants and natives. We don't want to identify the migrant person with a single image that represents them. It was a good opportunity to broaden everybody points of view."

Giolli Cooperative has also been involved in training for years, so it has often found itself in this "double" dimension, are there experiences born during training that have turned into real public actions? Campaigns? Activations of communities and territories on a specific theme or in reaction to a specific event in "our history"?

"The experience mentioned above of the condominium in the city of Modena was a training for students of the University of Modena and Reggio. A small association of condominium women approached the University which then approached Giolli, we chose to build the intervention with the involvement of the students. We hope that something significant will come out of the experiences of the MIGREAT project!"