



# Conference Proceedings

**CIVAE 2022**

**4th Interdisciplinary and Virtual  
Conference on Arts in Education**

May 11-12, 2022

Edited by

**MUSICOGUIA**

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**Published by** MusicoGuia Magazine

musicoguia@gmail.com

[www.musicoguia.com](http://www.musicoguia.com)

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Cover design by MusicoGuia

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**ISBN** 978-84-124511-5-3

**e-ISSN** 2445-3641

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**Suggested citation:**

MusicoGuia (Ed.). (2022). *Conference Proceedings CIVAE 2022*. Madrid, España: MusicoGuia.

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## Performing arts in education: an embodied experience of caring for fragility through relationships

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### Abstract

Performing arts represent a valid pedagogical and transformative experience for the person inhabiting the current time of fragility. Bodies, isolated from the pandemic, are brought back to the centre of educational institutions and social contexts of marginality. The emotional-bodily and affective-relational dimensions return as protagonists of the training processes. Through the mechanisms of *embodied simulation* (Gallese & Guerra, 2015) and *liberated simulation* (Gallese, 2010), which bring us to the knowledge of the neurophysiological processes of movement activation and emotions' expression, performing arts contribute significantly to the development of the relationship of the subjects involved in the performing practices, improving the ability to recognise the other as different from oneself. According to the perspective of *intersubjectivity* and *intercorporeality* (Ammaniti & Gallese, 2014), the relationship as *solicitude* (Ricoeur, 1997) leads to structure the integral human and global growth and heals fragilities, in the frame of the contact leading to express and manifest, with and through the body, experiences and deep emotions transformed into art and beauty for the observer.

**Keywords:** Performing arts, embodied simulation, Applied theatre, intersubjectivity, fragilities.

### Artes escénicas en la educación: una experiencia encarnada de cuidado de la fragilidad a través de las relaciones

#### Resumen

Las artes escénicas representan una experiencia pedagógica y transformadora válida para la persona que habita el tiempo actual de fragilidad. Los cuerpos, aislados de la pandemia, son devueltos al centro de instituciones educativas y contextos sociales de marginalidad. Las dimensiones emocional-corporal y afectivo-relacional vuelven como protagonistas de los procesos de formación. A través de los mecanismos de simulación encarnada (Gallese & Guerra, 2015) y simulación liberada (Gallese, 2010), que nos acercan al conocimiento de los procesos neurofisiológicos de activación del movimiento y expresión de las emociones, las artes escénicas contribuyen significativamente al desarrollo de la relación de los sujetos implicados en las prácticas escénicas, mejorando la capacidad de reconocer al otro como diferente de uno mismo. Según la perspectiva de la intersubjetividad y la intercorporeidad (Ammaniti & Gallese, 2014), la relación como solicitud (Ricoeur, 1997) conduce a estructurar el crecimiento integral humano y global y sana las fragilidades, en el marco del contacto que lleva a expresar y manifestar, con y a través del cuerpo, experiencias y emociones profundas transformadas en arte y belleza para el observador.

**Palabras clave:** Artes escénicas, simulación encarnada, Teatro aplicado, intersubjetividad, fragilidades.

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## Introduction

Marginalized at scholastic, educational and institutional level, the body is nowadays a *present but absent* body. During the pandemic, “schools, theatres, stadiums, squares, streets etcetera are useless, inert pieces, fragments of our cities without bodies (Borgogni & Zappettini, 2022). The theatrical work in the pedagogical field revolves around the use of the body in its entirety and having other bodies that resonate feelings, thoughts, and emotions, as shown by neuroscientific evidence (Zappettini & Borgogni, 2021). Theatre, in the multiple forms of *Applied Theatre*, or as a didactic tool that, through the performing arts, leads to the development of meaningful learning (Zappettini, 2010; 2018), can offer people the opportunity to connect to the other than themselves, through deeply transformative experiences that pass-through contact, gesture, movement involving the senses and emotions. The learning that arises and develops through human relationships, in the encounter of bodies in the here and now of sensory experiences, qualifies the human experience. A sense of common humanity arises, as in the path that led to the sixth edition of the festival *Quartieri di Vita*, in December 2021 (Zappettini, Borgogni, Carlomagno, In press), offering people from the outskirts of Naples a formative and transformative experience. Theatrical practices can also be a tool for the formation of the person through relationships with bodies and in space, for a re-education of contact in the delicate time of return to social life and reconstruction of ties weakened by pandemic isolation. University’s subjects can follow a similar path. That was the case of the subject. *Disegno, Arte e Musica* (Zappettini & Cardaci, 2020), held in the autumn of 2021. Through the expressive arts the students enrolled in the Faculty of Primary Education at the University of Bergamo were able to express themselves through body and movement; the expressive arts have become a privileged channel for meeting the other and allow the opening of a reflection on the aesthetic dimension of educational action.

## Fragile bodies in the face of the other

The intersubjectivity perspective developed in the psychodynamic and neurobiological fields is based on the awareness that “the emotion of the other is first of all constructed and directly understood through the reuse of the same neural circuits on which our first-person experience of that given emotion is based” (Ammaniti & Gallese, 2014; 30); it is *intercorporeality* that constitutes a form of primary knowledge that humans derive from their relationship with the other through sharing the same situated nature and intentional purposes (Ammaniti & Gallese, 2014). Such evidence, built on the phenomenological reflection developed in the last century by Husserl (1913, 1931) and Merleau-Ponty (1945), and the writings of Buber (1993) on the fundamentally relational character of man, finds nowadays confirmation in the latest Damasio (2022), revealing the conscious component of the emotional and affective states that bind us to others.

Today we observe *fragile bodies*, which struggle to open up and express themselves, which bear on their skin the signs of a critical time, which has marked the affective-relational dimension and the communicative-expressive one. The directors involved in the research project<sup>1</sup> aimed at monitoring theatrical processes in the pre-pandemic period report the observation of bodies that are stumped, castrated, frightened, restrained, tending to close in, impatient, suspended, rigid bodies, struggling to unveil their faces, which are veiled behind masks. Bodies that seek contact, a relationship, eager to open and overcome barriers. The theatre, although limited in the possibilities it could offer, was able to provide emotions, emotion, live encounters, in presence, offering the magic of being there, together, in the same space, at the same time. The body that hits the stage of the social theatre or that inhabits the

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<sup>1</sup> Please refer to the PhD work entitled “Fragile bodies, processes of creativity and pedagogical reflection in the performing arts”, which is currently being developed by the autor and supervised by Antonio Borgogni.

lessons of Drawing, Art and Music in the classrooms of the University of Bergamo is a body that makes itself *absolutely visible*<sup>2</sup>, naked, called upon to *act exposed* (Zappettini & Borgogni, 2021), and whose showing implies an openness, sincerity in letting itself be seen in its own fragility. The students initially express themselves with shyness and fear of making mistakes, they struggle to use their bodies and voices, they report the difficulty of crossing the threshold of the classroom because of work that takes them out of their comfort zones. Through play, music and creative expression, little by little the bodies are freed, opened up and put into play, giving poetry. The emotion that comes from being watched is a movement of energy that stirs and gives a sense of strength and vitality. The person in the scenic space reveals himself, shows his true face (Levinas, 1979) and the other manifests himself as “a body different from mine that moves in space, a face that turns to my presence” (Rivoltella, 2021; 64). The theatre is configured as a place in which each person’s desire to ‘be discovered, unveiled, naked; sincere in body and blood, in all human nature, with all that you can call as you please: spirit, soul, psyche, memory and the like’ takes on citizenship. But always in a tangible way, therefore I say: in the body, because it is tangible. The meeting, the going to meet, the laying down of the armour, not being afraid of one another, in nothing. [...] Such a place is necessary. If the theatre did not exist, another pretext would be found” (Grotowski, 2016; 33-34). The body on stage is not absent, ignored, but openness can be an opportunity to shorten the distance with the other, experiencing an intimacy that does not hurt. *The body does not lie*, it often reveals distortions or defences that can be straightened out or dropped; through the theatre workshop the person can regain repressed or atrophied communicative and expressive potential. Bernardi, a social theatre’s scholar, states: “The environment that presents the best opportunities for the development or reconstruction of the psychophysical relationship with oneself and with others is the theatre workshop” (Bernardi, 2004; 62). Neuroscience explains: “When we watch someone express a given emotion with their face and this perception leads us to understand the emotional meaning of that expression, we do not achieve this understanding through inference by analogy. The emotion of the other is constituted and understood by the observer thanks to a mechanism of embodied simulation that produces in the observer a bodily state shared with the actor of that expression” (Gallese, 2007; 24). Experiencing the core of an emotion has pedagogical and transformative potential because it increases the sense of vitality, develops self-esteem and a sense of efficacy, helps to release negative energies, and encourages relationships with others. Through resonance and sharing with the Other, the experience regenerates and new meanings sprout. As Damasio argues, it is precisely the emotions and feelings arising in this conscious resonance, the central aspects of biological regulation, the communication bridges between cortical and sub-cortical structures, between mind and body (Damasio, 2012).



**Figure 1. Course of Disegno, Arte e Musica, Zappettini, 2021**

<sup>2</sup> “Absolutely visible body, in a way: I know what it means to be watched by someone from head to toe, I know what it means to be spied on from behind, watched from behind, surprised when I expect it, I know what it means to be naked” (Foucault, 2006).

### Art as a cure

In today's narcissistic society of the *desert of the Equal* (Han, 2017; 17), with the spread of *mainstream* communication, reinforced by pandemic confinement, social media increasingly become theatres of individuality, all foreignness and otherness is eliminated, the proximity of the Other gives way to the absence of distance of the Equal, everything is equally close and equally distant. In this context of expulsion of the Other who is different from oneself, theatre is inserted, as "expression, formation and interaction of persons, groups and communities" (Bernardi, 2004; 57). Social theatre, as well as performance art in educational and training contexts, differ from other branches of drama, because their primary purpose is not the aesthetic product, the entertainment market or theatrical research, but the process of growth and training of the people who participate in it. "The primary purpose of theatre is the production of relationships rather than the production of meanings" (Bernardi, 2004; 66). The relationship is the key to educational theatre, and if we go back to the theatrical research of the main pedagogical directors of the 20th century (Cruciani, 1995) we can precisely find the relationship among the main elements of reform that also pushed theatres to move away from the institutions traditionally attributed to representation (Cruciani, 2003); as Grotowski (1968; 67) states "The essence of theatre is an encounter". As neuroscience and inter-subjectivity demonstrate, and as is evident in the pedagogical field, in the themes of the person, of the face (Levinas, 1979) and of otherness (Buber, 1954), an approach to the person that enhances man's proprium is central, which is "openness to the other, being-with; an openness that is not simply an exchange of communication, but an experience of affective participation, reciprocity of presence" (Rivoltella, 2021; 62). The other we meet in the theatre "is the other in ourselves, that part of us that lives in exile in the deepest depths of our being. And it is the other human being, separated and distant from us by geography, culture or gender" (Barba, 2002; 4). In the postmodern society of indifference there is a tendency of the person to blindness, the contemporary *narcissist* tends to bend the other until the ego recognises itself, perceiving the world only in the nuances of itself, with the consequence that the other disappears, "the boundary between the Self and the Other vanishes, the Self merges and becomes diffuse. The self drowns in the Self" (Han, 2017; 34). Theatre fits in as a tool to bring the person to confront the Other, it brings back to the forefront a gaze that offers confirmation and recognition, and that raises feelings of self-worth, that reminds us how much we need the other, the other who sees, who loves, praises, recognises and esteems. The theatre stands as "invention and action of sociality and community, destroyed and threatened today by individualism and the homogenisation processes of global culture, and as training and research of psychophysical well-being of individuals through the establishment of companies. Groups producing performative, expressive and relational practices" (Bernardi, 2004; 58). Cognitive neuroscience shows us, with numerous evidence, the intrinsically relational nature of human beings, and it also transpires at the subpersonal neural level (Ammaniti & Gallese, 2014). Martin Buber (1954) identifies the fundamentally relational character of human beings, which manifests itself as either a third-person I-It relationship or a second-person I-You relationship. What distinguishes them is not the object but the style of relation, the epistemic state assumed by the Ego. These considerations suggest that there are various possibilities for approaching the other, one can relate to people as if they were inanimate objects, using the other in a consumerist way, or flattening the uniqueness of the other to one's own egocentric and solipsistic vision. From our point of view, the theatrical experience can transform the attitude and style with which one relates to the other from oneself, bringing him in front, It becomes You. Paul Ricoeur calls it *solicitude*, such as action or movement towards the other, based on the instance of reciprocity, "which constitutes the other as my simile and myself as the simile of the other" (Ricoeur, 1997; 41). Through the theatre, protected situations are created in which the other can stand in front of them, with all their history; each person is accompanied to feel in the deepest possible way, in order to move towards a care, an education, an



accompaniment of fragility. Theatre has a transformative power; it is the I-You relationship that is the key to change. In theatre, every life story is connected, resonates, with other stories, of people, groups, communities, institutions. Ricoeur (1997; 69) states: “the story of my life is a segment of the story of other human lives, we recognise ourselves through the fictitious stories of historical characters, characters from legends or from the novel”. Telling and representing one’s own story and those of others, faithful to the document or free in imagination, serves to understand, build, and realise one’s own identity and that of the group or community.



Figure 2. Quartieri di Vita, Zappettini, 2021

## Conclusions

Art that heals fragility becomes beauty in the eyes of those who witness that transformation. It becomes a gift because it brings about change in critical contexts, as Spanish director Patricia Ruz said at Quartieri di Vita, emphasising the importance of art as a cure: “It processes and changes it all. It’s a gift for everyone”<sup>3</sup>. On stage, people begin to feel strong even in their vulnerability, strong in their own feelings, instead of weak and defenceless, angry and alone, they feel full of resources and really together with others. The emotional and relational repertoire grows, with the ability to give and receive love, to express oneself. There is care because the expressive impulse of emotion, play, fun is manifested. In theatre the playful component is intrinsic, one feels involved first-hand in a movement of research and discovery, where error becomes a creative opportunity, not knowing where one will arrive. A play is the *portrait* of a pain that transcends into beauty. When a person feels seen, looked at, when the observer empathises and is moved in the face of feelings that in the past have met with indifference or incomprehension; all that theatre can, in the resonance of those who act and those who observe, constitute the most powerful way of increasing self-awareness. “These are human frailties that pass us by in everyday life with their trails of impalpable shadows and elusive fluorescence, and that are not easy to recognise. They are fragilities that cry out in the silence of the soul and are only heard when in us there are traces of the sensitivity and attention that belongs to the order of grace” (Borgna, 2014; 71-72). The theatre then widens the perspective, gives a gift of vastness and depth to the gaze we have on the Other, it offers us a new possibility, to welcome the Other for the fragility of which he is the bearer.

<sup>3</sup> Taken from the documentary Quartieri di Vita 2021 made by Nadia Baldi and screened during the final meeting of the festival, published on the Youtube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EQOuwFAaEOc>

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