

**QUARTIERI DI VITA 2021:  
FRAGILITIES AND PERFORMING ARTS IN NEUROSCIENCE AND HUMANITIES**

**QUARTIERI DI VITA 2021:  
FRAGILITÀ E ARTI PERFORMATIVE NELLE NEUROSCIENZE E NELLE SCIENZE  
UMANE**

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**Abstract**

Social theatre offers the opportunity to transform fragility into artistic performance by means of interpersonal connections and direct participation in playful and corporeal practises.

*Quartieri di vita*, the International Training and Social Theatre Festival organised by the *Fondazione Campania dei Festival* in December 2021, involved seven socially vulnerable groups operating in the Campania Region. The dialogue between human sciences, neurosciences, and theatrical cultures brings out how, through *embodying* arts, fragilities resulting from wounds can be transformed into gifts for others. Through scenic interactions, traumatic and painful experiences transform into conflicted and intense life stories that provide possibilities to cultivate positive emotions, care, and support. According to research on embodied simulation, it is the sharing of the same bodily condition between observer and observed that enables a direct form of understanding that we can label 'empathic'. Through reflection, fragility, art, and beauty intertwine and multiply in the eyes of others, embracing an inclusive vision.

Il teatro sociale offre la possibilità di trasformare le fragilità in performance artistiche attraverso la relazione e il coinvolgimento diretto in pratiche ludiche e corporee.

Nel dicembre 2021, *Quartieri di vita*, il Festival Internazionale di Formazione e Teatro Sociale organizzato dalla Fondazione Campania dei Festival, ha coinvolto sette gruppi socialmente fragili che operano nella Regione Campania. Il dialogo tra scienze umane, neuroscienze e culture teatrali fa emergere come, *incarnando* le arti, le fragilità derivanti da ferite possano trasformarsi in dono per gli altri. Attraverso le relazioni sceniche, le esperienze traumatiche e dolorose diventano storie di vita combattute e intense, occasioni per sviluppare emozioni positive, cura e sostegno. Gli studi sulla simulazione incarnata confermano che è la condivisione dello stesso stato corporeo tra osservatore e osservato che permette una forma diretta di comprensione, che potremmo chiamare 'empatica'. Attraverso il rispecchiamento, negli occhi degli altri, fragilità, arte e bellezza si intrecciano e si moltiplicano abbracciando una visione inclusiva.

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## Keywords

Embodiement, social theatre, applied theatre, fragilities.

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## Introduction

The dialogue between cognitive neuroscience and the human sciences is founded on a new approach to the person, which in the last thirty years has attempted to enhance the bio-psycho-social components in the full appreciation of all dimensions in mutual synergy (Zappettini & Borgogni, 2021a). The method we wish to adopt is the *integrated dynamic, complex, and systemic* approach of bodily experience (Carlomagno et al., 2021; 8). According to Gallese, «we must abandon the Cartesian concept of the supremacy of the ego and adopt a perspective that emphasises the fact that self and other are initially co-constituted» (Ammaniti & Gallese, 2014; 42). This dialogue finds an opportunity to deepen and situate itself through the authors' reflections on their participation in the International Festival of Education and Social Theatre Quartieri di Vita (henceforth referred to as QdV), which took place in December 2021, in its sixth edition, under the artistic direction of Ruggero Cappuccio. With the intention of incorporating seven difficult contexts in the Campania region<sup>2</sup>, the festival aimed to offer interested realities the chance to discover new routes of experimentation and study through theatrical workshops, in the name of sharing and social inclusion, in confrontation with seven internationally renowned European directors<sup>3</sup>.

Fragility, an element defining *each person's condition humaine* (Borgna, 2014; 7), has manifested itself in the *reborn* lives of some young people living in difficult social contexts, such as the Rione Sanità, the Forcella neighbourhood, or San Giovanni Teduccio, and as disability in Sant'Angelo a Cupolo and immigration in the provinces of Caserta and Salerno. Nonetheless, human frailty is an aspect of every life, it is one of its supporting structures, and it is one of its ontological roots (Borgna, 2014; 5) since every individual must deal with that over the course of their life. However, «vulnerability is not a sign of weakness, but of the greatest demonstration of courage» (Brown, 2016; 28). To be fragile is not to lose or win, but to have the courage to disclose oneself, open oneself, find oneself, and be seen as one is; it is to achieve the feat of the tightrope walker who agrees to walk without a safety net, exposing oneself to the risk of failure. The theater, which happens in presence, *hinc et nunc*, involves the «presence of a live body in relation to other bodies, those of the other actors and those of the audience, who interact simultaneously and in the same space» (Charlemagne, 2020, p. 349). It allows fragilities to be acknowledged and embraced in their human significance, and as a result of this cathartic process, they become «infinitely lighter than those ignored or rejected, which are converted into stones from which it is not always possible to escape» (Borgna, 2014; 91). On stage, the *exchange* occurs because the actor's vulnerabilities meet those of the audience and permit the creation of a *shared space of action* (Zappettini & Borgogni, 2021b). This shared space of action is constituted as a *place of possibility*, in which human vulnerabilities become a reciprocal gift of welcome and rebirth via their *relationship*.

Neuroscience, in collaboration with the humanities and theatre cultures, provides us with a fresh perspective on the functioning of the individual, even in times of suffering. There is much evidence

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<sup>2</sup> The Project is intended for socially vulnerable groups operating in the Campania region, with the goal of extending artistic conversation, the exchange of knowledge, and the dissemination of best practises on social theatre. The following are the facts involved in this edition of QdV: Nuovo Teatro Sanità, Nest and Femminile Plurale in Naples and in the region Magnifico Visbaal Teatro; Cooperativa Sociale Immaginaria; Mutamenti/Teatro Civico 14; Derrère la Scène.

<sup>3</sup> Filmmakers from Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Lithuania, and Spain participated in the project realised in collaboration with the EUNIC *European Union National Institutes for Culture*. Florian Bosel, Jana Svobodová, Ramzi Choukair, Charlotte Pfeifer, Jonas Tertelis and Andrius Jevsejevas, Patricia Ruz, Axelle Verkempinck, and Farbod Fathinejadfard are the foreign artists who participated in this project.

that theatre is a vehicle for personal development (Oliva, 2017), via the building of self-esteem and the reworking of unpleasant experiences that, when externalised and transformed, create art for the audience. It is mostly the *relationship* that heals, as it is the touch, the look that persists, and the welcoming hand that instils confidence and facilitates opening up. It is the other who invites one to move ahead in the expression of one's wounds, which, when told in the dialogue that occurs through autopoietic feedback (Ficher-Lichte, 2016), becomes a cathartic occasion for the viewer. Both the self and the other appear connected due to their shared inter-corporeal nature.

## 1. The social theatre of faces turned towards each other

*«Theatre is life. [...] I believe it is highly formative.  
Theatre is incredibly significant because it simultaneously engages the body  
and the mind,  
but it also moves you  
and so, engages the heart, soul, and feelings.  
A strong theatre education could counterbalance the excess of rationality that defines us»  
Elisa Frauenfelder<sup>4</sup>.*

Social theatre is a subset of *Applied Theatre*, which is an umbrella term for a variety of performing arts and practices. Participation of people, groups, and communities in improving their living situations is the common denominator<sup>5</sup>. The phenomenon of individuals and groups engaging in theatrical, recreational, celebratory, and performance-based activities is spreading globally. Social theatre, a term applied to numerous theatrical establishments since the 18th century, differs from this in that, in the 20th and 21st centuries, theatre is no longer associated with the bourgeoisie, which uses it for recreational, cultural, and social purposes, but rather with the classes and people in difficult situations, due to its transformative properties (Innocenti Malini & Bernardi, 2021). Individual education, the formation of groups and communities, and cultural involvement in institutions are the three fields of activity of social theatre (Bernardi, 2004). Social theatre is characterised by the priority of process over product, for the importance of work based on self-expression, relationship, and creative interaction; the creation of a safe context is central, which also becomes a place of confrontation and growth, as occurs in other places of knowledge, such as schools, "a stimulating and welcoming learning setting, where diversity and fragility become shared resources, the *suspended*

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<sup>4</sup> E. Frauenfelder, Interview -November 2017, in N. Carlomagno, *Performative Didactics: the Declination of Simplexity in the Performing Arts*, Nuova Secondaria – n. 10, giugno 2021 - Anno XXXVIII, p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> The following texts are suggested for further study: Bernardi C., (2004) *Il teatro sociale. L'arte tra disagio e cura*, Carocci, Roma; Bernardi C., (1996) *Corpus hominis. Riti di violenza, teatri di pace*, Euresis, Milano; Bernardi C. & Innocenti Malini G. (2018), La bamba, "la" samba, la gamba. Il teatro di comunità: esperienze e teorie a confronto tra Italia e Brasile, «Visioni LatinoAmericane», Anno X, Numero 18, Gennaio 2018, Issn 2035-6633 pp. 650-660; Bernardi C., Cuminetti B. & Dalla Palma S. (cur.), (2000) *I fuorisceca. Esperienze e riflessioni sulla drammaturgia nel sociale*, Euresis Edizioni, Milano, pp.9-23; Bernardi C., Innocenti Malini G., (2016) *From Performance to Action. Il teatro sociale tra rappresentazione, relazione e azione*, in *Atti del convegno Thinking the Theatre. New Theatrolgy and Perfomance Studies*, Consulta universitaria del teatro, Torino 29-30 maggio 2015 (in corso di pubblicazione), Bologna; Innocenti Malini G. E., & Bernardi, C. (Eds.), 2021, *Performing the Social Education, Care and Social Inclusion through Theatre*. Franco Angeli; Pompeo Nogueira M., (2002) *Theatre for Development: an Overview*, «Researche in Drama Education. The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance», VII, 1, pp.103-108; Pontremoli A., (2015) *Elementi di teatro educativo, sociale e di comunità*, Utet, Novara, pp.175-211; Prendergast M. & Saxton J. (cur.), (2009) *Applied Theatre: International Case Studies and Challenges for Practice*, Intellect Bristol UK and Wilmington, Usa; Prentki T. & Preston S., (2009) *The Applied Theatre Reader*, Routledge, Oxon UK and New York US; Taylor P., (2003) *Applied Theatre. Creating Transformative Encounters in the Community*, Heinemann, Portsmouth US.

*evaluation*, and the error welcomed as food for thought." It is frequently in the processing of *errors* that the human mind's elasticity and flexibility emerge, creating an adaptive dynamic (Carlomagno, 2022; 383). This enables the vulnerable individual to no longer feel alone, so they can find the courage to express themselves, and to create emotional touch; via performative mediation, wounds become a gift for all. In social theatre, the product is believed to be the result of a process that can take the form of a performance, but can also be something else, such as an open rehearsal or performance (Bernardi, 2004; 96). Ruggero Cappuccio, the director of *Quartieri di vita*, chose the term *scenic precipitate* as the performance's costume in order to emphasise the sudden occurrence of life on stage, which, in his words, becomes a «ritual passage because the spectator is an integral part of the rite. » The boundaries of social theatre are quite fluid; it bleeds into *theatrical therapy* when it employs expressive techniques to solve the inner and relational difficulties of people or groups. In *Quartieri di vita*, Jana Svobodová, Czech director working with NEST affirms: «I love to work with these people that are not academic trained. In my work I'm very much interested at personalities of the people. And to discover it. And we will start from the people»<sup>6</sup>.

Humanity that defines theatre is anchored in *intercorporeality* (Ammaniti & Gallese, 2014; 31) as the basic form of knowledge we get through our interactions with others. «Intercorporeality is a key part of intersubjectivity because we and others share, at least on some level, the same intentional objects; also, our situated motor systems are wired similarly to achieve similar goals. It is the sharing of the same situated nature and intentional purposes that makes intercorporeality a privileged access to the other's world » (Ammaniti & Gallese, 2014; 43). The body communicates the story of vulnerability, and when one is brave and supported enough to listen to it and embrace it, it becomes a powerful force. Theatre is «what occurs between the spectator and the actor » (Grotowski, 1968), where the other, prior to becoming an actor, is «a body different from mine that moves through space and a face that confronts my presence» (Rivoltella, 2021; 64). The marginalized body of our time is a body that is present but absent at school, educational, organizational, and institutional levels (Borgogni & Zappettini, 2022). On the other hand, the theatre is made to be a place where «the looked gaze and the gazing gaze intertwine on the directive of recognition» (Melchiorre, 1984, p. 118), bodies become active and participating presences, and they assert themselves by showing themselves.

Neuroscience provides a fresh perspective on the processes involving stage actors and audience members; through embodied simulation (Gallese & Guerra, 2015), we know that actor and spectator are engaged in a *creative relational dance* (Zappettini & Borgogni, 2021b) in which the bodies of observer and observed, in a relationship that unites the two parties beginning with the gaze, but not stopping there, extend throughout the entire body, vibrate in unison. Studies on embodied simulation indicate that the sharing of the same body condition between observer and observed provides a direct type of understanding that we can name "empathic" (Gallese, 2010). Actor and audience engage in a dance of intentions during a theatrical performance (Carreri, 2013; 84). In an upward spiral that leads to transformation for each party, actor and audience mirror each other.

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<sup>6</sup> «I like working with these people who do not have an academic background. In my work I am very interested in people's personalities. And in discovering them. And we start with people. » Translation by the authors.

Taken from the documentary *Quartieri di Vita 2021* made by Nadia Baldi and screened during the festival's closing meeting, published on the YouTube channel at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EQOuwFAaEOc>.

## 2. Theatre as a posture of the gaze, empathic listening to the other

« I discovered  
what it really means to exist  
when  
for the first time  
I really looked into the eyes »<sup>7</sup>

In neurophysiology and neuroscience, the gaze, the link between actor and audience during a theatrical performance, is seen as a crucial factor by which the resonance between observed and observer occurs (Rizzolatti & Sinigaglia, 2019; 2006; Rizzolatti & Voza, 2008; Rizzolatti & Gnoli, 2016; Iacoboni, 2008). It is at the heart of the theatre and is one of the most studied topics in the field of educational relationships, which is the study of objects in the human sciences.

According to neurophysiologist Alain Berthoz, the gaze is much more than an eye movement; «it is a communication of intent, an expression of shifting attention, and a manifestation of emotions » (Berthoz, 2011; 25). From a phenomenological perspective, «the gaze [...] envelops, palpates, and marries visible things» (Merleau Ponty, 2003, p. 149), referring to the idea of a tangible that promises the visible and of a visible that always implies a tactile experience. In this sense, the gaze becomes a trigger of the desire of contact and relationships, determining closeness and intimacy, and encouraging interaction between all engaged actors. The gaze opens the axes of resonance and generates the capacity and sensitivity for resonance, a form of relationship that cannot be unidirectional. In the theatre, as in school, when we observe, we are observed, exactly because we live in the sight of others. As is the case in social theatre and especially in QdV, the energy potential of the *autopoietic feedback loop* is generated (Ficher Lichte, 2016) by bodily feelings that come from this feeling of sharing, even the intimacy and nakedness of the performer on stage.

And this is how the gaze in theatre becomes embodied, a portal through which the other might penetratingly enter, in a continual and constant exchange of energy capable of producing resonant zones. The theatre can become a place where the actors on stage and the audience can tune and retune each other through the interplay of gazes. But not everywhere do gazes produce the same resonance. The fragile have frequently been crushed by a gaze, like Medusa's weapon (Lizzola, 2014; 83), whose gaze has the power to immobilise and petrify, or like the eye of the *Benthamite Panopticon*, as discussed by Foucault (2014), which achieves continuous control, with the result that «each cell becomes a small theatre, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualised, and constantly visible. «The primary effect of the panopticon was to create in each 'actor' or prisoner a state of constant awareness and visibility, which ensured the automatic operation of authority» (Markula & Pringle, 2006; 58).

In the theatre of *Quartieri di Vita*, the spectator's gaze does not crush the actor, but rather lifts him, restores his dignity, and offers a restful and welcoming presence. The sight of the fragile «undoes our gaze » (Lizzola, 2014, p. 77) and leaves us naked, exposed to the face and body of the other, who moans and trembles and speaks. Emmanuel Lévinas recalls the expression *ils me regarde*. «To remove the look from the body is to prevent it from becoming present to me, but to remove the word from the body, to refuse the request that its simple presence addresses to me, is to fail to comprehend its will. The body is what distinguishes and makes us unique, as well as what we share. In it, we are exposed, and it exposes us to others: sometimes in plain view, it reveals our incapacities, wounds, and deformities. The actual ones and the portrayed ones. We are reintroduced to the world, body to

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<sup>7</sup> These words are taken from the monologue of a participant in the scenic precipitate performed on 15 December 2021 at the French Institute, directed by Jonas Tertelis and Andrius Jevsejevas with Carlo Geltrude of the Nuovo Teatro Sanità.

body » (Lizzola, 2014; 77). In the spectators' eyes, the bodies become a *floating mirror* (Carlomagno, 2021; 8 in Aucouturier, 2005) in the eyes of the actors, they are able to return a positive image to their staging because «the community that looks makes powerful who is looked at, » according to Cristina Loglio, an expert on European cultural policies who spoke at the QdV Festival's conclusion. In an attempt to generate a shared consciousness, social theatre becomes a space where individuals can search for their individuality in a shared context. In this interpretive framework, the gaze becomes an encounter that establishes profound and affective dialogue, a discovery of the other. When I look or am looked at, I neither see nor am seen in myself, but *for* and *by* the other. The remains of my image or the image of the *Other* is the invisibility in which it is hidden (Merleau-Ponty, 2003); it is the memory it evokes and the emotions it stirs. «To see together is not the same as sharing a vision, because no two people will ever perceive the same thing. One can only share what one is unable to see. It is Invisibility. To share the invisibility of a sense is to see together. »<sup>8</sup> (Mondzain, 2003; 140). The gaze brings one closer, develops empathy, and establishes a unique bond between actor and spectator. « The actor invites the audience members to participate in the performance by placing themselves in his shoes while he dons the shoes of another character. A triangle circuit that amplifies the resonance of the action that is mirrored by the other (Carlomagno, 2020; 350). » (Carlomagno, 2020; 350).

In addition to a physical dimension, the relationship between actor and audience consists primarily of an emotional dimension. The realism of emotions in theatre is equivalent to actual first-person experiences; it is not simply a projective or identifying activity but is connected to the actual embodiment of the feelings. «Our ability to comprehend the emotional responses of others is intrinsically linked to a set of areas with mirroring qualities. » Like actions, emotions are highly contagious: the perception of others' pain or disgust stimulates the same regions of the cerebral cortex as when we experience pain or disgust ourselves (Rizzolatti & Sinigaglia, 2006). The mirror circuit causes the spectator to experience in a vicarious way what he observes in a co-action, which creates that *structural coupling* (Maturana & Varela, 1980) in which the actor and the listener are perfectly aligned. «What transpires between performer and spectator constitutes a fundamental global event that is not only symbolic, but also biological, which activates memories - archaic memory that immerses itself in the root of the species; memory established on the thread of individual existence... reshuffles, associates, stimulates, and induces multiple psychosomatic responses» (Pradier, 1995; 86). At *Quartieri di Vita*, the linguistic difference between directors and workshop participants, as well as between international spectators and actors from Campania who also acted in local dialects, did not prevent the profound empathy and communion that was created both during the workshop experience and in the scenic precipitates, because «the actor shares, beyond any linguistic or cultural barrier, the sounds and movements of his body with the spectators, making them part of an event that they themselves must contribute to creating» (Rizzolatti & Sinigaglia, 2006; 1). Indeed, mirroring mechanisms, thanks to the process of intentional consonance and interpersonal attunement (Gallese, 2007a; 2007b), enable the intersubjective experiences that underpin our ability to empathise with others, allowing us to implicitly understand others and identify them as similar to us. According to Boella, empathy as a fundamental aspect of human life is "evidence that the human situation is plural: not man, but men and women inhabit the Earth" (Boella, 2006).

Neurophenomenology, on the other hand, has frequently emphasised: «My consciousness is empathically entangled with that of others and the phenomenal world» (Varela, 1996; 79). Empathy as «the experience of other subjects and their experience» that allows us to «understand [...] the interior of others, their feelings, their sentiments, and their motivations» (Stein, 1986; 39).

In this sense, it can be said that in the theatre of the QdV, one does not watch a performance, but rather participates in one, as in an event that is enacted in a place "where one lives" an experience of

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<sup>8</sup> Translation by the authors. «Voir ensemble ce n'est pas partager une vision car jamais personne ne verra ce que l'autre voit. On ne partage que ce que l'on ne voit pas. C'est cela l'invisible. Voir ensemble, c'est partager l'invisibilité d'un sens.».

humanity that can be read as an aesthetic synthesis, a world within the world where the participant, as actor or spectator, feels a part of a community within the spectacle of the world. In a transformative perspective, theatre as a life art (Pradier, 1995) takes on connotations of participatory art. Thus, after traversing and experiencing the space and time of "emotional contagion» (Sulzer, 1794; 254) in the theatre of the QdV, its transformational force is fully experienced.

In this view, theatre cannot be solely «a charitable encounter in which we attempt to comprehend, explain, or accept the other. » Theatre is a *blossoming struggle* (see Fig. 1), it is our urge to appropriate the other - the authors, the co-workers, the spectators, and the deceased - in order to merge with him [...]. Confrontation with the other is a rite of passage that reaffirms reciprocal and unexplainable strengths and qualities (Barba, 2002; 4). Each one, actor or spectator, observer or observed, is tasked with «searching for the traces of joy, of its exhausted fragility, in the faces and eyes, in the smile and in the looks of anyone we meet in life» (Borgna, 2014; 27) because «evil can be endured without letting it have the last word» (Lizzola; 2014; 74) and because at Quartieri di Vita we have witnessed the triumph of Good, of wounded, struggled (Barba, 2002; 4). «Theatre has always been a site of exploration of the self towards otherness, a relational space to cross our boundaries, in which mirroring ourselves in the other and resonating with the other open up the intersubjective and collective vision by substantiating transforming experiences» (Carlomagno & Minghelli, 2021).



Figure 1. The flowery struggle of the Femminile Plurale women from the Forcella neighbourhood in Naples, coordinated by director Marina Rippa and French director Ramzi Choukair.

### 3. The fragility, beauty of *broken things*.

*«No theatre is born where life is full, where one is satisfied.  
Theatre is born where there are wounds, where there are gaps.  
That is where someone needs to listen  
something someone else has to say to him»  
Jacques Coupeau (Oliva, 2009).*

In popular perception, fragility is the image of useless, sick, senseless weakness, an opportunity to offer the other to exert prevarication and supremacy, whereas fragility contains the values of «sensitivity and delicacy, of exhausted kindness and dignity, of intuition of the unspeakable and invisible that are in life, and that allow us to identify more easily and passionately with the moods and emotions, the existential ways of being of others than ourselves» (Borgna, 2014; 3,4). On the stages of *Quartieri di vita*, fragility was staged, dressed in the costumes of disability, shining a light on the trauma of bereavement and violence, of illness and *neglect*, ripping off the masks of daily life and writing the new scripts of a desired life, liberated, reborn from the ashes of wounded existences, reined in stale and outdated plots. From the scenes of marginalisation, social exclusion, illness as a label, and addiction as a cage, we have observed a step toward the other. We have participated in a process of release, catharsis, openness, and rebirth because so many dark nights of people's lives have found a light, have come to light (see Fig. 2), and have emerged from the darkest abysses on the stage. And such sorrows, painful events, and unspoken words for years were not only observed, accepted, and applauded, but they also entered our lives as spectators, met us, embraced us, and inhabited our anxieties, our dark corners, and our unspoken life inclinations. The emotions and tears that flowed with each scenic presence were infused with a sense of empathy, brotherhood, communion, and unity, as if they were all members of the great human family. As spectators, we felt *vulnerable* as a result of the emotions that gripped us as we saw the actors relate their experiences, reliving memories, desires, and fears. We experienced fragility. Because being fragile essentially implies realising, first and foremost, that one is a brother as a child, that one is born from someone. Because «*one comes into existence* from a caring, called by an affectivity that gave birth to us and, as is often said, "brought us to light"» (Lizzola, 2014, p. 10). Fragility is a characteristic of something that must be cared for because it is prone to damage, and it indicates a fragile psychic or emotional balance. The lives of individuals with disabilities are fragile, as are their relationships with those who interact with them and those who provide care. In Sant'Angelo a Cupolo, the Cooperativa Sociale Immaginaria and German theatre director Charlotte Pfeifer have made the fragility of broken things the topic of performance. Is disability a defective condition? How does it feel to take up a porcelain cup and throw it to the ground? We watched the eulogy of fragility, the art of *broken objects*, in a gesture capable of shocking, angering, or confusing us, thereby overturning our expectations and patterns. It urges us to invert our view and allow the theatre to provoke us. According to Renzo Mirone, even breaking can become a game: «We are playing to break and trying to fix things. Maybe to see if fixing is worthwhile or accept and bear with what has been broken to discover in the end that it could rather be an asset». Charlotte, the German director of QdV, arrived in Benevento with the intention of repairing, of finding a solution, but after observing and interacting with the children, she discovered the beauty of breaking and declared, «broken things are extremely beautiful». We do not know why some lives are more fragile than others, we do not know the cause of some traumas that suddenly appear in the lives of some people, as the women of Femminile Plurale, or the young people of the Nuovo Teatro Sanità told us, but we want to look at fragility not so much and only as a shadow, as a dark night of the soul, which cracks human relationships and makes them intermittent and precarious, but above all we want to look at fragility as «grace as the luminous story of life» (Borgna, 2014; 7); it is constituted as a thematic core of key life events at every age, and which precisely through dark nights transforms

traumatic experiences into opportunities for rebirth, revival, and a new and deeper link with others. Fragility is a fundamental aspect of the human condition since «it is one of its supporting structures, one of its ontological bases» (Borgna, 2014; 5). Just as suffering passes, but having suffered never passes, so too, fragility is a human experience that, when born, is never extinguished in life, and that imprints on the things that are done, on the words that are spoken, the seal of delicacy and welcome, of understanding and listening, and of the intuition of the unspeakable that is concealed within the utterable. If social theatre teaches people to see fragility in themselves and others, an ethical responsibility to which each individual is called (Bernardi, 2004), then QdV has planted many small seeds in the lives of players and viewers so that life can flourish through theatre. In a mutual exchange, the fragility of the actor and the spectator have met in a fragile gift of *hospitable silence* (Han, 2017). Audience members' sensitivity and ability to listen are enhanced by the theatre. When a person attends a theatrical performance of this nature, he or she cannot leave untransformed, unaffected. We spectators who have witnessed Lizzola's courageous demonstration of fragility cannot refuse her invitation. «*Only we*, now and here in front, can take on responsibility, we who bear the capacity for violence and indifference, along with those who are exposed to force and are vulnerable. It is our responsibility to maintain trustworthy fraternity *among strangers*. In the first person, I feel responsibility and hope for justice; I play and recognise myself in proximity to those in front of me, in their wound and in the hand that inflicted it: choosing between us, and in me, the alliance in the wound. An alliance between the vulnerable: no one can be left alone, and no one can achieve transcendence alone» (Lizzola, 2014; 80). And it was Festival director Ruggero Cappuccio who introduced each scenic precipitate with the following statement: «we are working to ensure that no one is excluded. » The vulnerable other invokes capacity and responsibility, and it is precisely on the edge of the nameless abyss of the excluded that *Quartieri di Vita* has built *fraternity between strangers* (Lizzola, 2014), and this is the value of theatre, a common fraternity in the human, made up of women and men who do not know each other, who give life to a *shared space of action*, which neuroscience describes as the shared space of action (Zappettini & Borgogni (Zappettini & Borgogni, 2021b). The theatre illustrates as the *place of the possible* (Barba, 2002) and, in our view, clarifies as the wisdom of one who warns, perhaps obliquely, that «without the curious listening to the noise of those unhealthy, chaotic and crowded places, it is the entire social and civil fabric that pays the price, that loses precious opportunities for transformation» (Lizzola, 2014; 128). Without this fraternal game, which provokes and calls economic and political subjects, institutions and services, and communities to a game of responsibility and creativity, those who are most fragile will remain alone and abandoned, but the fragile neighbour is *no one excluded*, as Sergio Manghi reiterates: it is all human beings, all vulnerable (Manghi, 1999). As we can find in various pedagogical approaches, from Dewey's vision of experience as an intensified vitality that is art in germ (Dewey, 2020); moving on to Frauenfelder's (2017), which emphasises the importance of theatre because it engages the body, the mind, and the heart, soul, and feelings, to Rivoltella's recent studies (2021), which postulate the assonance between theatre and didactics, since the nature of teaching is theatrical, insofar as it is voice, gesture, and body in action.



Figure 2. On stage, the dark nights of life have found a light. Scenic precipitate of the group Nest, Napoli Est Teatro, from San Giovanni Teduccio, followed by director and actor Andrea Vellotti and Czech director Jana Svobodová.

#### 4. Trauma as a gift

*«There is a crack in everything*

*and that is where the light comes in»*

Leonard Cohen

According to Taleb's research, *antifragility* is the capacity to remain intact in the worst-case scenario, gaining strength and increased robustness from shocks, difficulties, and precarious situations (Taleb, 2013). Fragility can sometimes manifest itself in the lives of individuals as a traumatic event that occurs unexpectedly and alters the established order. Yet, trauma can also be an opportunity for rebirth, a chance to transform one's wounds into a gift for another, thereby gaining strength and self-assurance. In *Quartieri di Vita*, the fragility associated with trauma was portrayed through the accounts of violence suffered, abuse, and bullying. Thanks to the bravery of the women of Femminile Plurale from the Forcella neighbourhood, one of today's submerged phenomena, that of violence, has been come to attention<sup>9</sup>. Traumatic experiences leave traces in the mind and emotions, the capacity for happiness and intimacy, and even the immune system and biology. Neuroscience, developmental psychopathology, and the study of how our behaviour influences our emotions, biology, and mental order have facilitated a greater comprehension of the effects of psychological trauma, abuse, and neglect (Van Der Kolk, 2015; 4). Literature contains therapeutic programmes demonstrating that "performing onstage is an excellent resource for healing" (Van Der Kolk, 2015; 382). The theatrical work consists of confronting life's painful realities and transforming them symbolically through communal relationship work. People are trained to go against this tendency, in the direction of *«feeling things deeply and expressing emotions constantly so that the audience can participate»* (Van Der Kolk, 2015; 383). People who have endured a great deal of suffering are frequently terrified of

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<sup>9</sup> According to ISTAT's 2020 survey on forms of violence among minors, 'stalking is more of a gender crime: the number of female victims is three times that of male victims (274 girls and 110 boys aged 14-17), to be six times higher in the 18-24 age group (1102 girls and 175 boys). Victims who reported being subjected to acts of persecution more than doubled between 2010 and 2018, and this increase also affected minors, rising from 274 in 2009 to 566 in 2018" (Istat, 2020; 6).

experiencing emotions because they result in a loss of control. In contrast, «doing theatre involves embodying emotions, giving them voice, making them experienceable, making them one's own, and impersonating them in various roles» (Van Der Kolk, 2015; 383). Utilizing the body in its entirety and having other bodies emote feelings, thoughts, and emotions are central to theatre work. «The theatre is an essential means to express oneself. Especially when we deal with stories in such a challenging urban area like this one. This place gives them a chance to express themselves» says Ramzi Choukair, a French director with theatre experience with Syrian women who worked with Femminile Plurale at QdV. Through profound experiences, theatre allows those who are fragile to connect with others and experience a sense of shared humanity. In *Quartieri di vita*, the young people on stage said they felt liberated, they expressed a sense of lightness, similar to the participant in the workshop in Rione Sanità, who had the courage to recount the sudden death of her young boyfriend, and two of the ten women of Femminile plurale, who recounted the trauma of the sexual violence they had endured, then said they felt supported, welcomed, and realised they were no longer alone. When the relationship experience that builds the neural code for love fails, we can speak of trauma. Trauma is the attempt to forget and conceal one's fear, anger, or depression. Finding *alternative* truth-telling methods and delivering them to the audience in the most genuine manner is the essence of theatre. To discover one's own truth, one must explore and examine one's inner experience in order for it to emerge in voice and body on stage. A courageous asylum seeker who exposed himself at Civico 14 in Caserta declares: «now I can see life more clearly, I understand some things about my life, and I could also make some dreams come true thanks to the theatre. And get to know other people».

Trauma produces real psychological changes, such as an increase in the activity of stress hormones and a change in the system responsible for discriminating relevant from irrelevant information, according to neuroscience research. Trauma impairs the region of the brain that conveys the physical, bodily perception of being alive, making it difficult to spontaneously engage in daily activities or repeat problematic patterns of behaviour. This behaviour is the result of real brain changes. Through a bottom-up approach, theatre enables the body to have experiences that profoundly and viscerally counteract the helplessness, anger, and collapse resulting from trauma. Gradually, through mirroring exercises, one learns to trust the other, to discover one's own body as positive, to overcome embarrassment and to learn to get in touch with one's emotions so as to avoid always maintaining a distance. The purpose of theatre is to foster a positive relationship with oneself, the body, and the other. Theatre provides a unique way of obtaining a broad spectrum of physical sensations and emotions, which not only brings people in touch with their usual bodily experience, but also persuades them to investigate new and alternative ways of experiencing life. On stage at QdV, an actor from Nuovo Teatro Sanità states, « We were given the opportunity to exorcise our darkest memories. We focused primarily on the sentimentality of these very special recollections ».

## Conclusion

Gigi Proietti's words stand out on Nest's wall: «Welcome to the theatre, where everything is fake and nothing is false»; if theatre is then «the place of fiction and truth» (Bernardi, 1996; 34) it is because theatre reconciles opposites, body and psyche, individual and group, ritual and spectacle, reason and emotion, freedom and discipline, theatre is the ultimate cultural rite because it is the reproduction of life's dramaturgy. Through theatre workshops, performing arts, community or festive dramaturgy, social theatre creates society. It seeks the active participation and leadership of all community members, especially the most vulnerable and marginalised. When asked by Spanish director Patricia Ruz, «what are they to you?», regarding women with substance abuse issues, young migrants, and asylum seekers from the La Tenda association in Salerno, she responds with an emotional smile: «They are a chance». Theater places the individual and his humanity at the centre. The other turns into a resource and an opportunity.

Today, it is the arts that promote society, whereas in the past it was society that supported the arts. Theater is the most social art form ever created. Its uniqueness resides in its mind-to-body transformation. And social theatre is the art of social bodies being created by bodies. Theatre is the means, society the end, art as vehicle<sup>10</sup>, in Grotowski's words (1968; 68). He stated that: «theatre is also a gathering of creative individuals. I, the director, am confronted by an actor [...], and then we are both confronted by the text». It is the interaction between actors and directors and the audience that generates relationships and reactions, because, as Ruggero Cappuccio states, on stage a story is told and multiplies in the lives of the spectators through refraction. The author first has a dream, a vision, and then asks the actor to dream the dream again. When the performer takes the stage, he requests for the third time that the audience dream the dream. In the image of a repeating mirroring, from author to director, from director to actor, and from actor to spectator, the refraction spreads exponentially, as if by contagion, before settling into a steady state and then, *Life contaminated by Social Theatre*<sup>11</sup>.

Therefore, the secret to social theatre is the thread (see Fig. 3). The healing thread. The thread used to stitch up tears. The fabric of memory. The interweaving of threads constitutes the social fabric and weave. The thread that weaves and runs through texts. The thread that connects and links bodies and minds, places and times, generates an infinite number of connections between past, present, and future images and experiences (Bernardi, 2004). Inhabiting one's own and others' frailties can therefore involve the possibility of weaving an assumption of care, listening, into the welcoming and benevolent gaze. In the eyes of others, fragility, art, and beauty intertwine and multiply through reflection, embracing an inclusive model.



Figure 3. The thread of social theatre ties, staged in Sant'Angelo a Cupolo, at the Cooperativa Sociale Immaginaria, in collaboration with Enzo Mirone and German director Charlotte Pfeifer..

<sup>10</sup> Art as a vehicle is understood by Grotowski as a process in which the actor, who has already freed himself of the character, also emancipates himself from the obligation to use the work on himself to make someone else (the spectator) have an experience, and uses it first and foremost to make himself a high, strong, spiritual experience, to be transported to a different plane, to the effectiveness of the physical action, in terms of energy transformations. Art as vehicle constitutes one of the culminations of the 20th century theatre and its revolutions. (Grotowski, 1993).

<sup>11</sup> *Life infected with Social Theatre* is the festival's slogan.

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