

## **Benefits of Participation in Drama Courses-The Need to Consolidate in Time the Economic Crisis**

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### **Abstract**

*With this article, the authors analyze the impact that the attending of theater courses taught by the ENTREtanto Theatre Company had in a group of 70 former students. Since 1996, that the courses are held annually in Valongo, county situated in the north of Portugal. The strategy followed was the mixed methodology, supported by a case study. The instruments of data collection were subject to triangulation: interview, group discussion and questionnaire, followed by the qualitative analysis and statistics when the results allow. The results point to the influence of theater in the promotion and development of a set of capabilities, such as self-control, adaptability, confidence, self-esteem and self-knowledge, becoming essential attributes to all human beings. The activation of these internal resources of the individual during the experience with theater nears the resilience process, helping them to overcome the embarrassment that the scenarios involved. It is suggested to central governing bodies as well local authorities to enhance investment in theatre activities which will result in attracting new audiences for theatre productions, events and courses.*

**Key Words:** Drama, theater, Self-knowledge, Self-control, Self esteem, program assessment.

### **1. Theoretical Framework**

#### **1.1 Introduction**

Throughout this article we reflect on the need to continue investing in theatrical activities, regardless of its scope of application. The fragility of the economic of Europe, in particularly Portugal, leads us through the realms of austerity imposed on the citizens. The multiple measures directly interfere in our daily life, negatively influencing the perceptions and representations of this and in particular the future.

It is within the domain of culture and investment devoted to theater that we focus because we are convinced of the importance of theater for human development. Our aim is to counter the trend of reducing investment for theatrical activities. To that end, as suggested in Allen, Allen & Dalrymple (1999), we proceed with the presentation of results from a case study, where we seek to understand the influence of the drama class on its participants. We believe that this approach is effective to the extent that, with the scarcity of resources in the agenda (Escaleara, 2010), we must analyze the results and use them as a pressure strategy.

#### **1.2 Economic crisis, an inescapable reality**

There are many economic experts who have publicly registered their concern for the economic perspectives for 2011. This year will be marked by difficulties and disturbances in various areas of European society. Under the spotlight of economic agents, Portugal is forced to adopt measures of austerity and support that materialize in the implementation of various taxes and cuts in public spending.

The measures that result from the Portuguese state budget for 2011 threaten to affect, in a decisive way, the state's role in society, interfering in a structural way in existing model of society.

As well as rising taxes, reduced wages in the public sector and lower expenditure on social benefits, there is also the reduction of financial transfers to local governments. If we consider that these local bodies promote educational and cultural projects, all of which are socially determining, these measures can seize a sustainable development of regions.

Many sectors of society speak out against this broader set of measures consisting of isolated and disconnected parts that do not allow correcting structural problems, while they constitute only drugs that attack the symptoms of fever, but don't act on the origin of the disease (Bento, 2010).

### **1.3 Theater finds itself trapped by political discourse and lack of resources**

Theater is an artistic expression in the central universe of the arts whose origin intersects with human nature itself. Given this, we are challenged to look at theater, not only as an art form, the expression of multiple circumstances that penetrate the human experience, but also as forming agent and developer of the human dimension (Caughlan, 2008). The recognition of the arts as an agent of economic and social development tends to be generally accepted. In Portugal, it has been legitimized through consecutive Government Programs. This visibility became apparent as early as 1991, when it was stated in *Programa do XII Governo Constitucional* "it will continue to enhance the value of theatre in its multiple facets: as arts, customs and tradition repertoire, as a mirror of mentalities and a privileged means of language "(62). In spite of speeches defending the arts, the cutting of funds by the *Direcção Geral das Artes*, the body responsible for implementing policies to support the arts, show otherwise.

With this economic backdrop aggravated by scarce resources, it is increasingly important to look carefully at the results of artistic initiatives (Allen, Allen & Dalrymple, 1999), in that it is society itself that demands to know how taxes are being applied by governing bodies. As stated Escalera (2010), theatre as a phenomenon taking place "live" is undergoing a state of illness due to cost sickness. To make it possible for theatre to continue to survive, the author suggests that through training programs, new audiences can be recruited.

Given this evidence, we aim to counter act the deterioration trends of the artistic panorama, we consider it urgent to present the results achieved with a theatre training initiative provided by a municipality.

## **2. Method**

This study examines the relationship between participation in a drama class and the development of the personal dimension. It explores and recognizes the benefits theater courses bring to the general public, helping them to overcome their current economic and personal problems.

While in social sciences and humanities paradigms coexist, our choice was the interpretive paradigm, allowing the appropriation of the specificity of our object of study. Given the nature of singularities embedded (Yin, 1994), we chose to follow the method of case study, mobilized within the mixed methodology (quantitative and qualitative). Namely, when data allows, it performs a statistical analysis that facilitates understanding and grouping of data into categories of analysis.

The case study is a methodological approach that involves an intensive and detailed study, where it proposes to meet a well-defined entity. We intend to understand in depth the importance of theater in the context of learning, opening up new understandings in relation to its impact on the development of the personal dimension.

Our concern in this study was to respect the epistemological and methodological validity. The validity issues were intentionally structured into the research design and plan. We used methodology that corresponds to the design (interpretative approaches) and helped by the experts in the review. In this investigation we pay close attention to the collecting data from multiple sources and compared it with other researches.

### **2.1 Characterization of population and the "case"**

The 70 participants in the drama class are on average 30 years old, with 55.7% of which are between 20-29 years old. We emphasize the lack of students over the age range 60-69 years old. It is noted that 55.7% are women and 58.6% have higher education. Our case is comprised of 14 drama classes run by ENTREtanto, Theater Company supported by the Municipality of Valongo. With the duration of 117 hours, these courses are pedagogically structured in terms of technical skills. At the theoretical level of training, we find Interpretation and Body and Voice contents. Practical training is aggregating the Simulated Practice (Rehearsal) and Real Practice (Performances).

Belonging to the district of Porto, Valongo is located in northern Portugal, a region with a high unemployment rate (INE, 2010). However, this municipality is striving to attain an harmonious and balanced development, where the quest for economic growth coexists with the preservation of the cultural and the natural. These theater courses are born in this specific context. We believe these actions are contributing to the growth of new public thus creating economic sustainability (Escaleira, 2010) and for the establishment of differentiated channels of dialogue with society.

## 2.2 Procedure and data analysis

The choice of the instruments for collecting data binds to the epistemological assumptions of interpretive vision, which we adopted. We favored the semi-structured interviews and group discussion. To complete the picture of understanding reality, these instruments triangulated with the questionnaire.

The interviews are one of the prime sources of information on qualitative research, taking increased importance in the case study (Yin, 1994). The interviews were conducted to two people who are linked to local dynamics: Theatre teacher, Vice Mayor of Valongo.

The discussion groups are very useful during any qualitative investigation. They can be used in conjunction with other investigative tools, contributing to a triangulated and validated reading. The seven elements that make up our discussion group participated in drama class in 2009 and also completed the questionnaire.

Within an interpretive approach, we combined the system of general categories of analysis with other themes that were derived from the dynamics of semi-structured interviews and group discussions. The coding of topics, resulting from the audio and video recordings were conducted using the NVivo software, version 8.

Regarding the questionnaire, we were committed to accuracy in all phases of its construction and application. It was organized in three parts, all of which with closed answers, *Likert* type with five categories of the ordinal type. Its implementation was accomplished through the computer platform *freonlinesurveys.com*. We obtained 70 valid responses, representing 51% of contactable alumni who attended the theater course between 1996 and 2009. For its quantitative nature, the processing of data was subjected to statistical analysis using SPSS software, version 15.0.

## 3. Results

After the reunification and aggregation accomplished had divided based on the qualitative elements it appeared, naturally, the category Person Dimension. That was divided in to three subcategories: Theater in the fields of satisfaction reward, the theater in the areas of self, confidence and self-esteem and self-knowledge

### 3.1 Satisfaction and Reward

One of the main results of this study reveals to the existence of feelings of satisfaction and reward frequently encountered in this theatre course. By registering the students' satisfaction, the drama teacher argues that "the individual has an intrinsic need for theater" (E1, line 875).

"I think improvisation is very good. It meant that we got to interact with others. It seemed like we knew each other for years ... There was a fellow sitting in a chair and we had to make him laugh." (GD-7F, lines 106-109)

The feelings experienced during the artistic creation seem to benefit from the use of theatrical techniques. The moments of public presentation of the play provided recognition and reward. The questionnaire responses demonstrated the recognition of these feelings of satisfaction and reward. Table 1 makes a reading of the variables by gender, which allows us to affirm that all the variables show a high average performance.

| Variables  | Male |      | Female |      |
|--|------|------|--------|------|
|  | M    | DP   | M      | DP   |
| During the course I felt enthused by the challenges. | 4,26 | ,729 | 4,44   | ,552 |
| I had moments of fun.                                | 4,29 | ,783 | 4,59   | ,549 |
| I was motivated.                                     | 4,10 | ,908 | 4,38   | ,590 |
| I was able to release emotions and feelings.         | 3,87 | ,763 | 4,15   | ,812 |

Table 1 - Variables by gender

It appears that the group of women gets higher level of scores. By this expression, it is emphasized that it was the female gender that demonstrated more enthusiasm for the challenges ( $M = 4.44$ ), as well as for the moments of joy experienced ( $M = 4.59$ ). It is worth noting that the state of motivation felt by the participants was mostly recognized as being present, both by female participants as well as by the male participants. These results seem to indicate a strong commitment of students to the content and the practices and techniques used in the context of theatre training, thus creating an impact on the level of personal commitment demonstrated.

An analysis by age groups does not allow the observation of the existence of a pattern.

| Variables  |    | Age ranges |       |       |       |       |       |
|--|----|------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
|  |    | 10-19      | 20-29 | 30-39 | 40-49 | 50-59 | 70-79 |
| During the course I felt enthused by the challenges. | M  | 4,33       | 4,38  | 4,13  | 4,41  | 4,50  | 4,00  |
|  | DP | ,707       | ,590  | ,991  | ,527  | ,557  | -     |
| I had moments of fun.                                | M  | 4,67       | 4,44  | 4,38  | 4,33  | 4,75  | 4,00  |
|  | DP | ,500       | ,641  | ,744  | 1,00  | ,500  | -     |
| I was motivated.                                     | M  | 4,33       | 4,23  | 4,13  | 4,33  | 4,50  | 4,00  |
|  | DP | ,500       | ,810  | ,991  | ,707  | ,577  | -     |
| I was able to release emotions and feelings.         | M  | 3,78       | 4,05  | 4,25  | 3,89  | 4,25  | 4,00  |
|  | DP | ,833       | ,793  | ,707  | 1,054 | ,500  | -     |

**Table 2 - Variables in relation to age**

Overall, the data seem to reflect a tendency to the homogenization of the mean, which translates into a clear benefit for all ages, with special emphasis on the participants that make up the range 50-59 years, since they are the group that obtains the best average.

### 3.2 Self-control, confidence and self esteem

We affirm that the development of self-control was to some extent, an unexpected result. From what we observed in this study, drama emerges as a vehicle for personal empowerment, as it facilitates the activation of internal resources of the individual. The gains recorded in the ability control appear to have benefited from teaching strategies adopted by the teacher Júnior Sampaio, leading the student to overcome some constraints which derive from the context. One of the participants in group discussion states:

"The way Junior calls to our attention, can lead people to become more sensitive. People stand back."(GD-5F, lines 162-163)

Questioned about this specific teaching method, identified as very demanding and rigorous, the drama teacher claims that to be able to overcome our limits, it is essential that we are willing to accept criticism and adapt to adversity.

"Yes, very educational, my teaching is true and not taught. I look in the eye and see if the student can take it."(E1, lines 740-741).

In this sense, it is understandable that 81.7% of participants in the questionnaire have answered yes to question "coped well with criticism?" In line with the resilience to criticism, linked to the development of self-control enhanced during theater training, 93% responded positively to the question "I was able to adapt" Adaptability seems to have benefited from the personal strategies like a good level of self-esteem and confidence, both developed during the theater training. Parallel to what was observed for the development of self-control, the adaptability and resistance to criticism, it became clear that the confidence levels were stimulated with the completion of the drama course.

"Not being so afraid to talk. I developed trust."(DG-2F, lines 124-125)

"When they're shy, I ask them to repeat. They take this as training for themselves. They realize that the only way to conquer fear is by doing ... "(E1, lines 1050-1051)

Having observed an increase in the levels of self-esteem during the course, we note that the moments of public performance, stemming from work of representation of the play, have contributed to the development of confidence in students.

"I started to think that if we express ourselves on stage so easily for so many people, so in real life we have to do the same. We have to be ourselves." (GD-7F, lines 171-173)

Moreover, we note that students recognize that these levels of confidence spread beyond the areas of theater, with repercussions in their everyday life "... after the course I got myself into things that I had always wanted but never had been able to do" (GD -3M, lines 177-180). Table 3 records the variables linked to confidence, adaptability, and resistance to self-criticism, based on gender.

| Variables                         | Male |       | Female |      |
|-----------------------------------|------|-------|--------|------|
|                                   | M    | DP    | M      | DP   |
| Coped well with the criticism.    | 4,00 | 1,033 | 4,21   | ,656 |
| I managed to keep self-control.   | 3,81 | ,601  | 3,90   | ,502 |
| I was able to adapt.              | 4,16 | ,523  | 4,23   | ,536 |
| I was able to control my anxiety. | 3,81 | ,873  | 3,87   | ,570 |
| I was able to overcome old fears. | 3,61 | ,667  | 3,85   | ,812 |

**Table 3 - Variables by gender**

As noted, all items are performing interesting means. As it has been observed in the previous fields, the higher levels are recorded in the women group, with special emphasis on adaptability and ability to handle criticism. Relating now these five variables in terms of age group ranges, it was observed that all age groups had good averages in adaptability.

| Variables                         |    | Age ranges |       |       |       |       |       |
|-----------------------------------|----|------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
|                                   |    | 10-19      | 20-29 | 30-39 | 40-49 | 50-59 | 70-79 |
| Coped well with the criticism.    | M  | 4,56       | 4,05  | 4,00  | 4,33  | 3,75  | 3,00  |
|                                   | DP | ,726       | ,793  | 1,309 | ,707  | ,500  | -     |
| I managed to keep self-control.   | M  | 3,89       | 3,87  | 4,00  | 3,67  | 4,00  | 3,00  |
|                                   | DP | ,333       | ,522  | 0,00  | ,866  | ,816  | -     |
| I was able to adapt.              | M  | 4,11       | 4,28  | 4,00  | 4,11  | 4,25  | 4,00  |
|                                   | DP | ,601       | ,510  | ,535  | ,601  | ,500  | -     |
| I was able to control my anxiety. | M  | 4,00       | 3,79  | 3,75  | 4,11  | 3,75  | 3,00  |
|                                   | DP | ,500       | ,767  | ,707  | ,782  | ,500  | -     |
| I was able to overcome old fears. | M  | 3,56       | 3,72  | 3,75  | 3,89  | 4,00  | 4,00  |
|                                   | DP | 1,014      | ,724  | ,463  | 1,054 | ,000  | -     |

**Table 4 - Variables in relation to age**

In general, it is in 10-19 years old range that the higher mean values are concentrated. A closer look at the questionnaire responses shows that satisfy the highest average in the variable "coped well with the criticism" (M = 4.56), indicating a greater openness to criticism in relation to the other groups. The lowest averages are obtained in the variable "I was able to overcome old fears" and in the variable "managed to keep self-control". These results seem to point to a still fragile, self-awareness of young people, along with the tensions that startle the young, preventing them from taking a balance stance, facilitating the self-control. With the exception of the variable "was able to overcome old fears", the only element that incorporates the range of 70-79 years is the one that presents lower results.

### 3.3 Self-knowledge

One of the major findings in this study was the way in which the making visible the self, with the knowledge of the strengths and weaknesses over time development within the context of class theater. There are multiple records that link the participation in drama class and self-knowledge. The techniques and tools common to theater were central to the proper understanding of the strengths and weaknesses.

"I was always very shy, timid and I think that helped a lot." (DG-2F, lines 121-122)  
 "We have no idea of our shortcomings and theater helps us to know them. It's good because we're correcting." (GD-5F, lines 146-147)

This journey of personal (re) construction is essential to the formation of authenticity. This justifies that "a theatre course marks us for the rest of our lives." (E1, line 985)

"... the theater allows them to be themselves, and allow their self-knowledge especially for adolescents it would be important." (GD-6F, lines 208-210)

In the following table it is possible to register the presence of high scores in all variables, especially the notes that register the recognition of students against the importance of theater in the process of personal knowledge.

| Variables  | Male |      | Female |      |
|--|------|------|--------|------|
|  | M    | DP   | M      | DP   |
| I got to know my strengths better.               | 4,03 | ,605 | 4,08   | ,532 |
| I recognized my weaknesses.                      | 4,03 | ,605 | 3,95   | ,857 |
| I got to know new skills.                        | 4,03 | ,547 | 4,21   | ,522 |
| The theater has helped me to know myself better. | 4,23 | ,669 | 4,41   | ,677 |

**Table 5 - Variables by gender**

We note that both genders admit they improved their self-knowledge of their weaknesses, as well as of their strengths. In line with what has been observed in previous points, except for the knowledge of some weaknesses, it seems that are the woman who seems to benefit more from theater, with the highest levels in three variables, which affects their daily practices.

An analysis of the distribution of means and standard deviations in function of age, does not allow to observe the existence of a pattern.

| Variables  |    | Age ranges |       |       |       |       |       |
|--|----|------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
|  |    | 10-19      | 20-29 | 30-39 | 40-49 | 50-59 | 70-79 |
| I got to know my strengths better.               | M  | 4,22       | 4,05  | 3,63  | 4,33  | 4,25  | 3,00  |
|  | DP | ,441       | ,510  | ,518  | ,707  | ,500  | -     |
| I recognized my weaknesses.                      | M  | 4,11       | 4,00  | 3,75  | 3,89  | 4,25  | 4,00  |
|  | DP | ,928       | ,688  | ,463  | 1,167 | ,500  | -     |
| I got to know new skills.                        | M  | 4,22       | 4,13  | 4,00  | 4,11  | 4,25  | 4,00  |
|  | DP | ,441       | ,570  | ,535  | ,601  | ,500  | -     |
| The theater has helped me to know myself better. | M  | 4,11       | 4,28  | 4,38  | 4,44  | 4,75  | 5,00  |
|  | DP | ,928       | ,605  | ,744  | ,726  | ,500  | -     |

**Table 6 - Variables in relation to age**

The high scores are a constant throughout all age groups, with particular emphasis in the 10-19 years old and 50-59 years old intervals. These participants, for the features that come with the age group they belong to, seem to be the ones that most development self-knowledge.

#### 4. Discussion

The elements that converge around the word theater have, in essence, a complex transformation process that binds the individual to the character that is representing either as an actor or as a protagonist who represents herself or, as proposed by Augusto Boal, as a *spect-actor* (Boal, 2000). The instances in which this bond takes place allow composing concepts and possibilities of action of dramatic language. According to Rogers (2009), the human being the resources necessary to develop and understand him, and yet there are some necessary conditions to facilitate the process, causing her to be authentic, necessarily without masks.

Accepting that theatrical spaces cultivate freedom and enjoyment of emotions, it appears that on entering of the experiences of intellectual, physical and intuitive dimension, theater helps the individual to enter a climate prone to discoveries, thereby making visible all that is invisible.

Overall, the results obtained in the first sub-point demonstrate the consistent presence of feelings of enthusiasm and motivation experienced by the participants in drama classes. In parallel, the theatrical spaces seem to have emerged and contributed to the intense moments of joy, leading to the experience of pleasurable sensations that in the current context of social despair, seems to be very important.

In opposition to the logic of theatre training as a simple animation feature, the results embodied in the register of these feelings seem to have contributed to the fact that the individuals were capable of releasing their emotions, predisposing them to a greater attention to their emotions and the emotions of others.

These achievements can be decisive for the human being to access its psychological layers that tend to remain buried, which is fundamental to the development of skills and traits involved either with emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995), and with the intrapersonal intelligence (Gardner, 1995).

Given the lack of a pattern associated with age we are to believe that the experiences configure themselves as essential for all ages in this study, particularly for young people to the extent that the indicators are located in the young age group with 23, 4% unemployment (INE, 2010).

Being considered by many as the most critical period, specially involving the stage of adolescence and youth, lead us to stress the importance of the results obtained from the younger population. If we consider that during the ministrations of the courses, about 40% of participants were over the age range that includes the teens (10-19 years old) and 37% were located in the next interval, we stress the importance of theater with implications for the level of emotional maturity of the young. These elements could be essential in the identity construction of the young people in that, according to the theoretical concepts exposed by some authors (Erikson, 1976), may be decisive in overcoming the stage a tension and crisis.

With regards the second subcategory observed, we note that the theatre course seems to have been instrumental in developing the internal resources of participants, materializing in the improvement of self-control, adaptability, resistance to criticism, confidence and self-esteem. The changes observed in both genders, with particular emphasis on the group of women, seem to have been decisive so that the students were able to mobilize internal strategies. The activation of these strategies allowed the development of the adaptability that is essential for everyone, especially the older students were able to overcome old fears. As stated by Caughlan (2008), these are achievements that contribute to strengthening self-acceptance and self-esteem and developing authenticity the human being.

We believe that these issues are of particular relevance to human development, as in being able to take risks, properly controlling anxious moments, we will be able to say that theater contributes to human beings activating its own resources (Rogers, 2009). Some of the core capabilities are thus gathered due to the many demands that are presented to the human being, in particular today.

Finally, and regarding the discussion of the last category, we note remarkable changes in the areas of self-knowledge, which seems to benefit from the context of teaching practices with the theater. The discourses that emerge from the interviews and group discussions reinforce the general understanding that the spaces of reassurance, formed around the fertile ground of the theater, are essential for the formation of a broader level of knowledge.

It is only in the weaknesses awareness that men group performs better, being women, the ones who seem to benefit from the better level of self-knowledge. Again, these elements can be structures support for women, the group most affected with unemployment and the precariousness of work (INE, 2010), to adopt behaviors more consistent with these findings, helping them to overcome periods of increased difficulty.

An observation on the basis of the age group enable us to record high gains at all ages, with special attention to the younger group and for those who are in the range 50-59 years old. The latter age group includes in itself a universe of great difficulties due to face unemployment situations (INE, 2010). Already close to retirement, and marked by gains and losses across their life span (Baltes, 1987), these participants find in theater the facility to reveal their attributes, understanding, advocated by several authors (Pino Juste, 2001; Ribeiro, 2009; Tejerina Lobo, 2005).

## **5. Conclusion**

Evidence gathered during the empirical research is particularly suggestive of our understanding of the virtuosity of the theater in the realm of the personal dimension. From the various dimensions of human development, the sense of earnings in the personal dimension is suggested to us to be central by the protagonists of this study.

In a study of a particular case, the findings may not be extended to other contexts, being merely a source of clues for further research. Nevertheless, we argue that our results are important elements of reflection, able to defy the logic of the market trend to which we all tend to be subdued. In particular, it became evident that the theater by its intrinsic and extrinsic resources. It was especially important in the development of emotional feelings and skills because they are central to individual it able to mobilize its internal resources, conducting themselves in a harmonious existence.

To the feelings of enthusiasm, joy and motivation, we add the development of self-control, adaptability, confidence, self-esteem and self-awareness, essential parts to the human. As noted, the gains recorded here assume its centrality in the group of women and in all ages. However, some of these gains are even more impressive when considering the singularities of certain age groups. Such is the case of the group of teenagers who, when faced with a fragile self, accompanied by low self-esteem, can suffer serious difficulties in establishing their identity, with negative effects on the process of socio-professional integration.

As regards Cyrulnik (2003), the resilience process comprises a harmonized set of phenomena that enable humans to enter into an emotional, social and cultural context. By being able to appeal to their resources, the individual will be better able to fight the torrents, including those resulting from the economic crisis that overshadows portuguese daily life.

Moreover, we consider the established governing bodies, and in particular, local authorities, as essential parts to build a society closer to the human being. We suggest that the governing bodies and governments continue investing in training. Training in theater is a necessary journey for the construction of pathways that stimulate the pleasure of experiencing, knowing, evolve and change. We believe that society should benefit from the resources provided by the theater, whose educational, social and playful action connects to the development of human beings - citizen as social actor.

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