THE POETICS AND POLITICS OF EMPATHY: THEATRE AS EDUCATION

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AUTHOR NOTE

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ABSTRACT

This article is built upon the premise that there is an urgent need to create a kinder, more cooperative world in order to address the crises which threaten to destroy it. The key component in this enterprise is empathy, and theatre can play a major role in training young people in the exercise of empathy. Recent developments in neuroscience (Bråten, 2007; Damasio, 1994; Denes, 2016; Singer & Lamm, 2009; Stamenov & Gallese, 2002) have demonstrated that the human brain"s capacity for empathy can be strengthened by frequent use. In addition, the discovery of so-called mirror neurons has revealed the extent to which the operation of our brains reflects the way in which theatre is also conceived. We are in a state of constant dialogue with ourselves and, due to the way mirror neurons stimulate us when we observe the actions and words of others, we respond like theatre audiences. Given this new scientific data, I propose that curricula in formal education need to be reconceived to take account of neurological understandings, resulting in the placing of drama processes/methodologies at their core.

Keywords: empathy, neuroscience, theatre, education

LA POÉTICA Y POLÍTICA DE LA EMPATÍA: EL TEATRO COMO EDUCACIÓN

RESUMEN

Este artículo se basa en la premisa de que existe una necesidad urgente de crear un mundo más amable y cooperativo para hacer frente a las crisis que amenazan con destruirlo. El componente clave de esta empresa es la empatía, y el teatro puede desempeñar un papel importante en la formación de los jóvenes en el ejercicio de esta. Desarrollos recientes en neurociencia (Bråten, 2007; Damasio, 1994; Denes, 2016; Singer & Lamm, 2009; Stamenov & Gallese, 2002) han demostrado que la capacidad del cerebro humano para la empatía puede fortalecerse mediante su uso frecuente. Además, el descubrimiento de las llamadas neuronas espejo ha puesto de manifiesto hasta qué punto el funcionamiento de nuestro cerebro refleja la forma en que también se concibe el teatro. Estamos en un estado de diálogo constante con nosotros mismos y, por la forma en que las neuronas espejo nos estimulan cuando observamos las acciones y palabras de los demás, respondemos como el público de un teatro. En vista de estos nuevos datos científicos, propongo que los currículos de la educación formal necesitan ser rediseñados para tener en cuenta estos descubrimientos neurológicos, lo que resulta en la colocación de procesos/metodologías dramáticas en su núcleo.

Palabras clave: empatía, neurociencia, teatro, educación

A POÉTICA E A POLÍTICA DA EMPATIA: O TEATRO COMO EDUCAÇÃO

RESUMO

Este artigo parte da premissa de que é urgente criar um mundo mais gentil e cooperativo para enfrentar as crises que ameaçam destruí-lo. A componente chave deste empreendimento é a empatia, e o teatro pode desempenhar um papel importante na formação de jovens para exercê-la. Desenvolvimentos recentes na neurociência (Bråten, 2007; Damasio, 1994; Denes, 2016; Singer & Lamm, 2009; Stamenov & Gallese, 2002) mostraram que a capacidade de empatia do cérebro humano pode ser fortalecida pelo uso frequente. Além disso, a descoberta dos chamados neurônios-espelho revelou até que ponto o funcionamento do nosso cérebro reflete a forma como o teatro também é concebido. Estamos em um estado de diálogo constante com nós mesmos e, por causa da maneira como os neurônios-espelho nos estimulam quando observamos as ações e palavras dos outros, respondemos como uma plateia de teatro. Diante desses novos dados científicos, proponho que os currículos da educação formal precisam ser redesenhados para levar em conta essas descobertas neurológicas, resultando na colocação de processos/metodologias dramáticas em seu núcleo.

Palavras-chave: empatia, neurociência, teatro, educação

THE POETICS AND POLITICS OF EMPATHY: THEATRE AS EDUCATION

What I am proposing in this article is that "critical empathy" needs to be placed at the centre of curricula in formal and non-formal education, and that theatre is the most effective vehicle through which such critical empathy can be "taught". By critical empathy I understand a process by which an empathic connection is created with another person, whether real or fictional, before that connection is then distanced or framed in ways which enable a critical examination of it. Critical empathy asserts the importance of empathy as a psychosocial means of achieving cohesion between individuals and societies while simultaneously recognising the dangers of "unframed" empathy. The motive for this emphasis arises from nothing more or less than the survival of the human species. Survival is not possible if we continue in our current practices of consumption of finite resources and competition based on the divisions promoted by nationalism and its cognate partner consumer capitalism. The OECD"s position paper *The Future of Education and Skills 2030* lays out the situation clearly:

> Children entering school in 2018 will need to abandon the notion that resources are limitless and are there to be exploited; they will need to value common prosperity, sustainability, and well-being. They will need to be responsible and empowered, placing collaboration above division, and sustainability above short-term gain.
>
> In the face of an increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous world, education can make the difference as to whether people embrace the challenges they are confronted with or whether they are defeated by them (OECD, 2018).

If this was true in 2018, the COVID pandemic has further underlined the importance of global co-operation and empathic collective action in meeting challenges – COVID, climate change – which do not respect national boundaries. The core question I am posing in this article is: *how* can education make a difference? Furthermore, if education is so important in human development, why has it, at most times and in most places, failed to address the big issues facing the survival of the species? I write from the comfort of a "developed" global North perspective where formal education is available to all children. The formal curriculum in the Anglosphere is increasingly inept at offering a problem-solving approach to the great issues that threaten to overwhelm the young people in its schools. However, the question still resonates with non-formal and informal education as well. Popular education has a long and distinguished history in Latin America (Boal, 1979, 1992, 1995, 1998; Freire, 1972, 1974, 1978, 1985, 1998; Kane, 2001). The accumulated wisdom of the continent forms a solid foundation from which to build a new curriculum capable of responding both to the needs of its diverse inhabitants and to the perilous condition of our planet. This formal curriculum will be framed within Freirean pedagogy and delivered through applied arts which offer training in empathy. The pedagogy advocated by Paulo Freire is grounded in the idea that our understanding of the world derives from an encounter between each person"s lived experience, and that new knowledge is exposed through the dialogues between the teacher as student and the student as teacher:

> Dialogue is the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world...

> Dialogue cannot exist, however, in the absence of a profound love for the world and for men. The naming of the world, which is an act of creation and re-creation, is not possible if it is not infused with love (Freire, 1972, pp. 61-62).

Freire"s (1972) insistence on the primacy of love as the bedrock of dialogical pedagogy points to a significant role for empathy in the educational process; a process which can only operate as "the practice of freedom" (pp. 60-95) if we, the learners, are open to feel and understand the experience of others. Boal"s (1979) transposition of this pedagogy into a theatrical form demonstrates how theatre can use fiction to generate a new reality but that reality can only come into being if it takes account of concrete experience:

> Often a person is very revolutionary when in a public forum he envisages and advocates revolutionary and heroic acts; on the other hand, he often realises that things are not so easy when he himself has to practice what he suggests...
>
> Maybe the theatre itself is not revolutionary, but these theatrical forms are without doubt a *rehearsal of revolution.* The truth of the matter is that the spectator-actor practices a real act even though he does it in a fictional manner (pp. 139, 141).

THEATRE

While theatre can be many things, it is also a process which formalises, intensifies, and reflects the way in which we all conduct our lives, moment by moment. Even in those moments when we are not in the presence of another, we rehearse the pattern of our thoughts; we plot the next action of our lives; we calculate our response to information from the outside world. Performance is not turned on and off like a tap; rather it is the continuous state of being conscious. To be a living human is to be an actor. Judith Butler"s (2006) work on the fluidity of identity offers a philosophical analysis of this notion. However, unless we choose to engage in theatre, we are typically the actors of our own characters. We ask ourselves how we, the characters, will act or speak in a given situation. Those who engage in formal theatre ask themselves how another, different character will act or speak in a given situation or, in the case of a scripted drama, why those particular words and actions have been allocated to that character. In theatre, the daily, the frequently unconscious or semi-conscious business of living becomes a process in which mind and body, or, more properly, embodied mind makes highly self-conscious decisions which are worked on and subjected to the rigours of the rehearsal room. This becomes a process of organised empathy whereby the actor, in order to make credible the portrayal of the role, attempts to engage with the thoughts, feelings, and actions of the character as if she were actually that character. The deeper the exploration of character, the more the actor discovers about herself; how she would think, feel, and act in a comparable situation. As audiences we might be taken over by the illusion and, thanks to the responses generated by mirror neurons (see the next section of this article), enter into an empathic relationship with the character. If unconvinced, we mostly detach ourselves from the moment declaring the character unrealistic or the acting stilted.

There is also another position created by the framing effect of the theatrical form. An audience member experiences an empathic connection with the character while

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simultaneously becoming aware of the wider social consequences arising from the behaviour of that character and, by extension, of the empathised audience. The theatre thereby can be used as a laboratory for testing the limits and consequences of empathy through the application of critical distance. The results of such proposed tests have important outcomes for the conduct of social living and, even more, for the possibilities for social change. This is the vision which Bertolt Brecht espoused for his type of epic, and later dialectical, theatre:

> I wanted to apply to the theatre the principle that it is important not only to interpret the world, but to change it. The changes, whether big or small, that ensued from this intention – an intention which I only gradually came to recognize – were only ever changes within the framework of theatre... (Kuhn *et al.*, 2014, p. 251).

It is within this theatrical framework that the elements necessary for social change can be tried out. The theatre demonstrates that empathic engagement, the capacity to feel the position of another, is the mainspring of action that might produce social change.

> As she was standing between courtyard and gate,
> She heard or thought she heard a low voice calling.
> The child called to her,
> Not whining, but calling quite sensibly,
> Or so it seemed to her.
> "Woman", it said, "help me".
> And it went on, not whining, but saying quite sensibly:
> "Know, woman, he who hears not a cry for help
> But passes by with troubled ears will never hear
> The gentle call of a lover nor the blackbird at dawn
> Nor the happy sigh of the tired grape-picker as the Angelus rings".
> [*She walks a few steps toward the* CHILD *and bends over it.*]
> Hearing this she went back for one more look at the child:
> Only to sit with him for a moment or two,
> Only till someone should come,
> His mother, or anyone.
> [*Leaning on a trunk, she sits facing the* CHILD.]
> Only till she would have to leave, for danger was too great,
> The city was full of flame and crying.
> [*The light grows dimmer, as though evening and night were coming on.*]
> Fearful is the seductive power of goodness!
> [GRUSHA *now settles down to watch over the* CHILD *through the night. Once, she lights a small lamp to look at it. Once, she tucks it in with a coat. From time to time she listens and looks whether someone is coming.*]
> And she sat with the child a long time,
> Till evening came, till night came, till dawn came.
> She sat too long, too long she saw
> The soft breathing, the small, clenched fists,
> Till toward morning the seduction was complete
> And she rose, and bent down and, sighing, took the child
> And carried it away.
> [*She does what the* SINGER *says as he describes it.*]

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> As if it was stolen goods, she picked it up.
> As if she was a thief, she crept away (Brecht, 1966, pp. 138-139).

In this example Brecht depicts a moment certain to arouse an empathic connection to Grusha but does so using theatre"s capacity for aesthetic distance. Grusha exhibits empathy for the baby and therefore wishes to rescue it from immediate danger while the audience experiences empathy for Grusha because her altruistic feelings result in danger to herself. Simultaneously, the Singer reminds the audience of the wider socio-political context into which Grusha is being drawn. By exploiting the epic possibilities of his theatre, Brecht succeeds in showing at once that empathy lies at the core of action, but, of itself, is not enough to achieve social change unless accompanied by sustainable, strategic goals which are enabled by critical distancing. The point is made directly by Brecht in the dialogue from the *Katzgraben Notes*:

> *Hurwicz*: But you"re anti-empathy, Brecht.
>
> *B.*: Me? No. I"m in favour of it, at a certain stage of rehearsals. It"s just that something else is needed as well, namely an attitude to the character you"re empathising with, a social evaluation (Kuhn *et al.*, 2014, p. 262).

This "social evaluation" is closely linked in Brecht"s theatre to the notion of "historicization" (Silberman et al., 2015, pp. 156-158). The performance draws attention to the historical moment in which the character acts so that the audience can see what social forces were dictating aspects of that character"s behaviour and how changes to social structures enable people to behave differently. Through empathy we engage with the situation of a character while simultaneously, through critical or historicised empathy, we perceive that conditions and with them, people, are in a constant state of change; in Freirean terminology, we are incomplete and always in a state not of being but of becoming (Freire, 1998).

This combination of empathy with critical distance is the aim of applied theatre which most often works with those whom Augusto Boal named "non-actors". The goal may be personal and/or social change but the process involves an engagement with the Other, resulting in a change to the position depicted at the outset. This is why Brecht spoke of intervention as a core theatrical principle: an intervention into the *status quo* in order to produce a new reality. The application of theatre to a point of psychological or sociological *stasis* is intended to provide the motivation to seek change. Typically, an applied or social theatre process is initiated by the telling of stories. Participants recount aspects of their lives in the form of narratives which illustrate the barriers, internal and/or external, to their self-development. Story-telling moves into drama when other members of the group are co-opted into the roles required for the dramatisation of that story. Once the story is opened out in this way, it begins to move away from being a private, personal recollection into the communal property of the participants, each of whom brings her own life experience to bear upon the role assigned to her. Should the intention be to create a piece of theatre for an audience, rather than confine the drama to the workshop, this becomes public property susceptible to all the interpretations and felt responses of each member of that audience. Boal developed the figure of the Joker in order to focus those responses in ways which transcend a simple empathic response to the oppressed person. Part of the Joker"s role is to channel empathy

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towards community and personal change, always grounded in the reality emanating from lived experience:

> We propose a "Joker" who is a contemporary and neighbour of the spectator. For this it is necessary to restrict his "explanations"; it is necessary to move him away from the other characters, to bring him close to the spectators. Within this system, the "explanations" given periodically are designed to make the performance develop on two different and complementary levels: that of the fable (which can use all the conventional imaginative resources of the theatre), and that of the "lecture", in which the "Joker" becomes an exegete (Boal, 1979, p. 175).

The Joker prevents the audience from being swept along on a cathartic tide of empathy, directing that tide instead against the walls of injustice and inequality. Boal"s description fits the character of Azdak in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* precisely. He constantly offers a perspective which requires the audience to look again at what it is seeing. This "double seeing" was rendered yet more sophisticated in the original Berliner Ensemble production directed by Brecht in 1954 through the device of having the Singer and Azdak played by the same actor.

Professional actors are trained to represent the thoughts, emotions, and consciousness of another. That is their craft. Non-actors, those who are employing performance to express their reality rather than to earn a living, offer up their own stories or their own responses to events which they have encountered first-hand. Theatre is always a re-presentation of lived experience, not the experience as it happens. Therefore, even when someone is telling her own story, she is retelling it; like an artist, the narrative is being shaped. Some incidents are omitted while others are highlighted, and the telling is adjusted as the teller gauges the reactions of the listeners. A psychological distance, however small, opens up between the teller of the narrative and the subject of the narration. This gap between the actor and the character, one the protagonist in reality, the other the protagonist in the fiction, enables the actor to establish a critical distance from her own actions and feelings which may lead to a change in behaviour or the taking of a different decision. When this process transforms into a drama, the subject becomes a character in her own story. This distance enables her to view herself from the outside and to make critical judgements about herself. Might she have acted differently? Could she have behaved in a manner which produced a different outcome? Even when the actor and the character are the same person the process of theatre creates a dialectical relationship between empathy and distance which alters the nature of each.

The Italian drama therapist Salvo Pitruzzella (2017) observes that the theatrical process is inherently therapeutic because it opens a space for dialogue between ourselves, the actors, and our virtual others, the characters, while in the same moment enabling a critical reflection upon that relationship:

> Creative acts produce aesthetical distance. This is one of the key functions of the dramatic process as conceived in dramatherapy. Differently from the theatre performances, which, once started, ought to be driven to the end ("the show must go on"), the dramatic reality established in dramatherapy is constantly reversible. At any moment, the actor can take a step back, exiting for a while from the dramatic reality, in order to observe it from outside.

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> When the emotional weight of the character becomes overwhelming, or too painful to be handled, it is always possible to utter: "This is not me", and put ourselves in a Brechtian "epic" position (p. 133).

This movement of the actor in and out of the character describes the typical process of improvisation from an applied theatre workshop. Traditionally the difference between applied theatre and dramatherapy has been the emphasis of the former upon social action whereas the latter deals predominantly with psychological change. However, Pitruzzella"s use of Brecht as a stimulus for his dramatherapy groups has largely dissolved this distinction, as he made clear in a recent chapter (Prentki and Abraham, 2021, pp. 245-251).

The nature of the intersubjective matrix as articulated by Pitruzzella is of an endlessly malleable trialogue of actor, character, and audience. This is how human consciousness operates in its infinite negotiations with its virtual other. The particular significance of an applied theatre process is that it frames or makes conscious that which we engage in automatically in order that we can critique the encounter and thereby make changes to our own behaviours and, where possible, to the world around us:

> The boundaries between the actor and the audience, as well as the distance between the actor and its role, become flexible and permeable and sometimes they vanish entirely. Each of us is an actor, audience, and character at the same time, and narrations become scenarios for improvising in a relentless process of creation and representation, into which the world"s stage and our inner theatre... overlap and interconnect (Pitruzzella, 2017, p. 106).

The so-called "safe space" of an applied theatre workshop is created in order that many of the typical social constraints and self-consciousness that govern our daily interactions can be suspended in the interest of discovering deeper emotional resonances and profound empathic connections between the self and the other. Paradoxically, while safe from the thoughtless judgements typified by today"s anti-social media, we are able to enter the territory of the unspeakable beyond the realm of common sense in order to experience the possibilities of other ways of organising our social and personal living.

> In drama, the world of narrations that each person has created finds space and non-judgemental welcoming. They can be respectfully explored, recounted in many different styles, they can be transformed, and their meaning can change. People"s stories mutually reverberate and influence each other, and they provide the raw materials to create new stories, the stories of change (Pitruzzella, 2017, p. 109).

The key quality which enables social and individual change is imagination, allied to the reality of lived experience. Applied theatre is a process whereby the participants bring their realities in the form of stories into a creative space where they can be subjected to the possibility of different outcomes. It is at once free of the constraints of lived experience and grounded in responses to that experience. The drama workshop can be a space for the unlocking of the collective imagination. Improvisation requires not only the acceptance of the actions and words offered by another, but also the possibility of the taking of those words and actions in new directions that might lead to new insights into psychosocial motivations.

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The drama process, whether located in formal theatre or in the multiple contexts of social theatre, is the closest external replication of the internal neurological patterns of our brains.

It turns out that, as we observe the behaviour of other individuals, our brain appears to share a rich mosaic of neural activity with the observed individuals, including representations of his bodily actions, his feelings, and his facial expressions (Keysers, 2011, p. 112). Keysers observation reflects the process of a drama workshop or play rehearsal where what he describes becomes the business which engages all participants (Howard-Jones, Winfield & Crimmins, 2008; O'Grady, 2020; Zaki, 2019, pp. 47-51). We are, whether we wish it or not, living in a continual dramatic scenario in dialogue with our virtual other or with the characters we encounter in our everyday lives. The advantage of engaging self-consciously in the drama process is that our awareness of how we function is raised to a point where we can be self-critical as a prerequisite of potential personal and social change:

> Drama can be the place where body, relationships, knowledge, roles, and narratives, gradually and delicately, can be put again into play; we can play with them, disassembling and then reassembling them, and creatively redefining and recombining them. We can let them encounter others" bodies, relationships, knowledge, roles, and narratives, building a new intersubjective matrix that can temporarily replace the old worn out one, enabling us to acknowledge, explicitly or implicitly, that things can change, and changes are doing us no harm. By communicating with others, we can allow ourselves to be influenced and inspired by them, and revive our empathic predispositions, helping each other in our own search for new balances (Pitruzzella, 2017, p. 107).

NEUROSCIENCE

The full implications of recent discoveries in the field of the neuroscience of the human brain (Bråten, 1998; Stamenov & Gallese, 2002; Stern, 2000), enabled by the invention of fMRI scanning[1], are only now in the process of being felt across a range of disciplines. One of those is theatre and its subdiscipline, applied or social theatre. I am neither qualified nor intend to offer a scientific response to the work being conducted in neuroscience, but I do wish to consider implications for applied theatre and, even more specifically, for theatre as an educational process aimed at the development of a kinder, more humane world than the one we currently experience.

In order to appreciate the significance of recent research into these neurological structures it is necessary to disabuse ourselves of many of the foundations upon which Western philosophy, particularly since the Enlightenment, has been based. The binary of mind versus body runs deep in our cultural histories and is at the core of Judeo/Christian mythology from the expulsion from Eden onwards. It has led to a mistrust of emotions and a belief in the superiority of our reasoning capacity. This is a fundamental distortion of how

1 Functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) detects changes in blood flow and oxygen levels that result from brain activity. It uses the magnetic field of the scanner to affect the magnetic nuclei of hydrogen atoms, so they can be measured and converted into images.

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our brains operate as expressed by Dutch neuroscientist Christian Keysers (2011):

> We have to stop thinking in dualistic terms that assert the conscious logical rational mind in opposition to gut reactions. The body, brain, and conscious mind are partners, in permanent exchange. Many of the important processes for social cognition in particular occur inside the brain but outside the conscious mind (p. 105).

Such a partnership gives rise to the notion of embodied knowledge (Merleau-Ponty, 2013) which is fundamental to an activity such as theatre in which body, brain, and conscious mind are all employed in the service of social cognition directed at representations of the world as we experience it and, sometimes, as we may wish to change it. The artificial separation of body from mind has been a contributory factor in the recent rise in populism witnessed around the globe. In particular, in relation to climate change there has been a tendency for governments to temper what experience of climate change has taught them in order to associate themselves with popular messages, even at the cost of planetary survival. The attempt to separate knowledge from embodied experience will produce fatal consequences for us all, whereas an understanding of how lived experience works, in partnership with a growing awareness of what must be done to mitigate and finally reverse global warming, is the only hope for life on earth.

Once free of the false Cartesian binary of body/mind (*"je pense, donc je suis"*), (Descartes, 2005), the gate into a large field of post-humanist discourses is opened (Damasio, 1994; Braidotti, 2019). Within this contextual frame, the importance of the identification of what has been termed "mirror neurons", initially achieved through the work of Vittorio Gallese and his team at the University of Parma, becomes evident. Daniel Stern describes the operation of mirror neurons as follows:

> The visual information received when watching another act gets mapped on to the equivalent motor representation in our own brain by the activity of these mirror neurons. It permits us to directly participate in another"s actions, without having to imitate them (Bråten, 2007, pp. 36-37).

As James Thompson has suggested in conversation with the author, the term mirror neuron is therefore too limiting to encompass this process. Rather than a mirror which can only imitate, albeit with distortion, these neurons are the means by which we enter into an empathic relationship with another. Sympathy, telepathy, and empathy all lead to the transmission of feelings generated by watching and listening to another. In other words, in the social interactions of our daily lives we are constantly behaving like a theatre audience, reading and responding. Keysers (2011) expresses it thus:

> It turns out that, as we observe the behaviour of other individuals, our brain appears to share a rich mosaic of neural activity with the observed individual, including representations of his bodily actions, his feelings, and his facial expressions (p. 112).

This interpretation of the actions of mirror neurons falls into line with Colin Trevarthen"s (1995) work on consciousness which he developed in part through observation of musicality in young children:

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> The human consciousness seems to emerge from a completely non-rational, non-verbal, concept-less and totally non-theoretical potential for participation and communication with other persons that one can see first in infants (p. 8).

Trevarthen"s observations were endorsed by the experiments of Stern who coined the term "intersubjective matrix" to describe the core process of human development from the prenatal stage until the grave:

> In light of new evidence of other-centred participation shown by infants in their many forms of imitation, as well as the new findings on mirror neurons and adaptive oscillators, I am now convinced that early forms of intersubjectivity exist almost from the beginning of life (Stern, 2000, p. xxii).

Without intersubjectivity there is, in fact, no functioning human being, and the traumas and violence which afflict the lives of so many, damage the neural system in ways which inhibit the effective operation of that matrix. As Stern went on to express it: "Intersubjectivity is not simply a capacity, it is a condition of humanness" (Bråten, 2007, p. 36). This definition of what constitutes a human is a far cry from the vision of the isolated individual offered by Piaget"s view of child development and therefore requires a fundamental overhaul of formal systems of learning. I would, however, caution against any simplistic substitution of heteronomy for autonomy and suggest a dialectical rather than a binary assessment of their relationship. Elements of autonomy may prove essential for the wellbeing of each of us, even as any society is made up of individuals and any individual cannot function outside social frameworks.

Rather than any traditional binary which sets up an opposition between society and its individuals, the paradox offered by Ivar Frönes takes us closer to an understanding of the contradictions that comprise the ways in which empathy affects our notions of human relationships: "The more we know about others, the further, deeper, and more different the other becomes, while at the same time becoming closer" (Bråten, 2007, p. 215). We define ourselves through our relations with others, even as others define themselves through a network of relations which may include us. Part of that process of self-definition is an assessment of the ways in which we differ from others whom we perceive as close to us. The other who is merely a distant stereotype offers only difference, but the other to whom we relate shows us who we are and who we might become. In this eternal quest for a better understanding of being human, neuroscientific discoveries can work hand in hand with the social sciences and the humanities, involving a complete reconsideration of notions of identity.

The wiring of our brains not only exerts a profound influence upon our relations of empathy, but it also affects our understanding of ethics. Altruism, it transpires, is not necessarily altruistic, but rather an aspect of the way in which our emotions motivate our actions in relation to others:

> Shared circuits might be much more powerful than intellect when it comes to morals. We do not primarily think about whether it is right or wrong to make people suffer, we feel it (Keysers, 2011, p. 194).

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> Altruism is a component of the self and, in denying it, we damage ourselves. In the words of Karsten Hundeide: "the care of others is not only something we do for others, but something we do in order to recreate our own human subjectivity – our deepest moral core" (Bråten, 2007, p. 253).

EDUCATION

The place where most people are first likely to encounter a person from beyond their immediate family or neighbourhood circle is in a nursery, playgroup, formal school situation, or simply playing out on the street with other children. Young people"s brains have the greatest capacity for neuroplasticity.[2] Therefore, it is vital for their empathic growth that education offers continual and abundant opportunities to practise the art of empathy. Time is running out on our species to get education right. As with climate change, so with empathy; without changes to the ways in which we educate our children and ourselves, the human race will extinguish itself through selfishness, conflict, and apathy. I am not suggesting that education alone, still less theatre alone, can bring about the changes required for survival, but a fundamental reconsideration of how and why we educate ourselves in the light of new understandings of who we are, may be brought to bear upon the structural inequalities that govern our world. These structures are created and operated by people, and it is, finally, people who must change them. Unlike climate awareness, education has barely even recognised its problem. Psychologist Jamil Zaki (2019) expresses his concern thus:

> If you wanted to design a system to break empathy, you could scarcely do better than the society we"ve created. And in some ways, empathy *has* broken. Many scientists believe it"s eroding over time (p. 8).

The global migration of people from intimate, rural communities to an urban existence of overcrowded isolation has been proceeding ever since hunter-gatherer societies were displaced by settler-farming ones, but today the position has reached crisis point, fuelled not least by the internet. Ironically developed to improve and speed up communication between people who would otherwise not make contact with each other, all too often it has fallen prey to anti-social media where ideologies become battlefields and stereotypes are readily endorsed. However, it does not have to be so.

> ...the brain is not hardwired at all. It changes, and these shifts are not random. MRI studies have now repeatedly shown that our experiences, choices, and habits mould our brains. When people learn to play stringed instruments or juggle, parts of their brain associated with controlling their hands grow. When they suffer chronic stress or depression, parts of their brain associated with memory and emotion atrophy (Zaki, 2019, p. 20).

Our neuroplasticity enables our brains to be trained to expand our empathic capability. To create a more caring world, it should be the first duty of formal education to focus upon

2 "Neuroplasticity, also known as neural plasticity, or brain plasticity, is the ability of neural networks in the brain to change through growth and reorganisation. It is when the brain is rewired to function in some way that differs from how it previously functioned". Wikipedia [Accessed 31/08/2022]

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building empathy. This will require a fundamental realignment of the curriculum away from the traditional divisions into subject disciplines founded upon the false dichotomy of a mind/body split where knowledge can be imparted abstractly as a function of reason, and towards one which understands that the neurological structure of the brain is designed to develop embodied knowledge. Feeling is a key aspect of learning. Consequently, most learning needs to be grounded in the lived experience of the learner, not handed down by some exterior mechanism. Narrative lies at the heart of this process. As we learn about the stories of others and the contexts in which they lived, our capacity to empathise with them, a prerequisite of compassion is aroused. A connection is established with people from other times and other places without which a more caring world cannot exist.

Zaki (2019) cites the experiment conducted by Tania Singer based upon the Buddhist concept of *metta*, "loving-kindness meditation". Singer and her team:

> Examined not just their empathic physiology – how students" brains reacted to other people – but their anatomy as well: the shape and size of their cortex. Remarkably, they found that empathy-related parts of the brain grew in size after kindness training (pp. 48-49).

Other studies operating within this paradigm have demonstrated that acting training leads to improvement in the capacity to empathise with others. Regular use of the elements developed by the actor enables her to grow, physiologically and psychologically, the faculties that enhance the practice of empathy. The three phases which constitute the concept are sharing, thinking about, and caring about. These are also features of applied or social theatre. Where formal theatre depends upon sharing and thinking about, only the process of application leads into the territory of caring about which relates to compassion and the taking of action as a consequence of compassionate engagement.

These understandings are underlined by the results of the Drama Improves Lisbon Key Competences in Education (DICE) research project into the effects of educational theatre, conducted over two years in twelve European Union partner countries. The results were published in 2010:

> ...we believe that there is a competence not mentioned among the Key Competences, which is the universal competence of what it is to be human. We have called this competence "All this and more" and included it in the discussion of the research results. (Drama Improves Lisbon Key Competences in Education, n.d.)

Therefore, the exposure to drama processes during formal education, I believe, has the effect of increasing the chances of the young person developing the capacity to achieve her human potential; a potential which is intimately associated with the ability to relate empathically to other members of the species. If the findings of the DICE project are to be taken seriously, drama/theatre has to occupy a central position in the curriculum. Nothing is more important than offering young people the chance to experience what it is to be human; to create spaces where their agency puts them in empathic relationships with others in contexts where they can critique that experience and release their innate creativity in order to imagine a different world. Unless education highlights this aspiration, it will continue along its current, deadly path of training young people as fodder for a job market ("employability")

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that will not exist by the time they are ready to take up their place in it. This is not just a matter of ensuring that drama finds a place somewhere in a traditional curriculum, but rather involves a reconceptualising of that curriculum based upon our recently discovered insights into the operation of the human brain. This means creating a dramatic curriculum: that is, a curriculum which puts experiential learning at its heart and teaches as many of the standard disciplines as possible via the medium of human stories that create opportunities for learners to engage empathically in the situations of the characters. Not only will this practice give rise to embodied knowledge in the learner, but it will also result in a *de facto* empathy training which, if sustained throughout the period of school attendance, will increase the empathic capacity of future generations and may, in all likelihood, stimulate changes in the structure of their brains.

My contention is that the type of relational empathy (Freire) stimulated by the practice of theatre (Boal), allied to the historicising processes that give rise to an understanding of the effects of social conditions upon human behaviour (Brecht) should form the bedrock of any curriculum designed to address the potentially overwhelming problems with which our species is confronted today.

CONCLUSION

Ten years ago, I concluded an article on theatre as personal, social, and political change with these words:

> We are not saying: "Wouldn"t it be nice to have such provision for our children?" We are saying that the building of a more just world – a world capable of surviving without destroying the planet – depends upon it. In the words commonly attributed to [Abraham] Lincoln, "The philosophy of the school room in one generation will be the philosophy of government in the next" (Prentki and Pammenter, 2014).

Today, thanks to the work of neuroscientists and neuropsychologists I am more convinced than ever that the way to a more humane world is signposted by empathy and a vital means of developing more empathic humans is through the practice of drama and theatre. Zaki (2019) concludes:

> It"s easy to live in a less intentional way. Building a new sort of empathy takes effort and sacrifice, for people who might not repay it. But in the face of escalating cruelty and isolation, we are fighting for our moral lives. Doing what"s easy is seldom worthwhile, and in moments like these, it"s dangerous. We each have a choice, and the sum of our choices will create the future (p. 173).

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