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The theater games and the construction of symbolic knowledge: from playing to a meaningful experience

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Abstract

This article aims to analyze the practice of the theater games by Viola Spolin (1906-1994) in her construction of the symbolic form and as a driver of meaningful experience (Dewey 1859-1952). The definition of symbolic form will be based on the writings of the philosopher Ernst Cassirer (1874-1945) and the philosopher and educator Susana Langer (1895-1985). For these thinkers, the symbolic is presented as a fundamental element of knowledge and structuring of human culture in myth, religion, language, history, and art. The central problem of this research is based on theater-educational studies experienced by the authors, taking the practices of the theater games as a way of expanding knowledge for an integration of the being, as a cultural, social, and symbolic form being, in the construction of practices of significant acts in the world. Thus, the methodology used is the bibliographic review of the fundamental concepts of theater games in correlation with the construction of symbolic knowledge. We aim to understand art in the production of the symbolic context so that we can base the embodiment as a symbol. Such studies aim to promote the consummate experience of game practitioners in the theater-educational context, supported by the principle that the aesthetic experience played will enable the expansion of the player's experience so that they can re-signify their world, building autonomy and knowledge of/in the aesthetic experience in a constant process of living and learning, forged in the webs of culture.

Keywords

Theater games – Symbolic form – Experience – Cultural performances.

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Introduction

This article aims to study the theater games, as created and propelled by the actress, director, and educator Viola Spolin (1906-1994), from the perspective of constructing human symbolic knowledge as an educational act. Spolin, an immigrant of Russian origin in the United States, elaborated her multicultural methodology based on intense experiences of the immigrant reception houses of the United States (Hull House) and in Chicago in the 1920s. Thus, we will relate Spolin's practices and structuring concepts of game knowledge with the philosophical and symbolic form studies of Ernst Cassirer (1874-1945) and Susanne Langer (1895-1985). Cassirer understands ritual, myth, and art as concrete forms of expression of emotions. Thus, the aesthetic game experience, when aimed at teaching, permeates the creative imagination, the practice of social cooperation, the development of sensitivity, the improvisational game in the present time, the rules, and the intense relationship of exchanges between actor and audience, in a new construction of the world in the educational context.

The first act of this article is the understanding of art in the symbolic form context and how the symbolic form manifests itself, based on apprehension in the sensitive and pertinent field of the player, in the eventual sharing of their perception with non-alien spectators, and also participants in the experience developed. After analyzing and relating the concepts of the symbolic with the central themes and constituents of theater games, based on the research of Ernest Cassirer and Susanne Langer, we will bring the symbolic present in embodiment (also called physicalization² by many researchers), a founding and essential aspect for the understanding of theater games and the construction of the symbolic form in the educational/experiential act, having as a theoretical contribution the educator and philosopher John Dewey (1859-1952).

The methodology of this article is based on the practical-theoretical concepts established by Viola Spolin to deepen and relate the symbolic knowledge postulated by Cassirer and Langer, aiming at a teaching based on the living experience of the player-student, who is a symbolic being, producer of symbols, able to reflect and position themselves in the world in a self-governing, critical, and human way. We thus agree with Dewey (2010) in his *Art as Experience*:

[...] the experiences that art intensifies and amplifies neither exist solely inside ourselves, nor do they consist of relations apart from matter. The moments when the creature is both most alive and most composed and concentrated are those of fullest intercourse with the environment, in which sensuous material and relations are most completely merged. Art would not amplify experience if it withdrew the self into the self nor would the experience that results from such retirement be expressive. (DEWEY, 2010 [1934], p. 211).

As highlighted by Dewey, it will be the relationship between the self and the environment during the experience of the theater games that establishes a meaningful

2- "The term used by Spolin is "physicalization" and had been translated, in *Improvisação para o Teatro*, to "físicação." However, we revised the translation during the preparation of this work, considering the term "embodiment" as more correct." (KOUDELA, 1984, p. 51). Notably, this term comes from the studies of actor, director, and pedagogue Constantin Stanislavski (1889-1938).

experience. Based on significant experiences, it is clear that the drama, the conflict, and the lived experiences are part of and build our lives and society. Drama is action. In this sense, the experience is based on aspects of people's lives in acts of performance, in act, in action, in which they elaborate, build and rebuild their world through multiple experiences, dances, sounds, theaters, liturgies, games, rituals, and looks. This is how anthropologist John Dawsey (2005, p. 3) reflects on the question: "Social and symbolic universes recreate themselves from elements of chaos." Not just a restoration of culture but also an action of resignification, an ambivalent action.

As a concrete construction process of symbolic experience, the theater games presents itself as a methodology of artistic practice and human and social knowledge structured by games. The teacher and translator of Spolin's works, Ingrid Koudela (1984, p. 44), considers that "the process of theater games aims to effect the passage from the (subjective) dramatic game to the objective reality of the stage." However, from the perspective of Cassirer's symbolic form construction, we must consider both the theater games as a dramatic game and the theater itself as objective and subjective realities or, if you like, subjective, objective reality structured as a collective act. Both the theater games and the dramatic game and the theater aim to generate a new reality, like all art. The game of rules is a symbolic game; the dramatic game is a symbolic game; the theater is a symbolic game.

In this context, the theater games aims, through such activities, to provide/create/structure a new reality for the players. Thus, "the improvisation of a situation on stage has its organization, as in a game. The boy was not simply imitating, but working with the problem of giving reality to objects." (KOUDELA, 1984, p. 44-45). It should be noted that the teacher, during the theater games, also becomes an instructor of such a game and is called by us teacher-instructor.

Concerning the theatrical game in building meaningful experiences, transposing reality to the scene, and constructing new realities, many possibilities of understanding, study, and relationships can be used since the ludic and playing have always been part of the human experience. The German philosopher Ernest Cassirer understands the symbolic form as a fundamental element of knowledge and structuring of human culture: myth, religion, language, history, and art. The world, according to this author, is constantly recreated by us and we also build worlds in our experiences. In this sense, art and games are symbols that fulfill us as human beings, being able to recreate this world based on the experience they provide us. According to Spolin (2001), in her *File*, theater games enable the

Experience in thinking creatively and independently. Imagination and initiative develop rapidly in the atmosphere created by the teacher; Practice of social cooperation; Development of sensitivity to personal relationships and deep human sympathy through analyzing and performing various characters in different situations; Controlled emotional release; Independent thought experiments, expressing ideas clearly and effectively. An experience like this in improvisations results in the achievement of body and voice flexibility. (SPOLIN, 2001, p. 146).

For Spolin, creative imagination, the practice of social cooperation, the development of sensitivity to relationships, and human sympathy are practiced, deepened, and developed in the process of playing, in which the player, through collective acts of improvisation, becomes capable of expressing/producing their ideas in a critical and localized way, re-signifying their way of seeing and acting in the world.

The study of the symbolic form, as understood by Cassirer, provides opportunities for the practice of the theater games to understand the sensitive dimension of the subject better, understood as a symbolic being in action and production. The subject's symbolic interrelationship in the improvisational game would enable the self-liberation of the spirit, thus, a builder of cultures.

By establishing the practice of improvisational game, in terms of Viola Spolin, we understand that the player enters the game in the act of experience, in the process of becoming, in which there is a continuous physical and intellectual effort to act within the here and now in the situations that arise, and avoiding the predetermined. In other words, the role of the student player is understood. Likewise, the relationship with the audience, which is also in the game to contribute to the scene/action/resolution of the presented problem, and thus "When there is understanding of the role of the audience, complete release and freedom come to the player" (SPOLIN, 1998, p. 11-12).

It is worth mentioning that, in the theater games methodology, while some players are in the productive process of resolving the focus in the game (e.g., defining the Where/place in which the players meet without using words), others are as an audience active, aiming to contribute to the objective evaluation of the scene, without making value judgments. In this sense, Spolin reinforces:

Exhibitionism withers away when the student-actor begins to see members of the audience not as judges or censors or even as delighted friends but as a group with whom he is sharing an experience. (SPOLIN, 1998, p. 11-12).

Supporting this thought, it is worth mentioning that the theater games has in its beginnings that the player leaves their role of mere spectator to act in the scene, becoming a subject in action, in a shared experience. When they put themselves in this role, they find themselves in their sensitive dimension as a builder of culture, i.e., in the formation of symbolic elaboration, because "in addition to being a common activity carried out in a group, the game provides the involvement and freedom individual, important factors for the development of experience" (SPOLIN, 2001, p. 5). In this sense, the players' communication and expressiveness in front of the assistant appreciator are potential instruments of symbolic transmission.

Concerning the symbolic form, Cassirer, in *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture*, states that it is the spiritual energy that unites the sensitive material with the intellectual, i.e., the symbolic form is in the interconnection of the fact in itself and its meaning. The author reflects that as we advance in symbolic activity, the more physical reality recedes. In this sense, instead of simply dealing with this physical reality, man becomes involved with linguistic forms, mythical-religious symbols, and art. Man gets to know things through the interposition and construction

of this symbolic medium. Studies on art as a symbolic form incorporate themes such as aesthetic experience, imagination, memory, artistic creation, and psychological theories of art and the different perspectives developed on art throughout history.

According to Cassirer:

[...] art can embrace and pervade the whole sphere of human experience. Nothing in the physical or moral world, no natural thing and no human action, is by its nature and essence excluded from the realm of art, because nothing resists its formative and creative process. (CASSIRER, 1994, p. 258).

The author points out art's formative and creative process and its relationship with human experience so that all subjects experience it. In this scenario, the theater games brings together playing, which also permeates human life with art and language, in which both complete each other in experience, being able to recreate a new symbolic world, uniting playing itself with its artistic meaning and human. Man in full game establishes multiple possibilities for creation and experiences, transposing the common to the imagination, the aesthetic, and the creative.

Faced with the (re)creation of the symbolic world aiming at the imagination, the aesthetic, and the creative, what would be Langer and Cassirer's perception of art as a construction of symbolic knowledge? First, We use this questioning to understand how the philosophers mentioned above think of art in the symbolic context to analyze the theater games in this interrelationship.

Cassirer and Langer: the symbolic of (in) art

The philosopher and professor Susanne K. Langer (1971 [1942]) also reflects on symbolic aspects from various perspectives. However, there are three main aspects of Cassirer's thought that she deepens: symbolism as a spiritual activity and valid *a priori*; art as a symbolic form representing the world in the objective field through aesthetic experience; and art as universal communication. The second aspect is the crucial point of this article. It is worth reiterating art as world data in the objective field. It should be noted that Susanne Langer published her work *Philosophy in a New Key* in 1942, two years before Cassirer's *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture*. *An Essay on Man*, published a year before his death (1945), is the only manifestation he wrote, where the development of art is explicitly found as a symbolic form. It must be clarified that Langer already knew Cassirer's previous works.

Susanne Langer, in her extensive work, will take as a starting point the creation of symbolic forms of human feeling for the constitution of her thought. Within this context, art fits perfectly, as it deals with relationships and even ambiguities between feeling, form, symbols, and the act of playing. Thinking of a work of art is perceiving it as complete, indivisible. Thus agreeing on this thought, Langer and Cassirer see the work as important in itself, not as an object from which the parts are separated, but that must be understood as a complete, relational whole.

Cassirer, in his *An Essay on Man* (1994 [1944], p. 247), defines that “The sense of beauty is the susceptibility to the dynamic life of forms, and this life cannot be apprehended except by a corresponding dynamic process in ourselves.” In this sense, beauty can be defined in the interrelationship of the integral and dynamic duality between the subjective and the objective, and, consequently, through the gaze and artistic practice, one discovers the dynamic beauty of forms and of the world, thus being a constructive and self-constructive act. Cassirer/Langer also refer to organic beauty as the natural beauty of a landscape, while aesthetics stems from an experience that goes beyond the immediate gaze of something. In this study, we highlight the importance of conceiving aesthetic beauty as an act in production, as it will be the intermediary of the players’ experiences.

Langer argues that there is not just one emotion that governs the work, as just defining artistic production as a producer or expression of emotions is too vague for the potential that the work of art brings. This makes us understand the importance of teaching art and theater permeated by the practice of games, their context, and their way of incorporating past experiences into a new experience that blends and gives an aesthetic character, re-signifying the world of the appreciator/ player through contact with art. Art produces worlds and people.

Cassirer states that:

To live in the realm of forms does not signify an evasion of the issues of life; it represents, on the contrary, the realization of one of the highest energies of life itself. We cannot speak of art as “extrahuman” or “superhuman” without overlooking one of its fundamental features, its constructive power in the framing of our human universe. (CASSIRER, 1994, p. 272-273).

In this sense, when someone has contact with art, they will no longer see the world as before. They will have the addition of the artist’s gaze and the aesthetic experience that displaces it. This vision helps us understand the cathartic process that art produces: revealing the human soul in its greatest complexity; it allows man to live passions and unlived stories, transforming themselves into a formative process of being in the world/universe.

For Cassirer, “Science gives us order in thoughts; morality gives us order in actions; art gives us order in the apprehension of visible, tangible, and audible appearances” (CASSIRER, 1994, p. 274). In this sense, the laws of science, religion, and language are symbols created by the mind in an attempt to produce an intelligible world. Symbols, for the author, are the mediation between perception and understanding. Cassirer and Langer also point out that the manifestations of culture are symbolic forms of a specific character, mainly art, in a way that men and women, through their practice, re-signify or symbolize reality objectively through experience.

In this context, culture and games exist and are constructed and reconstructed based on human practices, which can be enhanced in the educational act. The aesthetic experience played will thus enable the expansion of the player’s experience in the world so that they can reframe their world, building autonomy and knowledge in a constant process of experience and learning, which are built in the webs of culture. This symbolic knowledge, permeated by the experience of playing, will be addressed in the next topic.

From art to theater games: Building symbolic relationships

The theater games, specifically, allows the player to experience theater in its purest form, in action, without judgments and prior rationalization. In this sense, it results from an aesthetic beauty in which the improvisational act generates the player's experience. Man, while playing, removes their armor and allows themselves to be in their greatest completeness, as they are in a profound act of experience and understanding. They have a conflict to resolve, and through artistic strategies that the theater games proposes, they need to resolve it cognitively and through actions, combinations, and delivery.

Theater educator, director, and researcher Ingrid Koudela will explore Langer's studies on the concept of art and, consequently, the theater games Koudela, analyzing Langer's work *Feeling and Form*, states that art is the "creation of symbolic forms of feeling" (KOUDELA, 1984, p. 32). In the context of the theater games, art is a provider of knowledge. When the creative act is conscious, the player-artist will act in the world as a subject, positioning themselves before their social and cultural role. They then become critical being in the face of their own choices. As the art educator Maria Lúcia de Souza Barros Pupo (1997, p. 149) reflects: "Through fiction, 'other lives' are lived that can lead the viewer to unveil previously unrevealed perspectives on human beings." This is enhanced with the theater games, as the user is still an executor/producer.

In the context of man's relationship with the world, thinking about the work of art is also understanding the events that, at different times, occur in a people and, also, how this relationship between experience and work completes each other and goes beyond emotions, but register/produce symbols that will bring and will propose questions and searches through the representation of these works.

The formulation of experience which is contained within the intellectual horizon of an age and a society is determined, I believe, not so much by events and desires, as by the basic concepts at people's disposal for analyzing and describing their adventures to their own understanding. Of course, such concepts arise as they are needed, to deal with political or domestic experience; but the same experiences could be seen in many different lights, so the light in which they do appear depends on the genius of a people as well as on the demands of the external occasion. (LANGER, 1971, p. 18).

As pointed out by Langer, the events that propitiate the experience occur as they become necessary, having meaning at that time for that people. In this context, in addition to the experience itself, the player will externalize it, transforming it into a symbolic act, a work of art. Through the theater games, man will express, through symbolic representation, the material, intellectual, spiritual, and emotional traits of the society or social group in which they are inserted. Precisely this experience, accompanied by the artistic act equipped with a critical and symbolic positioning, justifies the importance of the theater games in the educational scenario.

In addition to this social relationship, Langer (1971) points out that art and language develop two distinct processes of symbolic existence: the discursive and the presentational.

The discursive is presented through a speech behind the symbol, and the presentational as a form of work perceived in the present, in the contextualized moment of the work of art, the here and now.

The presentational language (re)signifies itself and interacts with man's emotional life; we cannot translate it into other languages. According to Camargo (2019, p. 12): "For Langer, a work of art is always a primary, unique, indivisible, non-discursive symbol, a symbol called presentational, it is not a means, it does not represent, because it is present, presents itself, and this can be analyzed, but not reduced to analysis." In this context, art does not intend to transmit/clarify something but to provide an authentic, present, objective aesthetic experience.

If language is a medium, art for Langer is an act, an action. The sensitive in the fruition process materialized in a work of art, as in a loving relationship of affection in which the present means everything; there is no representation. As a presentational language, the theater games allows the student player to develop perception and imagination through aesthetic experience and present action. This experience can transform the learner's gaze before the environment in which they are inserted, recreating worlds. Art is not just a means of something represented but an act in itself, present, like the theater games.

There is no single truth when it comes to art, as its meaning is flexible, multiple, and ambiguous in the face of the "nows," it will be the aesthetic experience that will allow us to find new meanings during the expressive act of/in playing. Notably, the aesthetic experience in Dewey (2010) is not limited to creating artistic objects but investigating/creating solutions for experienced conflicts, whether in the general context of art or the theater games.

This expressive act is not reflected in something but exists in itself. In contrast, when thinking about symbols, we observe a symbol in art that can simply not represent or simultaneously represent several things. Thus, looking, feeling, perceiving, improvisation and artistic expression are not limited to pre-defined concepts but must be apprehended in their practical essence. It is essential to allow these various representations to communicate with the player, as this language often becomes indecipherable when reduced to words but intelligible when dealing with other senses and perceptions.

Logical formulas contribute a lot, but art cannot be limited to just this logical understanding because what exists between art and the public goes far beyond these formulas. It is the intimate relationship of lives – of the artist and the public – that intertwine, connect and neither the artist nor the public will be the same after this relationship. In this sense, the theater games presents itself through the relationships of symbols in the world, making them present and realizing that they are not fixed but related to the people with their beliefs, thoughts, and values. Finally, the symbol does not exist without an intimate relationship with the human being and the environment in which they live in the present act.

According to Koudela:

In the teaching process with theater games, the intellectual or psychological approach was replaced by a process of physical knowledge. The matter of the theater – the gesture – was physically experienced in the game. The gradual conquest of physical expression boosted

the knowledge process. The symbolized reality acquired texture and substance. (KOUDELA, 1999, p. 124).

In the theater-educational context, Spolin seeks, through theater games, to demonstrate the process of physical knowledge, having the body and the gesture experienced in the game in action, in the act of experience, as drivers of knowledge. It starts from the non-verbal, going against the approaches that defend learning only through verbal discourse.

In this sense, the theater games is expressed in two ways: as a discourse and a symbolic presentation, relating everyday life to the new experience elaborated through action and playing. The theater experience may not and cannot be separated from the daily life of the players. In this sense, the imagined drama must be re-signified in the learning process, being able to promote the critical actions of the subjects before the environment in which they are inserted. Thus, people are encouraged to question their historical and cultural values, already incorporated into their habits, to (re)signify them, demonstrating criticality and curiosity in favor of the development of self-governance.

It is noteworthy that the concept of self-governance, which comes from the studies of educator Paulo Freire (1999), argues that man has to be critical of the environment in which they are inserted to modify it through learning and experience. In this context, man becomes a builder of symbols, making him connect and feel he belongs to the world, in which his own experiences generate meanings, as stated by Cassirer (1994) in his work *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture*:

In language, in religion, in art, in science, man can do no more than to build up his own universe – a symbolic universe that enables him to understand and interpret, to articulate and organize, to synthesize and universalize his human experience. (CASSIRER, 1994, p. 359).

As highlighted, art in education as personal expression and as culture is an essential tool for cultural identification and development through experience. Through theater games, it is possible to develop perception and imagination, apprehend the reality of the environment, and develop critical capacity, allowing one to analyze the perceived reality and develop creativity to change the analyzed reality.

The theater games as a non-verbal and improvisational discourse allows the student player to communicate widely in the act of experience in the educational process. This non-verbal discourse, defended by Spolin, is called embodiment, which will be explained in the next topic.

The symbol as an embodiment

Cassirer (1994) considers art as one of the great symbolic systems, such as myth and religion. However, he highlights art as a system of its characteristics, in which the artist is a discoverer of forms, just as the scientist is a discoverer of natural laws or facts of nature. For Cassirer, art presents itself as a system of forms emancipated from matter,

unlike mythology, in which matter impregnates the sign. Within this formulation, art is based on interpretation, not on a relationship of imitation of matter, but on discovering and reading reality.

For the philosopher, symbols belong to the world of meanings; therefore, all symbolic relations are meaningful relations, while signals³ are fixed, conventional abbreviations for something known. According to Langer (2011, p. 30), “A signal is comprehended if it serves to make us notice the object or situation it bespeaks. A symbol is understood when we conceive the idea it presents.”

For Langer, the sign/signal, natural or artificial, is endowed with a “message” transposing meaning. When dealing with the natural sign, we speak of “a symptom of a state of affairs” (LANGER, 1971, p. 67, emphasis in original), i.e., a dog’s cry can mean hunger or cold, the opening of the fan-shaped peacock tail for the female, the desire for mating, the dark sky with many clouds, the rain, among others. The artificial sign occurs purposefully like the cathedral bell warning that mass will be celebrated in half an hour. Both signs pass on a message that will be decoded and directly related to the subject’s action, who can get ready to go to mass or take an umbrella not to get wet.

By referring to the symbol concept, Langer constantly revisited her studies, having a final definition related to the study of art and the assumptions defended by Cassirer. For her, the symbol does not intend to “refer to things and communicate facts, but to express ideas” (LANGER, 1957, p. 30, our translation). Unlike the sign, the symbol only occurs between men, between expanded rationality, being more complex, allowing us to understand and reframe the world, exercising our humanity. Thus, the sign propels us to action, to a reaction (actual, factual fact), while the symbol is directed directly to the field of thought (field of possibilities).

Physical action is transformed or potentialized into symbolic action in art or ritual, as it is not something known but re-signified, whether in the theater games and/or in the actor-player’s gestures. In other words, to be built in didactic stages, the symbolic action is first established as something that consolidates before being perceived, until the final stage, where the cocoon turns into a butterfly. The student, the actor, the character, and the symbolic action constructed by having an object or performing a gesture, even without the object, are a predominant part of physicality. On the other hand, interpreting what they represent (the meaning) is in the symbolic field. Such fields are self-constructed in an interactive subject-action process in the world.

In the theater games, the gesture is symbolic to convey something to the spectator, the teacher-instructor, and/or other players in the field of ideas. This is the essential focus of embodiment, i.e., transposing to the body, to the gestures, a sense, a meaning for action. The wave of the open hand from side to side could mean that they are saying goodbye to someone; a gaze, a jump, a movement passes on a meaning in the improvisation, aiming at the action of the audience and the other co-participating players.

3- It is worth mentioning that, in *Feeling and Form* and *Signs, Language, and Behavior*, Langer uses the word signal, and in *Philosophy in a New Key*, the author used the word sign (as we can see in the footnote in the book *Feeling and Form*, 2011, p. 30). Both have the same concept in this context, and this article uses mainly the denomination sign.

When we talk about embodiment in theater games, gestures, as Langer warned, are not mere movements nor mere signals that make no sense to the group but have to demonstrate the object and the action performed in the scene in a credible way to the player and the audience. According to Viola Spolin (1906-1994), the embodiment is “a physical manifestation of a communication; a physical expression of an attitude; [...] a visible means of making a subjective communication” (SPOLIN, 1998, p. 340). This process of embodiment is constructed and is finally established as subjective communication. However, before its elaborate synthesis, it goes through a process of construction and opposition between its possible meanings and signifiers, which are often totally contradictory.

In this sense, the gesture will help the learner-player to remain in the world of perception, being open to the world around them, i.e., enabling a meaningful experience in which they can critically reflect on their social role. The theater educator Ricardo Japiassu (2001, p. 76) states that “physicalizing implies expanding the expressive bodily capacity of the players, their attention, sensory memory, and conceptual (categorical) thinking.” Such physicalization/embodiment allows players, through theater games, to experience “the representational, symbolic dimension of the theatrical phenomenon.”

The symbolic dimension, made possible through theater games, will provide students with a critical reflection on their world, choices, and life project through bodily integrality in action. According to Professor John Dawsey (2005, p. 6), “the individual bears the responsibility of giving meaning to their universe.” Dawsey also argues that this experience is the inherent human attitude of producing meanings. In this sense, when experiencing something, a spiritual action is possible without which there is no world, and the symbol is the mediator and constituent of human existence and thought. According to Cassirer (1994), symbols help us to express ourselves not only in words but in ideas, actions and are inseparable from imagination:

[...] man does not live in a world of hard facts, or according to his immediate needs and desires. He lives rather in the midst of imaginary emotions, in hopes and fears, in illusions and disillusion, in his fantasies and dreams. (CASSIRER, 1994, p. 49).

Agreeing with the author, the expression through actions, ideas, and the experience of imaginary emotions and fantasy are also constituent parts of the game. Thus, man needs symbols to interpret and build reality, with the game being a mediator. For Cassirer (1994, p. 234), art, like all other symbolic forms, “is one of the ways leading to an objective view of things and of human life. It is not an imitation but a discovery of reality.” In this context, the symbolic corresponds to ideas that are beyond the reach of human reason. Through the symbolic, man is the creator of their world, which is also present in the embodiment, actions, and experiential educational act.

The game and art will provide man with this discovery of reality through their own experience in the act of playing. In this act, the player faces a conflict and needs to experience situations for resolution, being the subject of their learning. According to Dewey (2010, p. 109), “[...] conditions of resistance and conflict, aspects and elements

of the self and the world that are implicated in this interaction qualify experience with emotions and ideas so that conscious intent emerges.”

Therefore, the theater games is an essential tool for working with social and scenic conflicts, present in a school environment or a group of professional actors through action, improvisation, and can provide unique experiences for those who participate in it. It points to the need for the teacher-instructor's pedagogical intention, giving a pedagogical character to the theater games. If the game is experienced without any pedagogical intent, the opportunity to experience the social conflicts in the school environment is lost, which may not make sense to the youth - player, and the consummate experience may not occur.

For Spolin:

The game is a natural group form providing the involvement and personal freedom necessary for experiencing. Games develop personal techniques and skills necessary for the game itself, through playing. Skills are developed at the very moment a person is having all the fun and excitement playing a game has to offer – this is the exact time he is truly open to receive them. (SPOLIN, 2005, p. 4).

The games propose conflicts that dialogue with these creative constructions of the world, as they allow the player to identify themselves as a subject in the present/experienced reality, having to act and intervene in situations that the game will propose. The experience provided by the game's conflict can create an experience that did not exist in the player's previous experience. This new experience may help in the subject's understanding of the social roles they play. Cassirer (2001) aims to understand the process of transforming sensitive content into spiritual content, i.e., how the spirit provides objective representations in the elaboration of the own experience:

Myth and art, language and science, are in this sense configurations towards being: they are not simple copies of an existing reality but represent the main directions of the spiritual movement, of the ideal process by which reality is constituted for us as one and many – as a diversity of forms which are ultimately held together by a unity of meaning. (CASSIRER, 2001, p. 64).

In other words, the game constitutes a symbolic form and metaphorical representation space, i.e., a second reality in which students experience actions they usually do not perform daily. The second reality provided by the act of playing enables the inversion and performance of figurative roles that provide an authentic and singular experience. This significant experience reflects the personal experiences of those who play and, simultaneously, can provide analysis and criticism about these social conflicts promoted by the experience provided by living by the game itself.

For Dewey (2010, p. 148):

While there is no expression, unless there is urge from within outwards, the welling up must be clarified and ordered by taking into itself the values of prior experiences before it can be an act of expression. [...] To discharge is to get rid of, to dismiss; to express is to stay by, to carry forward in development, and work out to completion. (DEWEY, 2010, p. 148).

Embodiment, in this context, will be the act in experience, as the player-student will express their previous experiences, transposing to the body what was in the field of ideas, of thought, in the form of action, in a symbolic act, experiencing a new experience equipped with aesthetic learning. For Dewey (2010), thought enables the visibility of action and understanding. However, it is not limited to that.

For him, the feeling comes to understand the consummations accomplished by such action. Not only understanding the action itself, but the subtext, the desire, the hope, and the experience of such a person, generating discussions that go beyond the visual, thus becoming an aesthetic learning. Our experiences are presented in creative action, in the construction of characters, in the body, voice, attitudes, and in our relationship with the other, which are essential aspects of the theater-educational context.

Understanding not only what the experience is but of everything that involves it and the questioning it generates concerns the understanding of everything significant for a society and its cultural practice since it is about sociocultural spaces mediated by symbols, rules, rituals, and signs. These cultural practices move a group through political, educational, aesthetic, and ideological projects, centering the experience as a possibility of mediation and resulting from them.

Thus, the significant experience can provide the youth with a critical reflection on what was experienced. As Cassirer points out, they transform themselves as the experiences provide them with a new relationship with the world, i.e., creating a new world. It should be noted that the expressive act and even the experience itself are not always pleasant, without pain, without surrender, because: "There is interest in completing an experience. The experience may be one that is harmful to the world and its consummation undesirable. But it has esthetic quality" (DEWEY, 2010, p. 115).

In the theater games, when we work with theatrical elements through embodiment, we also work with the symbology of the elements, as the young person has to demonstrate in their physical field (gestures and/or objects) a meaning for the scene or their character. Through theater games, embodiment will make the symbolic visible and help teenagers in their trajectory, educational process before the world, and aesthetic experience.

Cassirer points out (1994, p. 257), "One of the greatest triumphs of art is to make us see commonplace things in their real shape and in their true light." Thus, symbols will be the intermediary field between spirit and matter. Therefore, art is symbolic, and the artist's essential function is to seek the realization in the sensory world and the revelation by giving form to the matter of the senses through art. When the student has this contact with the theater experientially, they will be able to reflect on themselves, the environment they experience, and their choices in a sensorial way.

According to Pupo:

By purifying sensory perception, theater games – contrary to the emphasis on inventiveness, interpretation, or dramaturgy – seek to promote the experience of collective tacit agreement. In them, the fable is not a starting point but a result of the action, and the 'physicalization' of objects, places, and emotions – axes of theatrical learning – is always linked to careful listening to the partner. One learns how meaning is given in the theater by entering into a relationship with

the partner in the game and with them physically building a fiction shared with the players in the audience. “Without a partner, there is no game,” the author’s recurrent maxim, illustrates the proposed path well. Consistent with the premise of “learning by doing,” the teacher is not called upon to explain or demonstrate but rather to encourage self-discovery. (PUPO, 2007, p. 261).

The sensorial will allow an agreement of touches, sensibilities, and connections between the group, in which the teacher-instructor will not demonstrate the game but make the discovery of that student possible. Through the sensorial, which results from action, embodiment, and improvisation, the youth will rediscover past experiences and find solutions for the game’s new challenge, promoting a consummate experience. It is in contact with the other, the playmate, the audience, and the teacher-instructor that the student will give meaning to theater learning.

The symbolic takes place from the apprehension in the sensitive and subjective field of the player in contact with the acting group, as the communication between the players and the improvisation in front of the acting public are potential instruments of symbolic transmission. The fable, the memorized text, the technicality (the technique for the sake of the technique), and the demonstration through copying are undone in the practice of theater games, in which the student allows themselves to be discovered, to be active, to be creative, to work in a group, and to improvise. It is the work favoring the student’s organicity, in which they and the group are actors in a significant symbolic and experiential theater.

Final considerations

The studies of theater games have an essential trajectory for teaching theater in Brazilian school units. In a period when there were no materials, and the art teacher was ambivalent (art education), Ingrid Koudela presents us with this wealthy material by Viola Spolin, which was essential for the formation and performance of this professional. With the advancement of theatrical pedagogy studies, it is noted that such material has been reframed, adapting to the multiple current school realities. In this work, we aim to highlight the theater games as symbolic knowledge, moving toward a concept encompassing theater teaching as humanitarian teaching, in line with the student’s integral formation.

It is noteworthy that the use of the theater games methodology allows no separation between the subjective and objective worlds of the learner. This junction will take place through experience, in which they will scenically reflect on individual aspects of creation concerning the totalizing set that is the theater. One learns about their body and physical awareness, but it alone will not have the integrative construction of a scene. According to Cassirer:

When absorbed in the intuition of a great work of art we do not feel a separation between the subjective and the objective worlds. We do not live in our plain commonplace reality of physical things, nor do we live wholly within an individual sphere. Beyond these two spheres we detect a

new realm, the realm of plastic, musical, poetical forms ; and these forms have a real universality. (CASSIRER, 1994, p. 238).

The theater games, as a personal expression and as learning, will provide the player in question with a theater-educational experience in the face of their scenic investigation, being able to develop in them the perception, the sensorial, the imagination, and the critical capacity in the face of the problems encountered in the classes of theater, providing aesthetic appreciation and emancipatory educational action.

The theater games, proposed by improvisational acts and symbolic knowledge, presents itself as a possibility of mediation between the experiences lived in the daily rituals of the player with the theater and its teaching. The player's daily rituals, in this case, can be (re)configured in a more significant way for their life through the practices that the educational institution can propose to them with the insertion of everyday life practices, whether from the rites that they establish at home, either on the streets or on the internet, in short, in the universe in which they are inserted.

According to Spolin:

The game is a natural group form providing the involvement and personal freedom necessary for experiencing. Games develop personal techniques and skills necessary for the game itself, through playing. Skills are developed at the very moment a person is having all the fun and excitement playing a game has to offer – this is the exact time he is truly open to receive them. (SPOLIN, 2005, p. 4).

Theater games in the educational context provide symbolic knowledge through experiential and group experiences. A knowledge not only based on techniques and theatrical concepts but on life, humanity, and the student's critical reflection on the environment. This knowledge occurs in the act of playing, in action, a propitious moment for the consummation of the experience. At this moment, aesthetic knowledge expands, and the symbol(s) becomes present to both the player and the audience, in which the act becomes symbolic through the embodiment.

I add a statement by Camargo *apud* Tagliari (2009, p. 33): “The formation of knowledge in children (and in men) is processed through an amalgamated and continuous process between mimesis and symbolization, or representation. Hence the importance of art in the educational process.” In this construction of symbolic knowledge, through the theater games, young people begin to give meaning to everything they experience, as they can materialize in actions what is in their imagination, giving them a new meaning.

Symbolic knowledge in the educational theater context, defended here, aims to shape human experiences and bring experiences that can be socialized through more subjective channels of expression that, for students, are expressive languages, which will become artistic languages through theater games. The theater games as an educational experience may allow the externalization of symbols, feelings, or even non-visible registers, seeking to unite the contextualization of the game and the youth with the act of acting.

This is the enormous educational challenge postulated here: to take advantage of the student's baggage, question them, and put them in conflict to have a consummate experience through the scenic expression provided by the very act of playing, a present act. This experience can promote a critical reflection of the student before the world so that they are aware of their choices and actions, thus promoting symbolic, active knowledge that integrates this being with knowledge. In conclusion, the game is not material to "spend the class time," but instead an essential pedagogical resource, capable of providing crucial experiences for understanding the active subject in society as a symbolic being.

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