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Estopô Balaio, a case of a socio-political engaged approach to Applied Theatre

Estopô Balaio, un caso de abordaje sociopolítico comprometido del Teatro Aplicado

Estopô Balaio, um caso de abordagem sócio-política engajada do Teatro Aplicado

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Abstract: Theatre can play a social transformation role when used as a platform for empowering individuals who are critically engaged in such cultural practices. This article is part of a research conducted in 2021 on Estopô Balaio's work - a Brazilian collective theatre group that has worked in an under-represented community in São Paulo. This research aims to critically demonstrate how Applied Theatre (AT) can transform people's lives, empower individuals engaged in group activities, and build a sense of community and empathy. Moreover, two Brazilian authors, Paulo Freire (1970) and Augusto Boal (2019), were used as primary references. The methodology framework was chosen to depict how the research was conducted during the pandemic. The Brazilian cultural and social context during COVID-19 will be portrayed shortly to present the research problem and purpose.

Keywords: applied theatre; cultural action; community theatre.

Resumen: El teatro puede desempeñar un papel de transformación social cuando se utiliza como plataforma para empoderar a las personas que participan críticamente en tales prácticas culturales. Este artículo es parte de una investigación realizada en 2021 sobre la obra de Estopô Balaio, un grupo de teatro colectivo brasileño que ha trabajado en una comunidad subrepresentada en São Paulo. Esta investigación tiene como objetivo demostrar críticamente cómo el Teatro Aplicado (TA) puede transformar la vida de las personas, empoderarse en actividades grupales y generar un sentido de comunidad y empatía. Además, se utilizaron como referencias primarias dos autores brasileños, Paulo Freire (1970) y Augusto Boal (2019). El marco metodológico se eligió para representar cómo se llevó a cabo la investigación durante la pandemia. El contexto cultural y social brasileño durante la COVID-19 será retratado en breve para presentar el problema y el propósito de la investigación.

Palabras clave: teatro aplicado; acción cultural; teatro comunitario.

Resumo: O teatro tem o potencial de provocar transformação social quando usado como uma ferramenta para empoderar indivíduos que estão engajados criticamente em tais práticas culturais. Este artigo é parte de uma pesquisa de mestrado realizada em 2021 que utilizou o trabalho do Estopô Balaio - um coletivo de teatro brasileiro que tem atuado em uma comunidade da periferia de São Paulo. Esta pesquisa tem como objetivo demonstrar criticamente como o Teatro Aplicado (TA) pode transformar a vida das pessoas, capacitar indivíduos engajados em atividades em grupo e construir um senso de comunidade e empatia. Além disso, dois autores brasileiros, Paulo Freire (1970) e Augusto Boal (2019), foram utilizados como principais referências. Um recorte da metodologia foi escolhido para ilustrar como a pesquisa foi conduzida durante a pandemia. O contexto cultural e social brasileiro durante a COVID-19 será retratado brevemente para apresentar o problema e propósito da pesquisa.

Palavras-chave: teatro aplicado; ação cultural; teatro comunitário.

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Making of theatre in pandemic times

Different political perspectives on [public] policies can either help broaden access to arts democratically or be constraining it (Boal 2019; Costa 2007; van Erven 1988). Brazil faced challenges under Jair Bolsonaro's administration, as he systematically dismantled the cultural sector in less than a year by demoting the Ministry of Culture to a subsidiary department in different ministries (Taylor, Klein & Boal 2019)¹. Bolsonaro's work to dismember the cultural sector can be viewed as a form of veiled censorship by the Government, which uses institutional means to suspend public grants, reject projects and cut funding (Veloso 2020)².

Furthermore, since the COVID-19 pandemic began, the actions and omissions of the federal government in response to the pandemic *"can be understood as part of a broader perverse policy of letting the most vulnerable people ... under the condition of 'living dead'"* (Granada 2020)³. In São Paulo, an exhaustive number of studies were published exploring the economic disparities - and its catastrophic social inequality - during a not addressed pandemic by the central administration. That situation has maintained and has exacerbated even more existing structural issues (Albuquerque & Ribeiro 2021; Sastry 2004; Summerhill 2010). Conversely, several collective theatre groups have led campaigns to distribute food baskets (cesta básica) throughout underserved communities as the number of people facing hunger escalated during the pandemic. 'Estopô Balaio'⁴ (Estopô) also stepped in as an emergency action. The work of this collective theatre group dates to the early 2010s and it has been an uninterrupted *making of* their history, facing harsh times of inequalities in Brazilian society that were aggravated by the federal government's lack of response to COVID-19.

Research proposal: unite, gather and share

Estopô Balaio started their actions in a peripheral neighbourhood, Jardim Romano⁵, in 2011. The decade-long partnership between the socially-engaged theatre practice of *Estopô* and the area were consistently utilising performing arts to poeticise and politicise their territory; due to the world emergency their agency begun to taking form of basic aid actions, providing primary needs for the local community - i.e. food - over the tragic period of State's rules's absence. As much as the partnership supports the population's access to literature, culture, and education in face of the government's neglect, this response was also a communitary lifeline to their own collective survival whilst relentlessly being left in omission.

It is necessary to bear in mind that in such cities as São Paulo, millions of people live in the margins of society as a result of the extreme poverty induced by social exclusion and opportunity denial. According to the sociologist Edison Martins *"As these inequalities are less observed and worked on by the government, the more these inequalities tend to alienate, separate and divide people"*.⁶ This paper seeks to achieve an understanding on how Applied Theatre (AT) can empower individuals engaged in group activities and thereby build a sense of community, solidarity and empathy. Ultimately, this addresses a visceral need to promote positive social change when questioning and endeavouring better living conditions. This condensed proposal's main purpose is to indicate the experience of those

¹ "President Bolsonaro has been engaged in building an increasingly autocratic regime. He is strongly opposed to left-wing policies, and is pro gun, and pro a Brazilian military regime. Critics point to his troubling record on human rights; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) and women's rights; immigration; calls for police to use more lethal force; and lack of support for environmental issues. He has stripped the indigenous affairs agency Fundação Nacional do Índio [National Indian Foundation] of the responsibility to identify and demarcate indigenous lands; this could force the indigenous people of Brazil to assimilate culturally" (Taylor, Klein & Boal 2019).

² Well known Brazilian composer, singer, writer, and political activist. In the Brazilian dictatorship (1964 -1985), Veloso's music and political action were considered threatening. The artist was exiled from the country <https://brasil.elpais.com/cultura/2020-01-27/caetano-veloso-nunca-achei-que-fosse-ver-tamanho-retrocesso-enquanto-estivesse-vivo.htm>

³ Our translation

⁴ *Estopô Balaio* is an expression from the Northeast of Brazil which can be interpreted in English as biting one's tongue until it is no longer possible to stay silent, ' means so much as 'an unstoppable urge to express.' <https://eugenevanerven.wordpress.com/2016/05/01/icafe-in-brazil-estopo-balaio-in-sao-paulo/>

⁵ Jardim Romano - Roman Garden - Jardim Romano <https://coletivoEstopobalaio.com.br/jardim-romano> access in 13/01/2023.

⁶ Edson Martins, sociologist and doctor in education from the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo (PUC-SP) extracted from <https://32xsp.org.br/especial/sao-paulo-das-desigualdades/> access in 19/01/2023.

who had their own situations transformed by the impact of a theatrical process; and to follow the progression of those social agents formed by this empowerment, stimulating and promoting social transformation through arts. Having said that, the research was led by this question: *How can Applied Theatre support transformational change and social resistance?*

Augusto Boal and Paulo Freire: creative processes and engaged theatre

Applied Theatre (AT) is an umbrella term that, briefing speaking, is the application of theatrical practices and creative processes in spaces that are not normally defined as theatre buildings. An essential characteristic of AT is that the audience is central to the process. (Kershaw 1992; Prentki & Preston 2009; Taylor 2003). While AT may take different forms, they are broadly understood as theatrical practices applied to educational, institutional and community contexts. This work is usually facilitated by art professionals with the focus on being beneficial to the participants in personal and social terms, through the lenses of Augusto Boal's work, a Brazilian theatre practitioner considered a 'guru' of AT (Prentki & Preston 2009). Nonetheless, there is no direct reference of the term 'Applied Theatre' in Boal's literature and the term emerged in academia and not from practitioners. Although the term 'Applied Theatre' is not significantly used in Brazil as it is in the UK, Australia and in the USA, the practices concerned are consistent with it (Coutinho 2010; Nogueira 2007; 2008).

Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) is an aesthetic method devised by Boal that uses theatre as a tool to transform unjust realities by stimulating dialogues concerning and with the subjects and their contexts. This resilient change happens by way of concrete social actions produced through organisation and solidarity among groups of oppressed people (Santos 2019). In making things 'concrete', Boal refers to Marx's eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach which says, "*the philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it*". Therefore theatre has a political role not only through what it shows, but how it shows.

Indeed, the effect of the forum [theatre] is all the more powerful if it is made entirely clear to the audience that if they don't change the world, no one will change it for them and everything will inevitably turn out exactly the same – which is the last thing we would want to happen. (Boal 2002, 244)

Theatre of the oppressed (2019) has a profound relationship with Paulo Freire's work *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). In line with Freire's concern that people need to be literate, Boal also feels it is necessary to use education to understand the world and its political implications. According to Santos (2019), Boal wanted to raise political literacy in people, in the same way as Freire's conception. In the same way, Boal believed that by learning and questioning the established reality, as citizens they would be equipped to intervene in this reality. Through theatre, therefore, one's way of representing reality is a way of creating one's own narrative about the reality and placing that reality in a discussion. It is important to read the reality in order to transform it, consequently, Freire also had a key role in AT. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* - Freire's most distinguished work - is a response against an authoritarian and disciplinary pedagogy and its social control. Situations of power dynamics make people feel powerless and internalise the oppressive condition. To overcome bondage impasse, Freire introduces the idea of '*conscientização*' "*which is an understanding of social conditions through the development of critical consciousness*" (Landy & Montgomery 2012, 132). Taylor (2003, XXV) connects this with "*the realisation that theatre can be a potent transformative agent and that it can open our eyes to new ways of seeing and understanding [the world]*".

Jardim Romano and Estopô Balaio seizing citizenship

This case study was used to look at a collective theatre group in Brazil and their influence in the local community. '*Estopô Balaio*' (*Estopô*) built its trajectory in a far east neighbourhood of São Paulo - the most unequal Brazilian city. *Estopô* is formed by migrant artists, mostly from the Northeast of the country and by residents of *Jardim Romano*. This research was made possible thanks to members and former members of *Estopô* that kindly shared their time and narratives as collaborators of this research:

Ana Carolina (Carol) – founder member of *Estopô* (non-local actress)

Bruno – former member of *Estopô*, founder member of collective *Acuenda* (local actor)

Carolina – drama teacher (non-local actress)

Keli – founder member of *Estopô* (local actress)

Children (pseudonyms)

Pedro – member of *Estopô* 11 years old

Lia – member of *Estopô* 13 years old

The first encounter among the members of *Estopô* occurred in a cultural centre CEU (Unified Educational Centres)⁷ located in the vicinity of *Jardim Romano*, a neighbourhood often subjected to floods. Consequently, the children's artistic creations were permeated by these episodes, triggering various creative processes. Interested in the narratives of children and teenagers from another project in the same centre - '*Teatro Vocacional*'⁸ -, the theatre-practitioner invited the youth (novice actors from '*vocacional*') and two professional actors to work collectively on a project.

At the beginning of this partnership between non-local artists and local youth artists, the project had no clear direction beyond bringing together the disparate narratives of the residents displaced by floods. The area was flooded for three months in 2010 and the intensity of the tragedy forced the residents to rebuild their lives materially and symbolically.

To explore how theatre may seek to transform, the research analysed shared narratives of an ongoing work of the collective theatre group, and how those narratives make sense in the experiences related to their contexts and cultural discourses. Besides giving concrete examples of some situations, the narrators identified oppressive discourses and how to disrupt them (Boal 2019; Denzin & Lincoln 2011; Freire 1970).

Artists as researchers: sharing experiences to change realities

This qualitative research focused on questioning, analysing and interpreting secondary data and interviews in order to identify patterns and categories that are meaningful to their experience (Auberbach & Silverstein 2003). In fact, the theatre group in question have no absolute answers about their work, but unfolding questions⁹ that prompts them in a continuous artistic research. For this case study, a qualitative method was used to seize the participant's perceptions and experiences from their

⁷ The Unified Educational Centers (CEU) are public facilities aimed at education created by the Municipal Education Department of São Paulo in 2001 and located in the peripheral areas of Greater São Paulo. This program is dedicated to early childhood, primary and secondary education as well as to offering quality services in sports, recreational and cultural practices to the population in general. The city of São Paulo currently has 46 CEUs which allocate more than 120,000 students (Silva 2014).

⁸ *Vocacional* is a theatre and dance programme running in São Paulo since 2001, which was created within the scope of the Municipal Culture Department. Vocational project aims at the reduction and elimination of the existing borders between professional and non-professional theatre practices: "*Placing the democratisation of the means of improvement in theatre; thus study and reflection in theatre as a possible guideline for this equation. In other words, the democratisation of the means of aesthetic production*" (Fabiano 2010, 39).

⁹ In a documentary film, the artistic director of *Estopô* says that at the beginning of their work in *Jardim Romano*, they had a research question: '*how far can art operate in situations of social trauma?*'

The director relates that one of the locals, after seeing her story on the stage, aesthetically re-elaborated, asked him: what do we do with all this? The director had no answer. He says that there is the reflection and ethical questioning from the artists throughout the work. Positioning and relationships that are constantly re-evaluated with constant mindfulness concerning mutual connection to a common good.

perspective - their 'real-world' environment (Creswell 2014; Flick 2007; Silverman 2011). Additionally, an interpretive/constructivist (see Cohen & Manion 1994) research and critical theory was a feature to unveil multiple realities pertaining and are a product of mental constructions; conforming individuals' set of experiences, beliefs and understandings (Guba & Lincoln 1994). Similar to Freire's concept of 'teacher-student/student-teacher' (1970) - where teachers learn with students and vice-versa - this investigation is stated in dialogic construction of realities - where researchers and participants mutually influence and act on the research journey transforming their reality. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) compared the researcher to a bricoleur. As Ely (1997, 4) sees it, researchers, insofar as they produce 'qualitative works', build these from 'materials that we find most appropriate to what we believe'. In this way, social realities emerge due to a constantly developing process of social construction (Berger & Luckmann 1966). However, its crucial point is that social construction must not be a product of social inequality.

In contrast, it is imperative to understand a culture of oppression to be able to dismantle it. Knowledge in this sense is a political matter. A transformative worldview needs to be *'intertwined with politics and a political change agenda to confront social oppression at whatever levels it occurs'* (Creswell 2014, 9; Mertens 2009). According to Lincoln and Guba (1994), critical theory inquiry aims to critique and transform through restitution and emancipation. Accordingly, AT can be used as a feature for empowerment of individuals in group activities as well as it is a collective exercise that can develop a sense of community and empathy. Furthermore, participant's reflections on the process were collected demonstrating the impact of theatre in their lives and the power of theatre for social transformation in the community.

Multiple platforms to learn about people

Due to pandemic, the fieldwork retrieved secondary data about *Estopô*; including a website¹⁰, a documentary film¹¹, recorded interviews¹², and a grant application¹³. Additionally, after building familiarity with their ongoing work over a decade, it was possible to design a more accurate open-ended interview (Stake 1995; Yin 2013) via web-based platforms using social interaction features based on a conversation (Rubin & Rubin 2012). The opportunity to learn more about the participants before the interview through secondary data reduced the remoteness impact of the digital fieldwork. The information found on the internet helped to establish a better rapport with the participants instead of keeping them digitally burdened and distressed. The primary data collection was through online interviews:

Type of interview	Number of interviews
Unstructured interview via Zoom platform	1
Semi-structured interview via Zoom platform	1
Semi-structured interview via WhatsApp video call	3
Semi-structured interview via WhatsApp text messages	1

Table 1 Type and number of interviews

¹⁰ <https://coletivoEstopôbalaio.com.br/> (*Estopô's website*)

¹¹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZZ_O4QOpGCo (Documentary: *Estopô Balaio*) ; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zoff-cGICic&t=1446s> (Documentary: *Territorio coletivo*)

¹² https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a_wQ3rppHas ; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e0GkdHPvKX8> ; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hITaADKlItm8> (Matéria: *Estopô Balaio*);

¹³ The grant application is in *Estopô's* private archives.

Purposive sampling and letting the snowball land in a good place

In qualitative research, purposive sampling is a common feature. By having familiarity with participants' views to select them and site studies purposefully is encouraged in order to establish the scope of the research problem (Cohen et al. 2017; Creswell & Poth 2018; Denscombe 2014). By selecting purposefully by non-probability procedure (Cohen et al. 2017) allowed to 'handpick' (Denscombe 2014) a typical sample and valuable insights in this research. As a starting point, four adult participants were deliberately chosen from a documentary film about *Estopô*. Among them a female - who still remains in the group -, and a male - who left *Estopô* and created another collective theatre group named collective *Acuenda*. These perspectives were important to contrast viewpoints about the shared experience lived. An explanatory sample was produced in this small scale study to probe deeper into the *"uniqueness, the idiographic and exclusive distinctiveness of the phenomenon"* (Cohen et al. 2017, 224) as well as smaller sample sizes which increase internal validity (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña 2014).

The snowball sampling in this study facilitated young actor's participation, since the sample emerged through connections between individuals (Denscombe 2014). In this case their guardians and a drama teacher were the connection for their interview. The educator presented a concern about parental consent for interviews, yet the issue was bound after the first interview when some young participants in the process - actors and non-actors - were asked to introduce me to the parents of the children involved with *Estopô*. With parental consent, the first child was interviewed and then, she introduced her brother who was also part of the theatre group. Thus, snowball sampling was an effective way of including children in the research, although it did not lead to rapport since the children's online material is scarce to build familiarity with the data. The figure below illustrates sampling strategies by Denscombe, 2014:

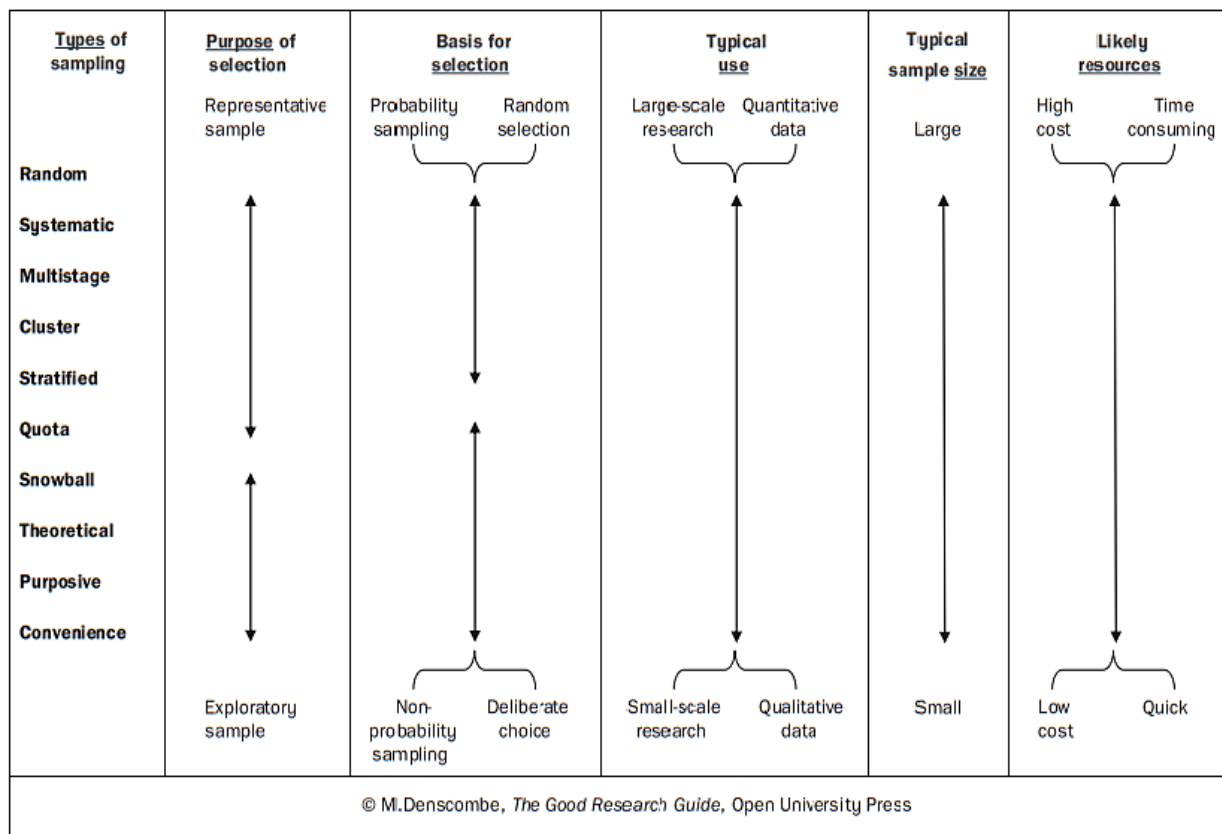


Fig. 2 Sample strategies (Denscombe 2014, 45)

Limitations: pandemic in fieldwork

Due to the pandemic, the way the research was first designed has been shifted. Therefore, different approaches to the subject were used. The fieldwork was adapted to a new digital routine in a fragmented communication process relying on the participants' schedules and the availability of gatekeepers to respond. The gatekeeper and drama teacher communications were via WhatsApp (asynchronous texts and audios) in accordance with their own pace (Cohen et al. 2018). Eventually, there were prompt responses, but mostly the messages were delayed by weeks, or longer. Hereupon, the participants acted more as collaborators than co-creators like it was expected in the original fieldwork plan¹⁴.

There were drawbacks in conducting remote interviews with children. As Morrison's (2013) put wisely of 'making the strange familiar', it was taken deliberated and improvised actions indicating how the children and their own voice were important to the research and creating a relaxed, and even at times, humorous atmosphere so as to build the familiarity. However, building a friendly conversation during the interviews took longer due to technological problems (e.g. poor internet connection) which affected and diminished the children's attention span, these cuts during the interview led to a fatigue in communication. Adding to that, other challenges were faced - commonly referred by various authors (see in Simons 1982; Lewis 1992; Brenner 2006; Danby et al. 2011; Hurworth 2012; Lesson 2014) - such as, avoiding the problem of children feeling exposed in front of others, ensuring the children were giving their true opinion and not trying to please anyone with their answers. As presented later, the '*children are agents of social transformation*', and by taking on a "*pedagogy of possibilities*" it is believed to empower children to reshape the world in new ways (Grossberg 1997, 387). It was acknowledged that remote interviews had disadvantages in approaching and amplifying children's voices.

The original aim of the research was to engage along with the residents of Jardim Romano, who are not part of Estopô, in order to have more insights into the impact of theatre in their lives. However, due to COVID19 this was not possible and so remains a limitation of the research and a suggestion for future inquiries. Besides, an interesting research trail is the collective theatre *Acuenda* which investigates the LGBTQIA+ community in Jardim Romano.

Data analysis: dialogical issues

The *constant comparative* method (Glaser 1965; Stake 1995) was used to analyse secondary and primary data; as the collection worked in a cyclical way, the theoretical framework was to simultaneously code and analyse data to develop concepts (Taylor & Bogdan 1984). Secondary data supported the development of the open-ended interview questions to be applied in order to assess the coding stage with arguments and interpretations. By keeping the secondary data in an open coding stage, it was possible to work them individually (website, a documentary film, recorded interviews, and a grant application)¹⁵. Codes generated on adult's interviews were a starting point to analyse the children's responses since they were more concise in comparison with the adult's. The four adult interviewees shared narratives and were speaking freely. As Cohen et al. (2018) suggest, having a similar background supported on understanding key issues, ideas, and local expressions. The analysis was carried out in Portuguese and English to make the opportunity to capture the subtlety of the colloquial language and its cultural meaning.

¹⁴ The original aim was also to engage with the residents of Jardim Romano, who is not part of Estopô, who potentially would have insights about the impact of theatre in their lives.

¹⁵ The grant application is in Estopô's private archives. This grant supported financially five months of work.

Estopô's methodology as a Memory agent and collection of Narrative

The artists spent the first year visiting and collecting narratives from the residents. The Northeasterners artists (non-locals) discovered a large number of residents who were also migrants from the same or near the region bonding in cultural identity. In five years, *Estopô* created *The Water Trilogy* comprising three plays. The first, '*Soon the fish will jump*'¹⁶, was portrayed solely by the local youth artists. The main elements of the scene were the residents, their stories and their perspectives. The performance was created to have the street as the stage but also ran elsewhere in the neighbourhood and inside official buildings such as schools, CEUs and nearby cultural centres. Consequently, residents in the audience could identify themselves within the narratives and social realities being presented. Through shared experience and creating commonalities, building the sense of community (Dewey 2005, 244).

The second play of the trilogy was '*What is left from the river*', highlighting again floods as a central motif, and their key element is 'the home'¹⁷. At this time, non-local artists joined the locals in devising the play. The actors portrayed the residents, and at the end of the performance, the residents who had inspired particular scenes were invited to the stage to share their reflections. That was also presented for a large audience in the city centre and other neighbourhoods that had endured the same scenario.

'*The city of invisible rivers*' - the last of the trilogy - had more interaction with different artists and residents. It is an itinerant performance four hours long that starts at a central train station, carried out on a train for around forty minutes, then continuing through the *Jardim Romano* and finishing at the river.



Fig. 3 '*The city of invisible rivers*' – last scene.

Retrieved from <https://www.planoextra.com/2017/03/estopo-balaio-critica.html> access 19/01/2023.

¹⁶ '*Daqui a pouco o peixe pula*'

¹⁷ Retrieved from the Estopô's website. <https://coletivoEstopôbalaio.com.br/o-que-sobrou-do-rio>

'Taking on board': audience and research - peer review

As a spectator in *City of Invisible Rivers* in 2015, Spadotto accessed an array of sensations, emotions and reflections. The journey also depicts the processes of gentrification in São Paulo, the more the city centre is behind the more apparent the depreciation. The remaining pavement is dilapidated - when there is one - and exposes social scars left by the floods for over ten years. On the walls, marks unabashed, and underneath this evident hardship there are scarified souls. Estopô coined the term *re-existence* to describe their way of living in this territory where the locals 'were forced to reinvent life, to create prospects for survival and re-existence'.

The barrier between audience and actors is lifted when spectators are invited to have coffee and cake (a common practice between neighbours) while they share their story. From there reality and fiction become exposed and encourage reflection. Within this effort, possibilities are voiced to the spectator with a poetic action crossing their routine and different realities - an "expansion of experience" (Dewey 2005, 325), stripping it to rethinking possibilities and alternatives for their realities.

Indeed, one should bear in mind that, facing adversities, it is imperative to reflect and be conscientious of oneself, and one's surroundings to avoid certain situations being seen as destiny and being accepted passively or considered non-breakable barriers. Freire argues that these barriers are the limit-situation¹⁸, in which one needs to become aware of the oppressiveness conditions and undertake subsequent action. Hence, theatre groups that are socio-politically engaged —with a focus on cooperation features, collectivity ideals and solidarity—, point to alternative possibilities and paths through which participants and audiences can unveil issues that frequently depict oppressive characteristics of everyday life (Montero 2006).

Fieldwork was an essential part for Estopô to work within their communities. Estopô carries out working with aesthetic and social *theoretical grounding*; performing *ethnographical work* for a year or more in length; *collecting 'data'/narratives from interviews and direct observations*. The next stage of the creative work starts with acting improvisations *experiments* based on their findings. *Local narratives* are interwoven with *literature, poetry and music* that bring even more layers of *sensorial experiences* that mark the *aesthetic* of this crafted work that is *personal, social and political*. From this perspective, *validity* was present in their *artistic research* as Estopô rehearsed on and experienced the streets, where the actual performance happens within the community and its narrative - shaping a reflective play. That process unveils Freire's concept of praxis "*reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it*" (1996, 33) when applied to building theories from a practical standpoint. Mackey (2016b, 488), on AT as Practical Research (PaR), observes that theory and practice can become a 'theoretical practice', and reflection and action can be combined into a 'reflexive action'. Thus, having practical work is the kernel of AT, applying theatrical practices outside theatre buildings and having the community at its core. In addition, this research is interested in approaching theatre as a political and pedagogical action, which will be discussed at *Re-existing to resist* section (O'Neal 1968; Boal 2019; see also Freire 1996 to complement the view of education as a political act in critical pedagogy).

¹⁸ In Freire's terms, a limit-situation is what impedes or prevents one's pursuit of becoming more fully human as a result of "hosting" or "housing" the oppressor's consciousness (Shudak & Avoseh 2015, 465).

Estopô Balaio: an applied theatre approach to community theatre

Questioned about what theatre Estopô does, they do not identify themselves using applied theatre or theatre of the oppressed. They find themselves as a theatre group doing theatre. If they had to define themselves, they would say *Documentary theatre* and *Community theatre*. The choice to analyse their experience from an AT perspective offered accurate insights to pinpoint social-political engagement actions through an artistic intervention, as Freire (1970, 30) says, “with” and not “for” others.

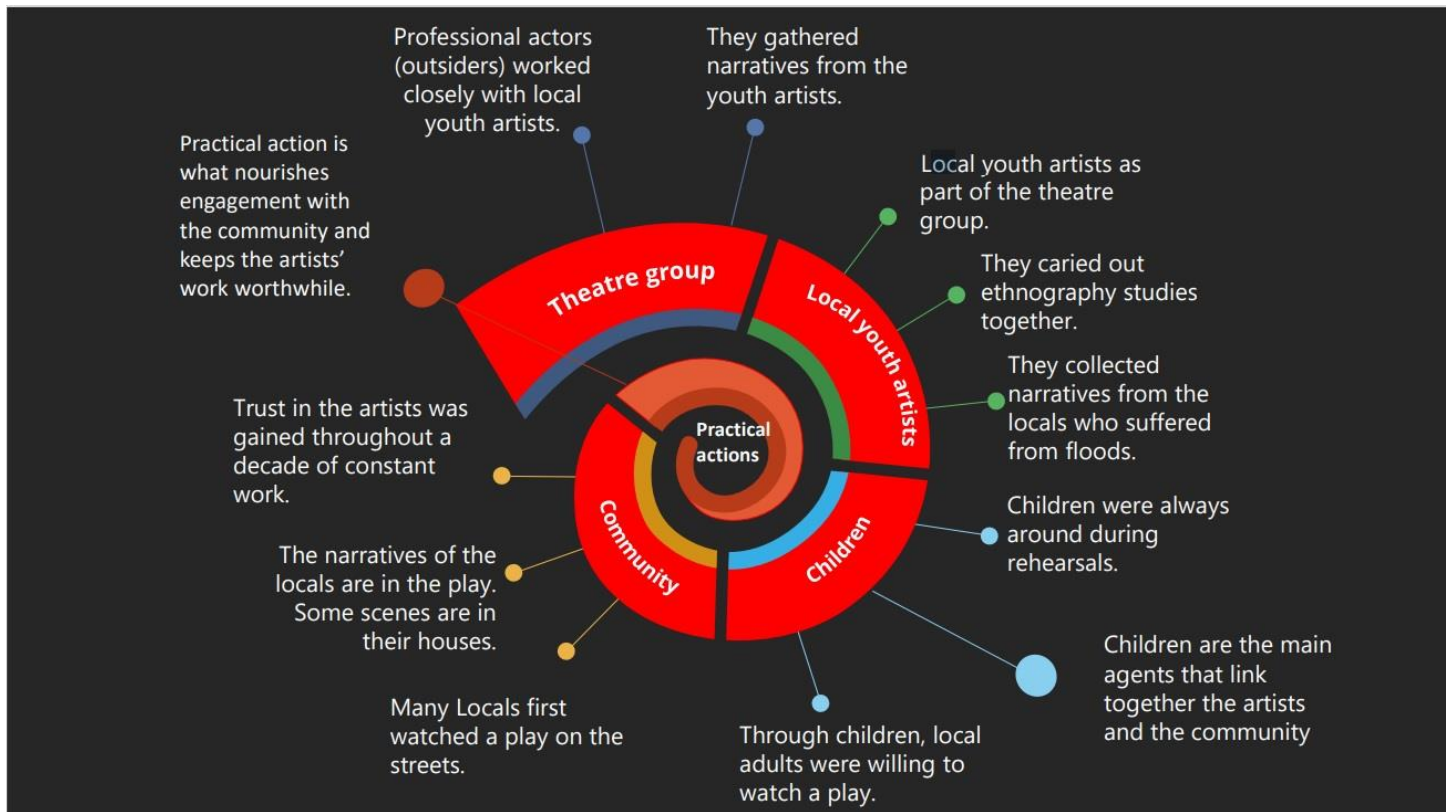


Fig. 4 Spiral towards trust (Spadotto 2021) - private collection

The image above shows how the theatre group that had members from outside the community started the approach with the community members and how they developed a path of trust together.

Findings and discussions from this journey

From this point onwards, we present condensed findings and discussions that can offer insights into how AT can support transformational change and social resistance.

Tackling arts deprivation with cultural community centres

All Estopô's members were enrolled at CEU¹⁹, a program the City Council maintains. Keli recalls that it was in the library of CEU that she used to spend hours reading to forget her problems and that she could finally find a place to make theatre for free²⁰. The impact of these centres is immeasurable,

¹⁹ The Unified Educational Centers (CEU) are public facilities aimed at education created by the Municipal Education Department of São Paulo in 2001 and located in the peripheral areas of Greater São Paulo. This program is dedicated to early childhood education and fundamental as well as offering quality services in the area of sports, recreational and cultural practices. The city of São Paulo currently has 46 CEUs which allocate more than 120 thousand students. <http://portal.sme.prefeitura.sp.gov.br/Main/Page/PortalSMESP/CEUs-Enderecos> access in 19/01/2023.

²⁰ see more in section (ii) Children as agents for social change.

enabling cultural and creative processes accessible to everyone and not only to privileged areas as usual (Fabiano 2010). Being involved in the fruition or participation in activities of such centres can flourish their talents and symbolic expression and support changes in participants in terms of becoming more committed, humane and sympathetic (Silva 2014).

Therefore, creating, maintaining and promoting such public facilities must be implemented as a whole programme. That is a conscious management of public space, continuous training of staff programmes, audience campaigns offering presentations subsidised by the State, dialogue with the community, action planning, and budgeting, among other issues. Running these programmes with robust actions into public policies encourages the continuity of this social transformation movement. It can reduce the risk of dismantlement in subsequent mandates regardless of their interests or political agendas (Viganó 2017).

Children as agents for social change

As Bourdieu (1998) shows, through scientific observation, cultural assets result from family guidance and school education. He argued that this guidance is commonly from middle and high-class families. Similarly, Jesse de Souza (2016, 28) states that,

An apparently individual's inner talent is, in fact, a product of the capacities and abilities transferred from parents to children through mechanisms of affective identification via everyday examples assuring the privilege of a social class and perpetuating it.

Indeed, access to theatrical training is often restricted to the higher social classes. However, the initiatives presented in this research seek to democratise access to cultural assets providing that material and symbolic opportunities to low-income families as a form of social recognition and breaking this cycle of the perpetuation of "innate stigma" (Souza 2016, 30). Keli affirms that theatre has saved her life. When she was about nine years old, she used to run away from her home environment to find shelter in theatre lessons to forget about physical abuse at home. Keli added that her two children were raised in a theatre environment where they could access art and be mature and open-minded. From the beginning of Estopô, her daughters were brought to the rehearsals. In Bruno's case, theatre lessons started when he was seventeen, and he brought his family to the theatre environment.

Regarding the interviewed children, they watched their first plays in preschool, but they only started doing theatre themselves when they joined Estopô. Their drama teacher endorsed that the transformation was already taking place by exposing them to art on their neighbourhood's streets. The drama lessons' pedagogical process intensified social transformation because it was available weekly and invited children to participate in the scenes.

For Keli and Bruno, more families come to the theatre' activities through their children, yet parents have mixed views. For some parents, it was not easy to understand their children's interest in the theatre. For others, it was considered a good place to go. In an informal conversation with an Estopô member, they referred to a conversation with a local parent who was a drug dealer. The parent shared that having a space where his child could go was good as they could learn something and divert from following the parent's paths. The children in this research may not realise how essential they were, are and always will be as agents for social change. We shall recall that it was their narratives of floods that were the trigger to this theatre project. Through the children's lenses, tragedy started being re-signified, making crucial connections between artists and the neighbourhood.

Theatre and reality meeting

A cultural centre does not guarantee local inhabitants' attendance. Developing the creative process, rehearsing, and presenting on Jardim Romano's streets was fundamental to Estopô's artistic process. It is an ongoing work to challenge residents' fixed mindsets through an effective exchange in the neighbourhood by proposing a reflection on social conditions and working on critical consciousness. Moreover, for many residents, watching a play on the neighbourhood's streets was the opportunity to have their first encounter with the theatrical language.

Dewey (2005) argues that art is a powerful form of communication; however, some incidents demonstrated the unfamiliarity of locals with the theatre language, causing friction in communication. Some of Estopô's members reported that during their early creative process, all the actors lay down on the street, and the director used a recorder to capture the sounds. This whole picture led someone to call the police, thinking it was a mass killing in the neighbourhood. The performance perception was conceived as a violent action in the community reflecting the distrustful routine in that space. The scene was (mis)understood as a threat. Carol reminds us that revolutionising the imaginary (challenging fixed mindsets) is a vital step towards bridging this gap:

To a certain extent, there is also a dispute of imaginaries. It happened because the theatre was not recognised as a language. In that context, it was not understood that it could be solely a street scene. Suppose it is understood that that scene could be related only to violence. In that case, we realise this is a language/creative imaginary revolution of a new possibility of occupying the street with new structures (Carol).

Recontextualising such artistic display in this way is challenging for those in the community and those approaching it.

In *Poetics of the Oppressed*, Boal (2019) uses theatre as a language to encourage the spectator to take the role of the subject and intervene actively. Estopô's engagement with the residents, as they put it, 'forced them to reinvent life, to create prospects for survival and re-existence'; their theatrical production is constantly nourished by and with the community and had a significant impact on the group's interaction. Estopô seeks dialogue using the spectacle based on the inhabitants' memories to generate other approaches to the world, utilising art references to re-elaborate their stories. Freire (1981) refers to it as the utopian pedagogy of denunciation and announcement, where an act of knowledge—and denounced reality—is used as cultural action for liberation. Hence the emphasis on the constant problematisation of the concrete reality is represented in codified²¹ situations.

Cultural action: a continuous work

Since the start of Estopô's works in Jardim Romano, there was a mobilisation for instrumentalisation and training being developed with the local young artists, in which they were immersed in the production and design of their performances. This process was facilitated by a grant awarded for four years of scholarships to ten young local artists who were part of the crew. Estopô's theatrical experience has been their wellspring to become professional. The scholarship was crucial in maintaining the artistic path as most of the youth engaged in the project were young carers who provided financial support to their family (grant application in 2014)²².

Estopô has the resources that ensure their upkeep due to extensive continuing funding and successful grant applications²³. These resources provide the means to support a rented space used as their

²¹ In Freire's Method, codification is a representation or the illustration of an aspect of reality, of an existential situation constructed by the students (here, the residents) in interaction with their elements. The mechanism provides a detached perception of reality by individuals, it starts to be observed, analysed. The codification could be through drawing or photography or drama. As for Freire, "Would the dramatisation work as codification, as a problematizing situation, to which would follow the discussion of its content?" (1987, 118).

²² Grant: 25 Lei de Fomento ao Teatro.

²³ Grants: Programa VAI, PROAC de Primeira Obras em Artes Cênicas.

headquarters (Casa Balaio). Estopô's work's expansion of the art form within the community was one of the key points. The residents' collaboration provided a new perspective that challenged the professional actors (non-local) to establish new ways of thinking. Casa Balaio hosts three other collectives, 'Arenga Filmes', 'Oceaniños' and 'Coletivo Acuenda'. It also became a place of artistic residency, welcoming different cultural actions to the venue (e.g. 'Sarau do Peixe' and 'Cine Varal Romano'). During the pandemic times, all activities were online. Nonetheless, collectives Estopô and Acuenda worked together in a campaign called 'All against coronavirus', delivering food and masks to the population.

In Estopô's work, social and political issues are raised and discussed with the public, restoring their relationship with the city through theatre. The exchange with the public takes place symbolically, provoking reflections from those engaging with the work. Which, in turn, re-signifies the subject's relationship with one's city and with one's peers.

Documentary theatre, urban intervention and an installation were their ways to bring about the neighbourhood's social reality. The stage becomes the place where the residents experience the flood. The houses, streets, and alleys tell the story of that place, with the residents co-creating their daily life, presenting it more than representing reality.

According to Mackey (2013, 46-48), a *'performance of place practices' is enacted by their inhabitants in their everyday lives and in the 'potential role of performance practices in bringing about a changed perception of such places when they are sites of dis-ease'*. Similarly, Estopô's workplace is highly marked by tragedy and can be reconciled by affective responses. On changing the perception of its inhabitants as well as the outside perception of that neighbourhood:

My way of changing something, some injustice here, is to promote everything done here. I do it through word of mouth wherever I go. I want people to come to the neighbourhood that has always been seen as marginalised so they look at it differently (Keli).

We need to show the reality that we are living in this neighbourhood. We are resisting. Here there are floods and robberies, but there are also artists and people concerned about the community.

We need to show this to those who do not live here so that they see that it is not only about bad things that they watch in the news or hear rumours. Jardim Romano also has its liveness from these people that bring happiness to many others (Bruno).

A *"political action with the oppressed has to be, deep down, a 'cultural action for freedom', for this very reason, action with them"* (Freire 1979, 57). Coutinho (2010, 164) reassures:

The theatrical experience, when living in popular spaces, such as a favela [slum and deprived neighbourhoods], lets us think about the essence of the theatre, and its most vital vocation, which is to communicate, to move, to mobilise an audience. There lies the strength of art, often forgotten in sophisticated theatres.

Response-ability

The food campaigns in solidarity with those most affected by social inequality implemented by theatre groups and other organisations were essential, as the Brazilian social inequality had deepened during the pandemic. However, such initiatives are only short-term palliative measures to mitigate the brutal conditions that millions of Brazilians live in, immensely aggravated by the politically deficient public administration in the Covid-19 crisis. To an extent, these measures only emphasised and denounced the public policies' emptiness in tackling poverty. There is indeed a transformational character of theatre; however, it is vitally important that the State takes responsibility through public policies and commits to human life, then guarantees the entire exercise of citizenship by those who are denied to.

All forms of art can be transformative and a stimulus for shifting ways of thinking - either for good or for evil, depending on the seriousness and humanity of its creators (Freire 1970; Boal 2019; van Erven 1988). If we are committed to intervening in social and political discourse within an artistic process, we should strive to be aware of whom these productions might serve. In order to contribute to fostering a fair society, we must constantly be reflecting upon our work and be aware of whose interests we are serving. Snyder-Young (2013, 138) stresses that artists are "*embedded in webs of power and beholden to institutions for funding, access...*" so one must be aware of institutions' agendas as funding bodies. Informed action is of utmost importance when constantly practising critical thinking. Additionally, when there is praxis - to act and reflect upon our actions (Freire 1970, 186), the practitioner cultivates response-ability (Haraway 2016, 35) in knowing and doing collectively with the participants through co-constructive and co-creative practices, ensuring that multiple agencies are part of the performative action flow.

Furthermore, to raise critical awareness of our actions, we must avoid considering ourselves as the community's saviour. It is commonly observed that some organisations or practitioners adopt a stance that they have a saviour role in the lives of others. In some cases, this stance inadvertently perpetuates stigmas treating some people as if they have no agency to change their situation. Freire (1970) asserts that the Pedagogy of the Oppressed is a learning process of people engaging and facing their struggle for their own freedom. He adds that no pedagogy is a means to freedom if it has an oppressed group as an object of humanitarian treatment, which uses the situations of the oppressed to promote their own 'benevolence' (Freire 1970, 50-53). Such a power dynamic sets up and maintains a scenario of oppression where some 'benevolent people' are starring the stage, and the oppressed people keep in the audience, watching the neo-liberalism system carry on.

Resist and re-exist

This paper presented an overview of Spadotto's research (2021) at Estopô Balaio's group in São Paulo, Brazil. It showed the social context of structural inequalities and the pandemic, which exacerbated the state's absence towards a vulnerable population. Then, a brief outline of Applied Theatre was presented. Next, a methodological framework was prospected to frame the limitations of this work. Finally, findings on Estopô's work were delved to exemplify actions in partnership with a neighbourhood neglected by the government and how those people resist oppressive situations through arts strategies. Beyond that, it reflected on the response-ability of practitioners and researchers.

In Estopô's work, social and political issues are raised and discussed with the public, restoring their relationship with the city through theatrical actions. The streets are their stage, and by choosing to expand the access to theatre at a street-stage, they reaffirm their political and aesthetic stance and presuppose a permanent democratic exercise of exchanging experiences (Pompeu & Vasconcelos 2020).

Radical theatre practitioners, through devising plays, changing the perspective of the relationship with the spectator, and challenging aesthetic forms, broaden the access to theatre and use it as a tool for social transformation (Heddon & Miling 2016; Nicholson 2005; Oddey 1994; Prentki & Preston 2009). This array of appropriation and application of theatre helps solidify the links between arts education and cultural action, strengthening artistic-pedagogical knowledge (Viganó 2019). The trajectory of Estopô allows us to consider the pedagogical dimension of the theatrical work in its beginning. For instance: by recognising the children's voices through their narratives as triggers to the creative process, by devising plays with local artists and residents, by supporting artistic training, and by continuous work carried out over a decade. Taking the artistic work beyond CEU to the streets and prioritising the cultural action of their work, Estopô broadened the institutional relationship, establishing the artistic dialogue to find an amplitude for its insertion and interference in the neighbourhood.

Furthermore, by integrating the perspectives from the community, the professional actors' perspective was challenged, inducing them "to rethink their assumptions and beliefs about themselves and their lives" (Marten 1999, 64). This created a greater exchange between the artists' and the residents' creative processes and perspectives. Supporting professionalisation of the local youth contributed to more people practising their agency and solidarity to make a difference in their realities and surroundings. By sharing the means of production in the theatre, more people can utilise them in their acts of resistance and, as mentioned before, as acts of re-existence, where people reinvent life, creating prospects for survival. As Boal (2019, 98) says, "*The theatre is a weapon, and it is the people who should wield it*". Political art occurs through these interferences and the process of formation experienced by it; not only artists but citizens and critical subjects in society are formed.

This way, the training experience is not only about a fruition process or knowledge transfer. The pedagogical artistic experience must consider the participants' sociocultural context (Freire, In Santos 2018, 254). The power of cultural action and artistic work with a community is only meaningful if it embraces its residents as collaborators and agents in their realities, respected as thinkers and makers, and citizens through continuous work instead of isolated actions. Therefore, this paper reassures the importance of a socially and politically engaged approach to AT to support transformational change and bring about social resistance, contributing to understanding artistic practices as a pedagogical and political action. "*Perhaps the theatre is not revolutionary in itself, but it is surely a rehearsal for revolution*" (Boal 2019, 135).

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