

On Deepening Identity Issues by Staging Neil Simon's *The Gingerbread Lady* with Young People

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ABSTRACT

In theater practice, the concept of human identity can be explored both as a phenomenon and a communicative act. The theoretical framework that merges the phenomenological and semiotic approach provides tools for young people to increase awareness of the overlapping narratives that underlie complex and multilayered human experiences, addressing identity and social justice issues while focusing on the concept of diversity. These self-reflective concerns are of critical importance to the contemporary postcolonial, multicultural and interconnected world.

*This paper demonstrates the effectiveness of staging Neil Simon's US play *The Gingerbread Lady* with young people, focusing on a European perspective. I will be providing that the play has enabled a collaborative and creative process, challenging participants' both individual and collective identity concerns. High school students have increased self-consciousness towards their personal narratives derived*

from the multifaceted social systems in which they live, allowing discussions and comparisons to emerge between the US social system represented on stage, and the European one. In this elective theater course, they have embodied physical, intellectual and emotional experiences by staging characters who address sexist, LGBTQ and racial issues.

A performance is declarative of our shared humanity, yet it utters the uniqueness of particular cultures. (Victor Turner, as cited in Schechner & Appel, 1990)

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I will explain a pedagogical practice that provides tools for young people to increase awareness of the narratives that underlie complex, multilayered human identities. I accomplish this by addressing issues of social justice through focusing on the concept of diversity in the staging of theatrical performances.

I am a teaching artist at Liceo Cantonale di Lugano, a high school in Lugano, Switzerland, a local European microcosm that belongs to a multicultural nation which is politically and economically in connection to the whole planet. In opposition to this reality, in the social and political practices of my region both the global perspective and the assumption on diversity are taken for granted and become colour-blind issues. Decisions are very rarely made with regard to different nationalities, cultures and ethnicities, other than when they are considered a problem to be erased.

In fact, I face the slogan “I/We come first” as a political and social statement built to assert the supremacy of a nation or a specific community in the confrontation with diversity and otherness. Similar to “America First”, the slogan recently restored by Trump’s presidency, some politicians in Cantone Ticino, the southern region of my country that borders Italy, claim: “Prima i nostri!” — “Ours first!”, with the idea of cutting out “the other” in favor of “those” who belong to this region and its supposedly sealed-off community, considering the fact that “national identity is not given, it is something to be defined, conquered,

and secured” (Szatkowski, 2019, p. 17) when certain communities feel a danger. In this ideology, economical and social issues dangerously turn in less or more covered xenophobia. But the core of Western education lies in the Enlightenment philosophy of the eighteenth century, which emphasizes freedom, equality, and brotherhood as fundamental principles in politics, society and law. Tolerance and acceptance of diversity are therefore cornerstones for understanding oneself and the world. For these reasons, I educate my students to think in terms of communities, national histories, and race to build openness to otherness.

In leading an elective theater course, I challenge the slogan “I come first” to dismantle it. The course aims at including and welcoming difference because it opens up the possibility of sharing one’s humanity instead of asserting the primacy of one person or the supremacy of a community over others. As I will show, this is possible even if, paradoxically, in front of spectators performers emphasize their presence (Féral & Bermingham, 2002; Zarrilli, 2004) in “empty spaces” (Brook, 1996) through their bodies, objects, clothes, music, sounds, words and voices as props, costumes (Reynelt, 2006) and stories to tell (Fuchs, 1985).

The European perspective in facing the complex reality of postcolonialism and multiculturalism is discussed by staging the first act of Neil Simon’s *The Gingerbread Lady*. The US social justice issues are represented in Simon’s play, and I thematize that the United States had been a colony of the continent where I live. For this reason, I consider that we should all feel a connection and a responsibility as both oppressors/colonizers, and sufferers, recognizing similar social issues in our communities. In my practice, I feel the need to discuss diversity with Swiss high school students, because European societies are multicultural while maintaining strong national roots, have a migration history and a colonial past, that lead them to follow discussions happening in the world with their specific perspective.

THEATRICAL POSITION

I will discuss my practice by merging a semiotic approach (Elam, 1977) with a phenomenological one (States, 1985; 1992; Grant, 2012), considering that both approaches are used to enhance reflexivity, i.e. to value the knowledge derived from the theatrical experience. Using

the concept “liminal” in Turner’s anthropological terms (Turner, 1982), the course is a process that fosters a liminal experience because it is outside the school curriculum and students participate on a voluntary basis. This enables them to challenge their comfort zone and cross a personal threshold defining their identity. It finally restores them to a community of equals with a public performance, at the end of the school year. My pedagogy focuses on phenomenology, in order to “claim [...] access to a fundamental-transcendental level of cognition, perception, intersubjectivity and being which would apply to all humans” (Grant, 2012, p. 10), encouraged to develop an ethical attitude that respects each participant’s complex history, experience, and point of view.

In the 1960s, Grotowski’s anthropological research “fundamentally redefined the relationship between the performer and his role” (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, p. 82), disregarding it as the ultimate goal of the actors. This leads us to the concept of performance, defined historically (Banes, 1990; Fischer-Lichte, 1997), anthropologically (Turner, 1987), semantically (Elam, 1980; Veltruský, 1981) and philosophically (Fischer-Lichte, 2008), that can be resumed as human “presence” on stage (Grant, 2012, p. 11). Moving from this theoretical background, I aim to foster the embodied experience of individuals employing artistic tools to express themselves (Carlson, 1985; Smith, 1991; Kozel, 1997; Jaeger, 2006). This experience invites the youth to develop self-awareness of their complex selves and of the multilayered communities and societies to which they belong.

In order to illustrate these matters, I will present the process of staging Simon’s first act, along with students’ perspectives. To elaborate this paper, I contacted nine out of the twenty-one participants more than one year after the performance, and asked the following questions: what did it mean to share a character with others? Were you able to reflect on the value of identity and the difference between United States and Swiss societies? In the following paragraphs I will discuss some quotes of the written answers I received from seven students, in order to evaluate the impact of this theatrical and pedagogical experience.

SOCIAL JUSTICE TOPICS IN THE PRACTICE

Neil Simon's *The Gingerbread Lady* (1970) presents a realistic and fun portrait of the US society of the late twentieth century. Set in the NYC apartment of Evelyn Meara, a woman recovering from alcoholism, the play covers different topics on diversity.

The main characters belong to the show business. For them, the need to appear is fundamental, and I focused on this topic to deepen the concept of soul and inner consciousness, which are invisible aspects to be represented on stage (Merleau-Ponty, 1968; 2002). Everyone was free to choose their favorite character, disregarding the gender assignments in the text. To make the invisible visible and expose the complexity of each character, performers had to choose one distinctive temper to engage with a specific quality of each character. They portrayed characters' different tempers, playing simultaneously on stage. For example, one student played the nervous, another one the brave or the selfish temperament of the same character.

- Evelyn Meara, Evy (42 years old), a singer and actress, was played simultaneously by five female performers.
- James Perry, Jimmy (40), Evelyn's friend and a gay actor, was played by one male and three females.
- Toby Landau (40), the wife of a producer living for her Helena Rubinstein make-up products, was played by three females.
- Lou Tanner (35), an unemployed music player, was played by one female and three males.
- Manuel (20), a Latino delivery boy, was played by two males.
- Polly Meara (17 years old), daughter of Evy and student—implicitly a direct representative of the participants, was played by three females.

I will identify participants' thoughts by declaring both the character they played and the performer's biological sex, female (F) or male (M).

Evy1(F) explicitly recognizes in the play the following topics:

insecurity, homosexuality along with homophobia, summarized in gender identity, but also the hunger for success and defeat for failures, relationship troubles, differences between children and

parents, toxic and harmful addictions, as well as psychiatric problems. (student response, 2020)

Xenophobia, racism, machismo, and sexism are also addressed in the play that is especially apt to generate one's identity awareness. About this issue, Evy2(F) considers: "In our society labels are put on all the time, as if each of us played a role assigned by [...] those who watch us. This is how we forget that we are the ones who create our identity and that we cannot depend on the opinions of others" (student response, 2020). In fact, the variety of characters and the multiple interpretations of the same character allowed the performers to experience the richness and depth of each personality.

THE PEDAGOGICAL PROCESS: CHARACTERS BETWEEN PRESENCE AND APPEARANCE

The multiplied roles are an intellectual challenge for performers, and Lou1(M) recognizes it: "a character most of the time is much more than what you read, and therefore pretending to share it with someone could sacrifice some fundamental aspects and make it appear simpler" (student response, 2020). He adds that "although a character is defined by elements that we all perceive, everyone has a different vision [...] about the personality of the shared character, and therefore there is the risk to show aspects that maybe for others do not apply" (student response, 2020). However, I assess participants' development of confidence and openness as a major facet of my research practice in arts education, supported by the male's own words valuing his experience. He manifests some contradiction to what he previously states about an apparent simplification: "But [...] I believe that it is still of fundamental importance to share a character with others in order to fully understand the vast array of emotions that characterize [... him], without therefore limiting oneself to one's own vision" (student response, 2020). Physical and emotional activities allowed to overcome intellectual barriers, and in regard to gender role, Lou2(F) states that for her it was interesting and fun to impersonate a male. She writes: "if you want to play a character that is so different from yourself, as in my case, the presence of other people is necessary to really understand it" (student response, 2020).

The strategies I used to stimulate interaction, dialogue, reflexivity and social change refer to the history of theater, facing “the decline of confidence in any possible authenticity of Character” (Fuchs, 1985, p. 172). In reference to the Great Reform of the early twentieth century represented in the theories of Mikhail Chekhov, Stanislavsky's disciple, I asked participants to select physical actions closely related to the temper of their character's personality, in order to seek the comfort and meaningfulness of being on stage. They repeated small movements or gestures to enhance nonverbal and non-significantly encoded experiences (Jaeger, 2006) in resonance with the written text experienced with both physical and emotional contributions.

For performers, the “body is [...] more than a vehicle of representation and mimesis, it manifests the presence of the actor, the immediacy of the event, and the material nature of the body” (Féral & Bermingham, 2002, p. 100). In a scene developing between mother and daughter, four young performers simultaneously playing Evy decided to physically stick to the fifth one interpreting “sweetness” in her weakest moment. She fears her daughter's willingness to live with her, and they interpreted a meltdown when she finally truthfully declares her vulnerability and thus becomes more assertive in her relationship: “You're seventeen years old, it's time you judged me. I just don't want you to get the idea that a hundred and eighty-three pounds of pure alcohol is something called Happy Fat [...] I'm not what you'd call an emotionally stable person” (Simon, 1971, p. 28). The kinesics becomes meaningful, as the movement of “melting” represents fragility, semantically. Evy1(F) writes:

Perhaps because Evelyn has hit the lowest point, she has no problem saying what she thinks. On the contrary, it is more difficult for her to show what she really feels, just as it is difficult for her to let herself be loved by those who would like to help her, because the fear of falling back into the tunnel is too great, but even more so is the fear of dragging those around her into her mess and traumatizing them. (student response, 2020)

Performers' choice to interpret a distinctive temperament developed from activities based on Richard Schechner's *Rasa Boxes* (1988). Young people explored the possibility of coloring the understanding and interpretation of a character in connection to eight human

essences outlined in a Sanskrit treatise on drama, the Nāṭya Śāstra, which are: surprise/wonder, love/eros, fear/shame, disgust/revolt, courage/heroism, laughter/hilariousness, sadness/compassion, and rage. They embodied and verbally played these inner states of being defined in a marked space, as they moved from one space and thus from one essence to another. The revelation of each inner state allowed character's complexity to clearly emerge when performers connected their chosen temper with others portraying different tempers of the same character. For example, the performers interpreting Evy realized how she is torn between sweetness and ferocity. When impersonating the two distinct personalities, they instinctively reacted on stage by turning their back on each other while still feeling how emotionally connected they were. These works of "positive, voluntary modes of refined self-presencing allow the practitioner to explore realms of embodiment which [...] allow one to (re)negotiate the terms and quality of engagement of the lived bodymind in its encounter with itself in the world" (Zarrilli, 2004, p. 661). A semiotic reading of this proxemic aspect defines how the meaningful use of space represents a conflict. Still, Evy3(F) declares (*italics mine*):

The dismemberment of Evy's individuality into multiple persons made it more evident that *there is no single and precise concept of identity [...]*, but that same Evy *was also just one* and the different people who played her also *felt this strong sense of shared identity*. (student response, 2020)

Participants acknowledged that the phenomenon of appearing is very complex: a person can be apparently sweet while controlling their anger. Phenomenologically speaking, such an experience asks participants to consider the crucial aspect of being in relation with any otherness, whether it be the reality of staging (i.e. in relation to other performers and theatrical conventions) or the request to represent visible and invisible aspects of the character, following its complexity and development in the plot. Evy2(F) writes: "I had the opportunity to play Evy, a woman constantly struggling with her inner insecurities and her seemingly secure outer image, which made me think a lot about the world we live in" (student response, 2020). And indeed, "by challenging the assumption that objects actually exist [...], we are more open to the present experience, thus creating the possibility of

attaining a «pure consciousness» of our immediate surroundings" (Wilcox, 2000, p. 78). Also Evy1(F) states: "Playing my character at the same time as other companions was fun, but it also made me think about how complex and multifaceted any one person is" (student response, 2020).

Trust and mutual support were developed in each group of participants. Polly(F) explains: "In the process leading up to the performance, it is essential to learn how to share the stage space with other people, as it is the harmony in the group work that is truly staged at the end of the year" (student response, 2020). Interpreters were collaborative and contextual in their "willing[ness] «to play the game» on which all aesthetic perception is based" (States 1996, p. 13) in theatre, and perception as a matter of "seeing" (Krasner & Saltz, 2006) is a complex experience for young performers engaged mentally, physically and emotionally throughout the liminal process of rehearsing for the show. Polly(F) finally considers the value of otherness for life itself: "Theater also represents unity for me, as each character needs the others to give meaning to his or her own existence" (student response, 2020).

In addition, I evaluate participants' personal development. In their interpretations, students recognized specific patterns of behavior in themselves, since "intentionality [that] can be described as both spatial and temporal is as a repetitive, habitual structuring of perceptual experience" (Jaeger, 2006, p. 136). Jimmy(F) explains: "We can learn to be independent of ourselves when we dislike ourselves or when we always run into the same dynamics we despise: what would Jimmy do instead of me?" (student response, 2020). Cognitive recognition of the aim of embodying personal choices in movements deepened the awareness of individual patterns in daily experience of all that surrounds, both by perceiving it and simultaneously interacting with it (Zarrilli, 2007). Lou1(M) declares:

In my experience, it is not always easy to understand what you feel at the level of emotions in your life, but having the opportunity to impersonate someone other than myself and being able to analyze it helped me to define a little better what we call emotions, and even if they were not necessarily related to my life directly, they helped me to evaluate with a closer eye what happens in everyday life to me and the people around me, being

able to understand me/them better. (student response, 2020)

Participants' awareness of the complexity of human reactions and internal challenges between temperaments follows from their multifaceted interpretation of the play, considering that "to understand the spatial temporality of intentionality [...], the constitution of an experience as a synthesis of the various bodily powers engage[s] in or connect[s] to features of the environment" (Jaeger, 2006, p. 135).

EUROPEAN AND AMERICAN SOCIETIES

The choice of Simon's play for a European staging is due to the richness of the US production in regard to self-representation and thus identity issues. Participants didn't perceive a great difference between the two societies, and still Evy1(F) considers (*italics mine*):

a substantial difference that I notice between the two interconnected «communities» with different but similar habits and cultures is due and partly dictated by *past history, government institutions, education, social and insurance assistance, and political parties*. These aspects preferentially push in opposite directions to the differences that enrich us, that *should be normalized, accepted and shared, instead of being despised and called out to fuel hatred*. (student response, 2020)

She recognizes the presence of social justice issues, considering that on both continents resentments generated by differences are nurtured. Lou2(F) states:

Being from North America myself, I think I was less surprised by the diversity of the characters in this American context. They were brutally honest individuals full of dark humor, completely aware of their own failures and those of the others. [...] These characters are also present in the European context but in a more hidden way. (student response, 2020)

Racial issues specific to the United States are addressed in the play. At the end of the first act, it is revealed that Lou's love for Evy ended

and drove her to alcoholism, because he had found a younger, Native American woman. The new romance is already over, and Evy asks: "What'd she do when you walked out on her? Ride into the sunset? Do a little sun dance? Wriggle and bounce her firm little body? You want to tell me about her tight little eighteen-year-old body, Lou?" (Simon, 1971, p. 39) This line reveals different, unjust attitudes towards society. Evy's racism surfaces and is apparently motivated by jealousy, while Lou's sexism and machismo come to the fore. Yet personalities are more complex, and participants learned that the apparent strength or weakness of any character has to deal with many more internal tensions, such as Evy attacking Lou while feeling her need for love.

Undoubtedly, the complexities in the characters' personalities are accurately portrayed in the play, and by embodying them, performers are helped in their reading between the lines. They grasp the invisible states which link complex human relationships, and question their inner selves. Neil Simon's play offers an opportunity to explore and acknowledge everyday, stereotypical attitudes towards diversity, and to question personal ways of experiencing and interpreting relationships and communities. Jimmy(F) writes:

the play made me realize how there are very different people in the world, living opposite lives but feeling the same sensations, the same emotions, although for different dynamics. That's why theater is a good training for empathy and understanding of the other, who really is no other. (student response, 2020)

Interestingly, Evy1(F) comments on students' openness to identity discussion: "Among us young high school peers, I noticed a lot of open-mindedness on all the issues addressed through the characters" (student response, 2020), even when facing the fact, as Lou1(M) writes, that "everyone, no matter how hard they try to show themselves in a certain way, is actually hiding another, more intimate identity that they try to conceal out of shame or fear" (student response, 2020).

To promote the adolescent value of finding oneself in the confrontation with the other while respecting one's own diversity, Evy1(F) concludes by saying that "if the themes of the play were addressed more often, not just negatively, perhaps opening up and showing oneself for who one is would be easier and less exhausting" (student response, 2020). This is a powerful statement dealing with the

issue of societies neglecting opportunities to discuss and address human identity in its multilayered complexity. The other in its richness is indeed fundamental for a culture of acceptance of oneself and the other. On this call for broader open-mindedness, Evy2(F) adds:

The Gingerbread Lady reminded me of how easy it is to focus on superficial aspects, how easy it is to judge and pass it off as a simple joke, something to laugh about... But above all, it forced me to focus my attention on the consequences of a life lived in the shadows, in denial, in a constant attempt to please the masses. (student response, 2020)

CONCLUSION

In the practice of educational theater, the analysis and staging of the first act of Neil Simon's *The Gingerbread Lady* allowed young people to both discover the plot and its themes through their own embodiment, and to open their mind towards awareness of each person's soul, emotions and physicality. By sharing the interpretation of a character with others, performers challenged their identity, raising ethical awareness on the complexity of individual and social experiences in a world where most of the time the "ego" would like to come first, and where the "ego" is often presented as a singular and well defined concept. Indeed, understanding the other follows from the possibility to deepen self-awareness and personal understanding. It is said that "empathy enlists possibilities rather than certainties" (Krasner, 2006, p. 256), accompanying young people to accept diversity and otherness.

To encourage high school students to achieve a state of individual consciousness, I engage with social justice, anti-xenophobia and anti-racist practices in the teaching of drama and theatre, asking for complex identities to take space and gain full respect. Questioning the richness of a personal identity allows students to overcome social blindness: students/performers gain awareness of social relationships and interactions, going far beyond the labels that categorize common identities, enacting experiences and therefore recognizing feelings and temperaments with which one should learn to deal in daily life. Participants, in their complex inner and physical identities, along with shared work, were challenged to acknowledge both the peculiar reality

of the theater and the complexity of true human relationships. They compared the social issues represented with those they experience every day, recognizing and valuing the concept of diversity on multiple levels.

Emotional comprehensiveness, along with intellectual understanding, is probably not enough on its own to deal with everyday social justice issues around the world, but I think it is a good starting point. As Jaeger writes:

Perceptual openness or presence to what is new, different and other must in some way constitute an individual's ability to experience a world. Presence is the possibility of transformation in familiar, habituated, and socially entrenched patterns through which one experiences the world. (Jaeger, 2006, p. 139)

Curricula in the arts facilitate the teaching and learning of social justice because they challenge identities through the participation in a creative group or a community of individuals who face their mutual diversity, along with the diversity of the characters they are willing to portray. In doing so, stories and history are written into societies and become narratives according to different points of view. Arts education is a privileged way to become aware of these narratives and learn to respect them in our multicultural world.

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