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Theater As a Teaching Procedure in Sociology

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Introduction

For the past several years, the Department of Sociology, University of Brasilia (UnB) has used theater as a pedagogical tool for teaching sociology. The results have been encouraging with respect to both the participants' increased sociological understanding and their personal growth. The purpose of this paper is to present some of the ideas regarding the use of theater as a teaching tool and some of the procedural steps.

The use of theater as a method of teaching sociology began in 1985 as an endeavor to motivate undergraduate sociology students who were taking a course in the Sociology of Labor. At that time, the Department of Artistic Education at UnB initiated a special project with the suggestive title of "Commit your Scenes."¹ Within this project, any Department or student at the university could perform a scene or dance in an improvised showroom at the Art Department on scheduled days.

*An earlier version of this paper was presented at the International Sociological Association meeting, Clinical Sociology Session, Madrid, Spain, July 1990.

I had twenty-three students enrolled in my course on the Sociology of Labor, and it was not difficult to convince twelve of them that they should prepare a presentation for that semester. One of the components of Sociology of Labor was the ideology of work. Such topics as moral asceticism, the right to be lazy, and the creative side of idleness were fully discussed through the readings of classic works by Weber, Lafargue, and Marcuse.² We chose to stage an act of "The Farce of Good Laziness," by Brazilian playwright Ariano Suassuna,³ since this play presented all of these topics in a very sarcastic, Dionysian, and poetic way. The play itself is a eulogy of a more poetic and pleasurable way of life, based on folktales of the Brazilian Northeast, in which the praise of idle and creative heroes is quite frequent.

After receiving successful feedback, an attempt was made to stage a second play the next year. At this time (1986), the course was on the Sociology of Education, and "The Daybreak of My Life,"⁴ by Brazilian playwright Naum Alves de Souza was selected. I had nineteen students enrolled in the course, twelve of whom actually participated in the staging. The others continued with their regular academic work. The third play was "A Respectable Wedding," by Bertolt Brecht, which was staged during a course on the Sociology of the Family and, this time (1987), all enrolled students decided to participate in the theatrical experience.

By 1988 our "Theatre as Teaching Procedure in Society" project had become an extension program which permitted students from other areas and schools to participate in the staging of "The Three-Penny Opera" by Brecht. The idea was to use a critical approach to the themes of corruption and impunity as part of a Political Sociology course.

Our last experience (April of 1990) was a presentation of the Brazilian play, "The More-or-Less Holy War," by Mario Brasini⁵ which depicts the relationships between the Church, local politics, and sexual morals in a small town in the Brazilian backlands. This was staged with the participation of undergraduate students taking the Sociology of Religion, as well as students of other subjects since the project was now a regular extension program.

The remainder of this paper presents some ideas related to the process of staging the plays, including the selection of the text, discussion of its contents and characters, and the theoretical and psychological preparation of students. It also deals with the relationships between the regular courses during which the experiences were conducted and the sociological inferences made from selected plays. Finally, some comments are made regarding the development and personal growth of the involved students.

The Process of Staging

Selecting the play is probably the most complicated part of the whole process. This is so because the chosen play must meet at least two conditions. First, there is the appropriateness of the theme of the play with respect to the topics and concepts dealt with in the particular course. Secondly, the selected play must excite the curiosity of the students and must also raise my personal interest in staging it. Since the students normally do not have much information on theatrical plays, this selection is done almost exclusively by me and the artistic director.⁶ finding a play with enough sociological content to justify its choice requires a lot of research. Furthermore, the play must be simple enough to permit its staging with limited resources. Finding such a play which also has the capacity to raise my and the students' interest and curiosity becomes very difficult. If a suitable play is not available for the exploration of the intended thematic, the idea is postponed for another occasion. This has happened many times. Most of the time the choice has become a matter of good luck, and it is not an easy one, as might be imagined.

Before rehearsals begin, a series of discussions of theoretical texts related to specific topics contained in the course programs are conducted. For instance "The Daybreak of My Life" deals with elementary school conflicts and children's cruelty. Thus, before starting rehearsals for this production, a series of seminar discussions on Freud's papers about children's sexuality⁷ were conducted.

In addition to the theoretical preparation of students, these discussions are also designed to emotionally prepare the students to participate in the theatrical experience, since most of them do not realize what is involved in the process of acting, character creation, staging design, and so on.

This method of preparation has two results. First, the students become more perceptive of the contents of the plays, thus promoting their understanding of the characters they are to perform. Secondly, when the rehearsals actually start, the students are relaxed and confident enough to overcome their inhibitions and their fear of being ridiculous.

The process outlined above has been applied in successive experiences, always with many positive results. Sometimes, these results have gone far beyond the classroom. In the case of "The Three-Penny Opera," further discussion of the themes of the play occurred in newspaper articles and non-academic works, for the topics of immorality and impunity had become frequent subjects of daily news in Brazil at that time. In our last experience, systematic and comparative readings of Freud's and Durkheim's main works on religion and morality,⁸ were carried out.

Teaching Sociology

Participation in theater has provided my students with a variety of experiences with sociological topics and concepts. As mentioned, the first theater experience focused on labor and toil. In the second experience, carried out during a regular Sociology of Education course, the focus moved from the field of labor or toil to the arena of schoolroom situations, and to the social relations established between children and their teachers and parents. The myth of the happy childhood and the repressive character of school assignments were shown as they were reflected in the introjection of the authoritarian personality and social norms by school children.

"The Respectable Wedding," by Brecht, attempted to present the family at its moment of constituency through the experimentation of a critical theory about socialization and the fulfillment of predictable social roles. The criticism also aimed at family members in their compulsory and prevalent hypocrisy. The idea was to turn each audience member into a social scientist, like Galileo, who used to examine the stars at a distance with his telescope.

The intent of "The Three-Penny Opera" was to unveil the tragedy of London's lupenproletariat of 1928, together with Brecht's scorn for the business world, religious hypocrisy, romantic love, and the venality of law, in a historical moment of corruption and discredit of the authorities. The play presented a similar context to that which Brazil was facing in the late 1980s. It also attempted to make the audience laugh about their own absurd anomie by following Brecht's suggestion that laughing is criticizing, and that seeing from a distance is focusing, in historical terms. The play attempted to show that Brazilian social order was composed of individuals who faced ethical principles, not to follow them, but to infringe upon them, leaving ethic morality as an object of mockery. This meant that citizens were slowly becoming superfluous social beings, with a tendency toward arrogant delinquency and blatant violence.

Finally, in the "The More-or-Less Holy War," we presented the saga of a priest who, wanting to close the brothels of his parish in a year of county elections, had to dispute the political hegemony with both the most affluent local "madam" and the richest landowner. The themes of religious indoctrination, sexual relief and political collusion were fully explored. The play attempted to demonstrate that, at least in the field of official politics, matters have not changed much in Brazil, as the priest's moral crusade—on which the play was based—actually happened in 1962.

The students not only acquire further comprehension about the sociological aspects which appear in the text and in the characterization of their

own roles, but, in addition, the compositions of the scenes as social gatherings offer the students the possibility of becoming actors in predetermined social settings.

This experience is made possible through a careful aesthetic approach which is developed by the artistic director. This approach also provides intense sociological background to the artistic work. Thus, the artistic director teaches students the techniques of walking, dance, song, and speech, and is benefitted in return by the sociological information furnished by the students. The main result has been, in many cases, a reduction of the interpretative work which would have had to be done by the artistic director. In this way, the sociological background actually facilitates the artistic work. In some cases, this has resulted in very shy students—those who rarely talk in the classroom—becoming good actors and performers.

Personal Growth and Development

The students themselves provide lively examples of personal growth. I have collected several statements by students who say that after their theatrical experience, the art of rhetoric became an “easy matter” for them. This result may again be ascribed to the aesthetic dimension in its therapeutic capacity as an agent of sublimation.

The theatrical experience has also provided the basis for the development of a new concept of collective work on the part of the students. A new sense of cooperation, solidarity, and companionship is gained upon this experience. By the very nature of theater, students come to understand their complete dependence on their mates, technicians, hair dressers, costume makers, and so on. At the same time, the theater promotes the students’ familiarity with the sociological problems and categories focused upon in each staged play.

In addition to these positive developments, students have provided evidence of how their involvement in the groupings facilitated their own integration in the University. They affirm that “after the theater” they started to appraise the university in a more positive way. This happened only after they had been seen on stage by hundreds of people. Some have stated that their participation in the play was an excellent opportunity for making friends in “the cold atmosphere” of Brasilia.

Conclusion

Regarding the sociological content required in each course program, any appraisal at this point would be premature. It must be remembered, however, that these experiences were offered as optional academic subjects. What has frequently occurred is that, instead of requesting additional theoretical discussion post festum, the students concerned have praised the stagings as an opportunity to do something "more pleasurable and different." However, I have noticed that the writing, thinking and sociological expression of some have become more fluent, and this may become a major asset in their professional formation.

I believe that a reasonable evaluation of the use of theater as a teaching procedure must follow at least two directions. First, an evaluation should consider the impact of the theater experience with respect to the theoretical concepts and academic criticism provided by the selected readings and by the play itself. This would take into account the long sessions of discussions, before, during, and after the rehearsals, as well as in the classroom. Secondly, an evaluation should also deal with the socializing aspects of the theatrical experience, since it involves the participation of youngsters during four to six months, sometimes on an almost daily basis.

NOTES

1. "Cometa Cenas," in Portuguese.
2. More specifically, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1932); *The Right to be Lazy* (1907); and *Eros and Civilization* (1956), respectively.
3. "Farsa da Boa Preguica," in Portuguese.
4. "A Aurora da Minha Vida," in Portuguese.
5. "A Guerra Mais ou Menos Santa," in Portuguese.
6. Later on, we will comment on his role in the process.
7. Especially *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905) and "Civilized" *Sexual Morality and Modern Nervous Illness* (1908).
8. Especially, *Totem and Taboo* (1912-1913) and *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912), respectively.

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