

1. Thinking

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MIGRANT PLAYERS

Abstract

The article proposes that recent discoveries in neuroscience have highlighted the dramatic nature of being human. The detection of mirror neurons, adjacent to the previously revealed motor neurons, has strengthened a view of the human as a player: one who processes her understanding of both self and other through life-long, playful, experimental dramas. We are stimulated to produce empathic responses by watching the dramas of others. An improvisation in which we accept the offer of the other and give back one of our own is both a metaphor for the human condition and a description of it. Anti-social forces disrupt circuits of neurons and damage our function as actors, characters and audience. Instead of being open to accept others, we cower tribally in the ranks of 'our own', projecting dangerous motives onto other tribes. Through Brecht's aesthetic of *Verfremdung* I examine how theatre intensifies empathy and distance, before applying it to the theatre company Cantieri Meticci. This Company brings migrants together with Italian citizens to explore questions around migration and identity. What the implications of man as player for organising a curriculum that enables rather than stifles the dramatic potential of each of us.

Keywords

Mirror neurons; empathy; Brecht; Cantieri Meticci.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Jaques: All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players.
(*As You Like It* II.VII. II 139-140)

While much attention has been paid to the insight of the opening line, exploring the metaphor of life as theatre, this article considers the significance of the second line as an articulation of what it is to be human. Taking up the modern sense of 'merely', commentators tend to assume that Jaques is making a largely pejorative remark about the worthlessness of existence. In fact the contemporary meaning of 'merely' was almost the exact opposite: men and women are nothing but players.

This article proposes that human development is a dramatic process and that individuals and the societies they inhabit are in a continual state of migration because the

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formation of personality is an unending, dramatic process. By this I mean that our sense of who we are, how we relate to the world, and how we learn is conducted through the medium of drama. Moment by moment throughout our lives we engage in internal and external negotiations predicated upon the shifting relations between actor, character and audience. We are neurologically wired to seek the self in the other and the other in the self. We exist, to adopt a term from neuroscience, in an intersubjective matrix. As a species endowed, or possibly blighted, with self-consciousness, we also watch ourselves performing and critique our continual performativity. In the words of Bishop Berkeley: *esse est percipi*, “to be is to be perceived”. One of the simple pleasures of my old-age is to observe my six year old granddaughter playing in our garden. Sometimes she employs props such as dolls, sticks or garden implements to assist with the scenarios she creates. On other occasions she calls the characters she requires into being without recourse to any physical manifestation: virtual others. The plays are sometimes drawn from lived experience – typically her classroom or playground: applied theatre – sometimes from the fantasies peddled by US communication companies on YouTube: formal theatre. In all cases she will rehearse and rerun the scenarios until her aesthetic sense is satisfied. By turns she operates as actor, character and audience. She is able to pass many hours on her own constructing her personality and her world through drama; just occasionally seeking the gratification of an audience, usually me. Reality and imagination co-exist dialectically for her; each making the other with the synthesis taking her into the realm of new experiences that redefine her being on her own terms. As with all of us these terms are never fixed but always fluid; just as we are not human beings but rather human becomings, migrating from today’s experience into tomorrow’s uncertainty through the dramatization of our ever-shifting relationship with reality.

If the vision I’ve offered you sounds idyllic, why do humans encounter so much damage, so much violence as they attempt to fulfil themselves? Why are the opportunities to play (and to migrate backwards and forwards between worlds) closed down as we move into adulthood? I believe that a major reason is the myth of identity. Identity is imposed upon each of us by the system in which we live, in order to control us; to make us pliable to the requirements of those who run our worlds. From basic documentation such as passports and identity cards to the sophisticated consumer profiling of digital corporations we are subjected to distorting notions of who we are: nationally, ethnically, politically, socially, etc. Once we have been herded into camps, we are separated from those who have been placed in other camps – refugees camps, migrant camps – giving rise to tyrannies of distance that destroy intersubjectivity and reduce other humans to objects; at worst to categories labelled sub-human. Divisions, labels and other markers of identity serve to restrict our capacity to learn, be that in the junior school, the workplace or on the street. Kenneth Gergen dissolved the myth of unitary identity in *The Saturated Self*:

In the postmodern world there is no individual essence to which one remains true or committed. One’s identity is continuously emergent, re-formed, and redirected as one moves through the sea of ever-changing relationships. In the case of “Who am I?”, the answer is a teeming world of provisional possibilities¹.

The actor, far from being a psychological freak incapable of articulating her own identity, makes a self-conscious profession out of that which we are all engaged in all the time.

¹ K. Gergen, *The Saturated Self*, New York: Basic Books, 1991, 139.

2. MIRROR, MIRROR

Neuroscientist Stein Bråten has studied the connections between the neurological structure of the human brain and the development of empathy; what he terms “altercentric participation”². His and colleagues’ discoveries necessitate a fundamental overhaul of the philosophical and psychological bases for understanding human development:

...the fundamental mechanism that allows us a direct experiential grasp of the mind of others is not conceptual reasoning but direct simulation of the observed events through the mirror mechanism³.

Vittorio Gallese has given this notion the term Embodied Simulation Theory.

The assumptions of Descartes and Leibniz about the isolated, monadic subject are wrong. The pre-linguistic, even pre-natal, capacity of an infant for interpersonal communion and learning has demonstrated the fallacy of Piaget’s notion of the asocial, egocentric child. Bråten elaborates the stages through which recognition of the social environment occurs, locating the development of consciousness as a dialectical communication with actual and virtual others:

The shifting between dialogical competence and consciousness manifests itself in inter-subjective attunement at various levels – from confluence of affect at the primary level to advanced self-other simulation and constructions at a more advanced level involving internal self-creative and dialogical circles of complementary self-other perspectives⁴.

Here Bråten could be describing the stages of a drama workshop that moves incrementally outwards from a still point of reflecting upon the individual’s virtual others, perhaps via a mirror exercise, to the dialogical modes of collective creation. This pattern does not offer an option for our growth but rather, as Daniel Stern expresses it, “Mirror neurons sit adjacent to motor neurons. They fire in an observer who is doing nothing but watching another person behave”⁵. Not only is the human brain wired for dialogue and non-linguistic responses to another, virtual or actual, but it is also wired to be an audience; stimulated by the observation of action. Involuntarily we are actor, character and audience.

In the words of drama therapist Salvo Pitruzzella:

The boundaries between the actor and the audience, as well as the distance between the actor and its role, become flexible and permeable and sometimes they vanish entirely. Each of us is actor, audience and character at the same time, and the narrations become scenarios for improvising in a relentless process of creation and representation⁶.

² S. Bråten, ed., *On Being Moved: From Mirror Neurons to Empathy, Advances in Consciousness Research*, 68 (2007): 2. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Dion_Sommer/publication/251382738_When_Empathic_Care_Is_Obstructed/links/5502caa80cf2d60c0e647f0d/When-Empathic-Care-Is-Obstructed.pdf.

³ V. Gallese, C. Keysers, G. Rizzolatti, “A Unifying View of the Basis of Social Cognition”, *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 8, 9 (2004): 396-403 (397).

⁴ *Ibid.*: 23.

⁵ *Ibid.*: 36.

⁶ S. Pitruzzella, *Drama, Creativity and Intersubjectivity: The Roots of Change in Dramatherapy*, London-New York: Routledge, 2017, 106.

If this is life described as theatrical metaphor, the metaphor itself dissolves into the thing described because there is no way of understanding existence other than as an unending series of dramatic encounters accompanied by constant spectatorship. As the study of interactions between new-born babies and mothers has shown⁷, the urge to communicate is enabled by the empathic capacity with which all humans are endowed unless this capacity is reduced or destroyed as a consequence of neglectful or violent social interventions. While this capacity is strengthened by being exercised through social intercourse throughout our lives, it is not dependent upon social formations because, in the words of Pitruzzella, “our primal imaginative act is connecting with the ‘virtual other’ within us”⁸. Imagination is the channel through which empathy flows, thereby allowing us to experience the same emotional flows as another. When we are attuned to another’s emotional state, we can respond telepathically as demonstrated by the habit of completing that person’s sentence. The force of imagination is so powerful that we find ourselves grieving over the death of a fictitious character while the actual death of a person unknown to us is registered as a statistic.

Given the all-embracing presence of the dramatic in all our thoughts and actions, it might be argued that the practice of deliberately, self-consciously creating dramas is redundant. However, such an argument ignores the vital role of distance in setting up critical spaces in which we can reform our relationships with our own personalities and the environments in which we operate; Pitruzzella again:

Drama can be the place where body, relationships, knowledge, roles, and narratives, gradually and delicately, can be put again into play; we can play with them, disassembling and then reassembling them, and creatively redefining and recombining them. We can let them encounter others’ bodies, relationships, knowledge, roles and narratives, building a new intersubjective matrix that can temporarily replace the old worn out one, enabling us to acknowledge, explicitly or implicitly, that things can change, and changes are doing us no harm. By communicating with others, we can allow ourselves to be influenced and inspired by them, and revive our empathic predispositions, helping each other in our own search for new balances⁹.

Pitruzzella writes from the perspective of the drama therapist but his words hold true for the more formal practices of theatre and, even more obviously, for the practice of applied theatre. Be it drama workshop or theatre stage, a space is being designated in which to explore who we are, individually and collectively, and how we negotiate and renegotiate the dialogical relationship of self to other. In this context change is a key concept. The drama process is an antidote to the socio-political functioning of identity that seeks to consign each of us to a category to which products and ideologies can be sold. In the teeth of all environmental and psychological evidence, the power-brokers would have us believe that we are stable, fixed entities – hence the measures taken to restrict or deny migration – that there are unchanging places to which we can return and rediscover who we *really* are. The experience of drama, of life made conscious, teaches us that there is no going back.

⁷ Bråten, ed., *On Being Moved*.

⁸ Pitruzzella, *Drama, Creativity and Intersubjectivity*, 98.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 107.

3. STOLEN GOODS

I'd now like to look at one moment from one example of how formal theatre has developed the representation of empathy through the framing devices of aesthetic distance in order to demonstrate how theatre plays with the paradox of distance as experienced by an audience. Grusha's taking up of the abandoned 'noble child' is depicted thus in Bertolt Brecht's *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*:

As she was standing between courtyard and gate,
 She heard or thought she heard a low voice calling.
 The child called to her,
 Not whining, but calling quite sensibly,
 Or so it seemed to her.
 'Woman,' it said, 'help me.'
 And it went on, not whining, but saying quite sensibly:
 'Know, woman, he who hears not a cry for help
 But passes by with troubled ears will never hear
 The gentle call of a lover nor the blackbird at dawn
 Nor the happy sigh of the tired grape-picker as the Angelus rings.'
 [*She walks a few steps toward the CHILD and bends over it.*]
 Hearing this she went back for one more look at the child:
 Only to sit with him for a moment or two,
 Only till someone should come,
 His mother, or anyone.
 [*Leaning on a trunk, she sits facing the CHILD.*]
 Only till she would have to leave, for danger was too great,
 The city was full of flame and crying.
 [*The light grows dimmer, as though evening and night were coming on.*]
 Fearful is the seductive power of goodness!
 [GRUSHA now settles down to watch over the CHILD through the night. Once, she lights a small lamp to look at it. Once, she tucks it in with a coat. From time to time she listens and looks whether someone is coming.]
 And she sat with the child a long time,
 Till evening came, till night came, till dawn came.
 She sat too long, too long she saw
 The soft breathing, the small clenched fists,
 Till toward morning the seduction was complete
 And she rose, and bent down and, sighing, took the child
 And carried it away.
 [*She does what the SINGER says as he describes it.*]
 As if it was stolen goods she picked it up.
 As if she was a thief she crept away¹⁰.

Brecht sets himself a theatrical challenge: how to depict one of the most empathy inducing moments imaginable in a manner that enables an audience to experience that moment critically via aesthetic distance. The playwright is seeking to create conditions where it is impossible for an audience to separate feeling from reason since "emotions have a cognitive function"¹¹. Our empathetic connection to Grusha is a given upon which Brecht can rely to draw his audience into the moment. We have an investment in

¹⁰ B. Brecht, *Parables for the Theatre*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1966, 138-139

¹¹ Pitruzzella, *Drama, Creativity and Intersubjectivity*, 100.

what happens; in short, we care. However, if the experience operates on a single level, our caring response, our delight at her revelation of humanity, is the beginning and end of the process. It is, for the audience, a passive, 'feel good' moment. Brecht does not let the moment rest there, however. It is a narrated moment of re-presentation with the story-teller visibly present and presuming, as artists do, to articulate the thoughts and emotions of the character. The theatre audience is further reminded of the story context by the on-stage circle of listeners like circles rippling ever outwards from the stone tale dropped into the pond of consciousness. Having set the frame, even the depiction within it exhibits the twin or possibly contradictory operation of feeling and reason or in Aristotelian terms pity and fear. The Singer is at pains to point out the dangers that Grusha's foolish, humane action will bring upon her: 'terrible is the temptation to do good'. Political systems are constructed to rely upon fear to coerce people into selfishness. Brecht constructs a fable to explore what might happen when two characters indulge in senseless acts of humanity against their self-interest: first Grusha, then Azdak, both of whom become migrants as a consequence of their actions; Grusha from necessity and Azdak as a function of his role as peripatetic people's judge. Before we applaud them too heartily, the experience of the play requires that the audience ask itself what kind of world we have created where acts of humanity are senseless.

A 'Brechtian' response to the dramatic action requires that we understand the interrelationship of feeling and reason through the setting up of an aesthetic distance that critiques the operation of what René Girard has termed 'mimetic desire':

Imitation does not merely draw people together, it pulls them apart. Paradoxically, it can do these two things simultaneously. Individuals who desire the same thing are united by something so powerful that, as long as they can share whatever they desire, they remain the best of friends; as soon as they cannot, they become the worst of enemies¹².

In *A Theatre of Envy* Girard traces the effects of mimetic desire on the action of several of Shakespeare's plays, demonstrating how objects of desire become desired or neglected according to the extent to which they are desired by someone else. In this way he shows that empathetic engagement is not *per se* a force for human flourishing and can lead to violent enmity. Shared desire is capable of both tragic and comic resolution: "The double bind of mimetic love/hate is the trauma par excellence in Shakespeare and perverts the human relations that it does not violently destroy"¹³. While it is important to acknowledge the destructive potential of mirror neurons' influence on behaviour as Gallese has done, Girard's reading of Shakespeare is partial, ignoring those instances where relationship has proved stronger than desire. Furthermore, following Brecht, it is the very act of staging mimetic desire that renders it available for critique, be that in the comic mode of Puck's love juice in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or the tragic one of Mamillius' death in *The Winter's Tale*.

4. IMAGINE THERE'S NO COUNTRIES

In this section I shall be looking at an example of the way in which theatre can be used to address the contradictions and stereotypes of media presentations of identity in relation

¹² R. Girard, *A Theatre of Envy*, Leominster: Gracewing, 2000, 3.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 16.

to the ‘other’: Cantieri Meticci (‘Hybrid Works’) from Bologna. The Company attempts to create a different kind of public discourse around issues of European identity, from the one which is currently circulating in mainstream media and among the politicians who crave space on their airwaves, digital platforms and printed pages.

For the analysis of the activities of Cantieri Meticci I am indebted to Pierluigi Musarò for his chapter in *Performative Citizenship*¹⁴. He sets the context for Cantieri Meticci’s work by showing the discrepancy in public perception between Europe’s capacity to absorb migration and the media-induced panic around the issue:

Far outstripping any real crisis is the public anxiety about migration and asylum-seeking in Europe, which in part has grown due to the media coverage of the phenomenon as well as the rhetoric of politicians, who describe Europe as being besieged by people fleeing conflict or seeking a better life¹⁵.

Into this space of fear and mistrust Cantieri Meticci set up counter-hegemonic projects that use theatre’s relational method of self in other and other in self between actors and characters, actors and actors and actors and audiences. Musarò describes Cantieri Meticci as

a theater [*sic*] company based and active in Bologna (Italy) and involving professional and non-professional actors from over 15 countries. Working in the intersection between aesthetics and activism, since 2012 Cantieri Meticci has been organizing large-scale theater projects that involve asylum seekers, refugees, migrants and Italian citizens, and which culminate in huge artistic events open to the local community. Running drama workshops in schools, community locations, mosques, and reception centers, Cantieri Meticci uses artistic tools to stimulate a public debate on the ongoing relations between newcomers and the hosting countries¹⁶.

The participatory and inclusive methodology of a workshop-based approach enables the company to subvert hegemonic distinctions of identity that place social groups involuntarily into hierarchically conceived camps of more or less dangerous others. In particular the metaphysical border between citizen and non-citizen is thereby rendered porous; overridden by a notion of common humanity.

A theatrical approach to the dismantling of this imagined border is especially pertinent because theatre offers the possibility of combining empathy with distance, thereby placing the spectator in an ironic relationship with the questions raised by the performance. The physical proximity of the actors who perform their own stories of migration, conflict and danger engenders strong empathic feelings in the audience whose attention is engaged, while simultaneously the framing process of theatre stimulates a critical consciousness that directs that audience towards asking themselves and their local and national governments awkward questions about why certain groups are made victims of discrimination and misrepresentation. This dual process of drawing in and pulling out is not only experienced by the spectators but also by the actors. Even when an actor is performing her own story, the very process of performance causes a distance to open between story and teller where the latter takes on the function of the actor while the self

¹⁴ L. Iannelli, P. Musarò, eds., *Performative Citizenship: Public Art, Urban Design, and Political Participation*, Roma, Mimesis International, 2017, Chapter 5.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 94.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 96.

depicted in the narrative assumes the contours of a character. Musarò's comment on the functioning of ethics in the work of Cantieri Meticci could be attached exactly to the above moment from Brecht with the substitution of cosmopolitanism for Brecht's focus upon class:

Inviting participants to imagine the humanity of themselves and of others, theatrical performances can be considered to be normative resources for ethical thinking. As a crucial communicative structure of our culture that functions as a form of moral education, the humanitarian dramaturgical consciousness becomes, in this account, paramount in the formation of cosmopolitan dispositions¹⁷.

Cantieri Meticci challenge the double standards that present the victims of conflict and poverty in far off lands as objects of care and sympathy for European citizens, while these same people, arriving on the door-step, are terrorists, scroungers and the dangerous 'other'. The Company, by confronting these citizens with the realities of migration and setting the migrants before them in person, "challenges people's opinions and makes them think beyond the daily-reiterated stereotypes"¹⁸. As Musarò points out the ambition of these projects reaches beyond the typical intentions of applied theatre into a practical exploration of how our alienating, globalised city spaces might be restored to the ownership of the people who live in them:

To rethink community and city space in the light of migrant stories, the project aims to create a 'new agora': a space for reflection on how organization of living space in the city influences our way of living, our perception of others, and our participation in public debate¹⁹.

5. CLUBS ARE TRUMP'S

Neoliberalism is the enemy of drama. It embraces a celebrity-laden theatrical commodity which can be sold to passive consumers of *ersatz* experiences and entered into the register of Gross Domestic Product under the label of creative industries. It does, however, have neither time nor resources for a dramatic process that involves a collective critique of contemporary reality achieved in a democratic forum where the dialectical relationship of experience and imagination is employed in the exploration of social alternatives. The relationships of neoliberalism are limited to those involved in buying and selling: the individual entrepreneur as salesperson; the private individual as consumer. Where once there were passengers, students and patients, there are now just customers. *Homo sapiens* has morphed into *homo economicus*, even as value has been transformed into cost. We are familiar with the cost of living but alienated from the value of living.

The neoliberal model of globalisation has promoted egregious inequality across the world with its inevitable corollary of social fragmentation. Sadly the fragments seem to lack any ideological frame through which they might coalesce into a body of resistance. Instead the decades of identity politics have resulted in retreats into ever tighter circles of mono-identities unwilling or unable to break free from the tags, imposed or sought, that enrol us into gangs: LGBT, Muslim, extremist, left behind, populist, liberal, etc.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 99.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 101.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 103.

Like all gangs they offer the security of group-think. Like all gangs they are exclusive; pulling up the drawbridge to shut out the dangerous other.

In recent months this drift into islands of the like-minded has been accelerated by the impact of anti-social media. Big data, successor to Big Brother, has transformed us into digital commodities to be sold to those who seek our money or our votes. The practice of profiling ensures that we are only offered opinions that are close to those we already hold or products in which we already show an interest. Thus we are insulated against the risk of being forced to think a new thought, change our opinion or reflect critically upon long-held convictions. Virtual barriers that prevent dialogue with those outside our club are more effective protection against a notion of common humanity than the razor-wire of the Mexican border or the Israeli separation wall scarring the Palestinian landscape.

Wherever we look across these landscapes of division and otherness, we see tribes of mistrust who lack the dramatic capacity of empathy; that specifically dramatic quality of turning the imagination into scenarios for action, of asking that fundamental question of all dramatic process: ‘what if?’ It is a common place of improvisation to engage in a game of ‘yes, but...’ However, the default stance of most of the world’s political leaders is to block whatever is offered if it emanates from an unreliable (in other words not our) source. Those who occupy positions of power are hopelessly untrained in the dramatic arts and consequently are unfit to make the moral and ethical decisions which constitute the art of governance. Donald Trump may well be the most egregious symptom of the phenomenon of empathy deficit – a grotesque example of a human being cut off from the well-springs of humanitarianism – but he is not the cause. The neoliberal model of globalisation has accelerated the crisis but the cause is capitalism itself: a system incompatible with justice and unable to permit the vast majority of the species to realise its humanitarian potential.

6. KNOWING ME, KNOWING YOU

Contemporary research in neuroscience highlights the tyrannical distance between what a human is and how she is forced to live against her nature in the dominant socio-political model. Daniel Stern expresses it thus: “Intersubjectivity is not simply a capacity, it is a condition of humanness from the phenomenological point of view”²⁰. In order to function as a person we have to enter into relationships. It is not that we ought to but rather that we must. Neurobiologist Karsten Hundreide talks of an ‘ethics of closeness’ which sounds like the antidote to the tyranny of distance, and tells us that “the care of others is not only something we do for others, but something we do in order to recreate our own human subjectivity – our deepest moral core”²¹. The parallels between the neurological structure of the human brain and the ways in which drama processes are constructed are palpable. The conclusion of the large-scale research project conducted by the European Union into educational theatre and drama should, therefore, come as no surprise:

The No6 on our DICE incorporates the first five [of the Lisbon Key Competencies] but adds a new dimension because educational theatre and drama is fundamentally concerned with *the universal competence of what it is to be human*²².

²⁰ Bråten, ed., *On Being Moved*, 36.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 253.

²² DICE Consortium, 2010, www.dramanetwork.eu, 49.

The implications of this finding are at once both daunting and inspiring. We should be inspired by knowing that we are devoting our professional lives to the most important activity in the fulfilment of human potential, but daunted by the awareness of how far short we have fallen in generating this understanding. The practical consequence of acting upon this research finding is to ensure that dramatic experience is made available to all: world leaders and the dispossessed alike, via formal and informal educational opportunities. This is not the traditional plea for a place for drama in the curriculum but rather a demand that the curriculum be structured dramatically to acknowledge the primacy of drama as a learning method in line with recent discoveries in neuroscience; discoveries which point back a hundred years to the wisdom of the early pioneers in our field like Harriet Findlay-Johnson. Inspired by witnessing her classes, a schools' inspector, Mr E. Holmes, quoted by Gavin Bolton, wrote in his book *What Is and What Might Be*: "In Utopia acting is a vital part of school life of every class, and every subject that admits of dramatic treatment is systematically dramatized (Holmes, 1911, p. 174)"²³.

If we fail to act upon our understanding of what constitutes a human being – a species born to migrate – those who advocate division, tribalism, nationalism, racism will triumph and, should we happen to survive, our lives will be poorer. The quest for meaning is given dramaturgical shape not because life has *a* meaning but because the quest itself, constantly, unendingly made and remade, is the mark of our humanity. The only label that we can confidently attach to our slippery identities is that of 'merely players'.

²³ J. Nixon, ed., *Drama and the Whole Curriculum*, London: Hutchinson, 1982, 29.