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Playing with theatre

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There can be a place for childhood in the favela

Marina Henriques Coutinho (trans. David Herman)

I remember an afternoon that I spent more than 20 years ago with a group of children in one Rio de Janeiro’s favelas. I was quite young and just beginning my career as a drama teacher in social projects. At that gathering, and full of naïve enthusiasm, I suggested to the children that we could play at telling our dreams. I wanted to use the dreams as inspiration for improvisations to be created in the class. I will never forget the reply of one of the children. We were sitting in a circle and beginning to recount our dreams when one very small girl raised her hand and said, “Tia, I dreamt of a pool of blood”. I tried to hide my shock at that response: after all, that image certainly did not fit in with my plans. I don’t remember what happened next, what I said or did… but I have never repeated the exercise.

After years of working in this field, I have noted that, for many children’s and young people’s groups in Rio’s favelas, drama classes can readily become a place for the expression of those experiences, among others, related to the fear and violence to which they are exposed daily. Frequently, in their initial contact with class activities, the children enact imitations of gangsters and police carrying weapons, simulating the gun fights and scenes of killing that they witness in real life. I learned to understand and accept this impulse but sought in practice to develop more playful teaching and artistic approaches so that, using their imagination, the children could work with their joys and pain. I have found in theatre games, and in other resources such as drawing, storytelling, and traditional games, a way to put the background of real life on hold and guide the children to another world of creativity where even their real difficulties can be given new meaning.

In 2010, I became a teacher at the Federal University of the State of Rio de Janeiro (UNIRIO) and since then have coordinated the Programa Teatro em Comunidades (Theatre in Communities Programme). In this programme, I supervise students from the Teacher Training undergraduate course who are responsible for facilitating applied drama methods to groups of children, young people and adults. In 2019, we decided to form our first class for children between the ages of 8 and 11 at the Centro de Artes de Maré (Maré Arts Centre), one of our partners.

This was prompted by the desire I shared with my students to offer support to the youngest people of Maré, who we saw as the most vulnerable of all the victims of social injustice in the region. The year of 2018 had been especially difficult for the residents of Maré due to an escalation of armed violence and a policy of hostility employed by the government of the
State of Rio de Janeiro. According to the 4o. Boletim: Direito à Segurança Pública na Maré (2019) (4th Bulletin: The Right to Public Security in Maré), published by the NGO Redes da Maré³ (Maré Development Networks), what most adversely affects the daily lives of the local population is the presence of networks linked to the illegal drug trade and the outlaw paramilitary groups who exploit the delivery of basic services, precariously monopolizing functions which should belong to the state. The document affirms that:

[…] the residents of the favelas of Maré have coexisted for more than three decades with the conduct of public security agents which disregards the rights of the population to security. Instead, the population is criminalized to the point where they are alienated by the disrespectful treatment they receive or by practices which intimidate and create insecurity and fear in their daily lives. The strategies employed in these locations are bellicose and characterized by arbitrary police measures and intense armed conflict.⁴

It is not difficult to understand that this context has a profound effect on the physical and mental health of the region’s residents. If living in this constant state of tension is harmful to the life of an adult, one can imagine the effect on the lives of young children.⁵ Unfortunately, the impact today of violence in their daily routine is even greater than decades ago when I met the girl who dreamt of a pool of blood.

In almost all of the articles that I have written about my experiences with applied drama in the favelas of Rio, I have made a point of never emphasizing the aspect of violence. This is not because I consider it unimportant for an understanding of that context but to avoid giving weight to the social stigma imposed not only on these areas but also on their population. Another preoccupation was always to reject the discourse of assistencialism employed by some social programmes that disseminate the idea that they are ‘saving’ the people that live in these communities. The narrative of the favela as a place of need and violence has been constructed over time and even today characterizes the popular image. I defend the “construction of another representation of the favela – to beyond its more visible wants” (Souza e Silva, Barbosa, & Faustini 2012: 54). According to this way of thinking, I believe it is important to convey an alternative narrative where the favela is perceived as a place of resistance and creativity, and in which the great majority of the population is part of working society. However, faced with the panorama of recent years, the aspect of condemnation has gained urgency.

In 2019, there was an increase in policing operations in Maré. In all, there were 117 days of armed conflicts in different parts of the region; that is, every three days the residents had to live within the sound of gunfire. In the same period, every seven days saw the death of a resident, a victim of armed combat. As a result of these conflicts, the children went through 24 days without going to school. This situation is a direct result of campaign promises made in 2018 by the candidates for governor of the State of Rio de Janeiro and president of the republic, who, during the electoral period, advocated a bellicose confrontational public security policy. Using the justification of fighting criminality, the state is employing necro-policies⁶ (Mbembe, 2018), a policy of death which brands the favela as enemy territory. Organizations in support of human rights, together with the news media in Brazil and abroad, have frequently denounced these genocidal policies which assail before all others the Afro-Brazilian population and victimize working families and children.⁷

One example was the murder of Marcos Vinicius da Silva in 2018, which occurred during a police operation in Maré.⁸ The boy was on his way to school when he was killed by the police. On that occasion, in addition to the “caveirão”,⁹ the armoured assault vehicle used
on the ground by the police, a “flying caveirão” helicopter was also involved. The image of these two vehicles is terrifying for everyone, especially the children. As a response to this increase in police operations with the use of armoured vehicles, Redes da Maré organized a campaign that brought together 1,500 drawings and letters from residents, including children, asking the court to discontinue this type of operation. Many children expressed the terror they felt by depicting the helicopter in their drawings: “I don’t like the helicopter because it shoots down on us and people die”, wrote one child – who did not specify their name or age – to the judges of the Court of Justice of Rio de Janeiro. The coloured drawing that accompanies this message shows a helicopter with armed police shooting down to the ground where a drug trafficker and children are running for cover. “This is wrong”, concluded the small resident.

Faced with these conditions, my students and I asked ourselves: Would it be possible for our drama classes to in some way make a difference in this state of affairs? Would it be possible, even if within the limits of impossibility, to contribute so that some children from Maré could have, for a few moments during the week, the right to play freely... a right of childhood?

In March of 2019 we began our first class for children in the Centro de Artes de Maré. Accompanied by mothers, fathers and grandparents, they arrived, timidly at first, but soon began loosening up with games proposed by our facilitators, Juliana, Gustavo and Camila, three students from UNIRIO who led work with this group throughout the year. Some mothers commented that they were hoping to find in our drama classes a place where the children could play in safety since this was no longer possible in the streets and alleyways of the favela. In the past it was common for children to play in the side streets of the community, something which had always caught my attention when I started to work in social projects, since the sight of children running freely through the narrow streets was not something one came across in the city’s middle- and upper-class neighbourhoods.

On that Saturday morning, seeing them happily at play with the facilitators, I was certain that our meetings could really become a special space-time for them and for all of us. The climate of spontaneous play established on stage confirms one of the fundamental characteristics of playing: that of being a synonym for freedom. The children were invited to forget their lives outside and to inhabit a “temporary sphere of self-oriented activity [...] an interval in daily life” (Huizinga, 2001: 11). In this sense, Prentki maintains:

[…] it is through play that we learn to live as social beings and through play that we begin to use our imagination; through the interaction between what is and what can be. By means of play we discover the creative excitement of becoming, the attainment of possible futures. Children have the propensity to play because they are physically and emotionally in a state of becoming.

(Prentki, 2011: 188)

Throughout the year, and in spite of external events, we continued our effort to create a “temporary world within the habitual world”, trying to introduce “in the confusion of life and the imperfections of the world a temporary and limited perfection” (Huizinga, 2001: 13). Most of the children we worked with were older than 9 and were already aware of aspects of theatrical communication. According to Piaget’s theories, children go through different stages in the development of a capability for dramatic representation. Between the earliest stages of infancy and later, more mature stages, there occurs a natural evolution in symbolic playing, in make-believe, from a spontaneous, subjective, and individual nature to
a stage in which the child is capable of understanding rules of theatrical communication that are more defined, intentional, objective and collective. Taking this into account, the processes organized by our facilitators followed the approaches of Viola Spolin’s theatre games. With her commitment to an educational role for drama, Spolin suggests that improvisation in the theatre should be based on participation in games. By way of the involvement created by play relationships, the child develops personal freedom within the limits of pre-established rules and creates the personal capabilities necessary for the game.

It was a challenging task for our facilitators; not only would it be their first experience in working with children, but most of the children had never before had drama classes in school or social projects. After nine uninterrupted years of activity with the Theatre in Communities Programme we can say that we were facing a double challenge: the meeting between the university students and the Maré groups was contributing to the education of both parties. The former study to become teachers and consequently the involvement with pupils provides firsthand experience in teaching practice, whereas the latter are almost always making contact with theatre for the first time. We set off together on a learning process which the Spanish educator Jorge Larrosa compares to an adventure: “An adventure is a journey into the unplanned, a journey in which anything can happen, and we don’t know where we will arrive, not even if we will ever arrive anywhere” (Larrosa, 2006: 53). The prospect of an unplanned journey alarmed Camila, Gustavo and Juliana at first. At the beginning of the year they were apprehensive and wanted to know, “What are we going to do with the children?” I replied, “We are going to play!”

And so it began. They remembered and used traditional games from Brazilian culture, such as *cirandas*, as well as tag, hide-and-seek, and so forth, which lent a playtime feeling of elation, laughter and excitement to the first encounters. Sometimes chaos took over and the world was turned upside-down. As Prentki contends, a vital element in children’s play, something readily forgotten these days, is “the licence to lose control, to experience a moment of madness without social consequence” (Prentki, 2011: 190). Camila, Gustavo and Juliana adopted this madness and played, sang and danced. An atmosphere of spontaneity was created, which, as Spolin explains:

> […] is the moment of personal freedom when we are faced with a reality and see it, explore it and act accordingly. In this reality our smallest parts act as an organic whole. It is a moment of discovery, of experience, of creative expression.

(*Spolin, 2001: 4*)

Even while they were throwing themselves into the games, the facilitators were also engaged with maintaining a firm hold. As apprentice teachers they were experiencing the complex relationship between freedom and authority. The children saw our space differently from their school where, in the majority of cases, they faced a traditional authoritarian system which Paulo Freire called the “banking model of education”. According to Freire: “We have not quite resolved the dilemma which the contradiction authority-liberty presents us and us almost always confuse authority with authoritarianism, unrestraint with liberty” (Freire, 2003: 61). We were endeavouring to create another type of relationship with the children in which they could understand that although the space was one of liberty, there were rules to be followed. According to Freire, an environment of liberty is cultivated with openness of dialogue between educators and educandos. In a similar way to Freire, Viola Spolin asserts: “True personal freedom and self-expression can flower only in an atmosphere where attitudes permit equality between student and teacher” (*Spolin, 2001: 8*).
Another feature which we considered important for the development of our work was the creation of a place for cheerful coming together. On many occasions we began our activities with breakfast for the children and their parents or chaperones who were able to be present. There were also festive occasions. One of our happiest get-togethers was when we all danced a quadrilha together during a Festa Junina (June Festival). On another occasion, Camila, who is also an actress and clown, presented her one-woman show, which caused considerable curiosity. Many had never seen a play before, and to see their teacher on stage as a character stimulated many insights about theatre: scenery; costumes; background music; and the use of space, body and voice.

As the meetings progressed through 2019, we began to introduce the idea of theatre improvisation. Based principally on Spolin’s system of who, where, and what, the children’s first experiments were full of spontaneity but without any organization. And initially we had no intention of steering the process towards a result that could be presented to a possible audience; we were more interested in the children’s gradual development with regard to on-stage experience, and the expression of their ideas, emotions and narratives. However, we understood the importance of helping them to organize themselves collectively, helping them to more effectively communicate.

Themes for improvisation were related to their daily lives, principally schooling. Curiously, the topic of violence appeared little throughout the work. Perhaps because we had initiated the process with game playing, their understanding, conscious or not, was that in our space, they could encounter a pause, an interval from harsh reality. It was not our intention to enter into those concerns; we wanted them to reveal their interests and desires for expression. Typically, the creative process in the programme begins in this way: the participants are invited to explore matters of local interest and personal concern. As Helen Nicholson maintains, “This means that the divisions between fiction and reality are deliberately blurred in order to provide a safe space for participants to transform experiences into dramatic metaphor or to find points of connection that are presented theatrically” (Nicholson, 2005: 66).

In an activity we called “pathways”, the children would draw the route from home to school, showing the places they passed and details which caught their attention. In their “path” maps, they drew attention to the popcorn vendor, the sweets stall, the baker’s shop, the motorcycle mechanic, the furniture shop, the carnival supplies shop, a dog, the grocery, the social project Luta pela Paz (Fight for Peace, a boxing project), the football field and the rubbish cart. One drawing had the curious title, “Esther’s map to find the treasure”, her school. These drawings contrast greatly from the stories about the violence of police operations. They are light, colourful and full of ingenuous comments. Not one of them mentioned arms-carrying drug traffickers, the helicopter, the drugs for sale arranged on open-air tables, or the barricades which keep out unfamiliar vehicles. The facilitator’s intention with this activity was to better understand the group by way of their perceptions about where they lived, and also to seek inspiration for improvisations based on their reality or what they chose to portray as their reality.

Various improvisations were created from these drawings: of boys playing football, of girls playing “amarelinha Africana”, of an armed robbery, of a broken-down bus and of a “bossy” school teacher. These small performances were full of spontaneity and delighted the children, especially the scene where together they confronted the authoritarian teacher. At first, the facilitators avoided directing these scenes towards something more polished and presentable to the public. However, at the conclusion of every year, the programme promotes an event called “Maré de espetáculos” (Maré Performs) in which the groups of youths and adults perform for an audience, and the children soon showed an interest in...
participating. Camila, Gustavo and Juliana began to ask themselves how to organize these brief sketches into a scenic narrative for a future audience. They provided a large trunk full of coloured fabrics and props which the children received with enthusiasm. Between one change of costume and another came the idea of playing as superheroes, and in no time they were forming a convincing Justice League: the Boy Skateboarder, the Super-Twins, Doctor Strange and Super-Ice were just some of the invented characters.

The narrative that was composed for a short presentation began with the discovery of a magic trunk and the transformation of the children into superheroes. Imbued with a sense of justice, each superhero would tackle a situation created by the improvisations. The armed robbery was resolved by Doctor Strange who offered employment to the robber, who, it became clear, was not a “bad” man; the Boy Skateboarder resolved the problem of the broken-down bus; and Super-Ice froze the bossy teacher who, with the help of the Super-Twins, became a patient and loving educator. For the finale, they decided to sing and dance a ciranda which they had learnt during the year. The creative process aimed to preserve the spirit of play. The play they created maintained the essence of play and sought, albeit with little technical help, to create a communication with the audience. We saw that it was possible to arrive at a result in which “the spontaneity of play was maintained with the added reality of transmitting their experience to the audience” (Spolin, 2001: 255).

On the day of the presentation, the family members were delighted as they watched the children’s ‘play’, where, robed as super-heroes, their youngsters remedied the world’s injustices. All of us present were captivated by the playfulness displayed on stage, by the pleasure which the children expressed by being involved in the characters and situations. The event possessed a special dimension for all. For the children it signified the adventure of being on stage for the first time; for the families it was an eagerly awaited result; for the facilitators it was the outcome of the first year’s experience working with that age group. Nevertheless, I believe that we all shared the common reaction of being transported to another time and place which challenged the inhumanity present outside in the streets and alleyways, welcoming more precious values into our lives: “Solidarity, empathy and humanity, qualities that have their roots in children’s play” (Prentki, 2011:192) at the “threshold of a counterworld” (Holloway, 2013). We felt sure that there can be a place for childhood in the favela.

In his Pedagogy of Autonomy, Paulo Freire raises questions similar to those raised in this chapter: what do we, as educators, do when working in contexts where we stumble upon human pain? “Is there anything we can do? How to act, what to do? What do we, the so-called educators, need to know to make things viable, even in our first encounters, with women, men and children, whose humanity has been negated, betrayed, whose very existence has been crushed?” (Freire, 2003: 74). Freire responds that the reality is this but that it could be otherwise, and for it to become “otherwise”, we, the progressives, must struggle. He declares:

[...] One of the first kinds of knowledge indispensable to the person who arrives in a favela or in a place marked by the betrayal of our right “to be” is the kind of knowledge that becomes solidarity, becomes a “being with.” In that context, the future is seen not as inexorable but as something that is constructed by people engaged together in life, in history. It’s the knowledge that sees history as possibility and not as already determined. The world is not finished. It is always in the process of becoming.

(Freire, 2003: 74) (My emphasis)

History as something that is possible, not something that is determined.
The world is not finished, it is becoming

It is with this certainty that we choose to go forward. The action of the Theatre in Communities Programme is a fabric woven by many hands: by the students of UNIRIO, the people of Maré, of our partnerships, of the university institution. Together we understand that for change to happen we must first be able to imagine, visualize and create a different world. And that, I believe, is what our superhero children know how to do very well!20

Notes

1 “Tia” (Auntie) or “Tio” (Uncle) is a common way for a small Brazilian child to address their teacher.

2 The university extension programme Theatre in Communities was initiated in 2011 by Prof. Marina Henrique Coutinho, who has coordinated it since then. It operates in locations within the favela complex of Maré and Penha, poor neighbourhoods of Rio de Janeiro. The programme is the result of a partnership between the Federal University of the State of Rio de Janeiro (UNIRIO), the Redes de Desenvolvimento da Maré (REDES da Maré – Maré Development Networks) with the Centro de Artes de Maré (Maré Arts Centre), the Centro Municipal Saúde Américo Veloso (City Health Centre Américo Veloso), and the Arena Carioca Dicró. In these locations, there are theatre workshops for children, teenagers, and adults every Saturday morning. More information about the programme is available at http://teatroemcomunidades.com.br/ and in the documentary film available here (subtitled in English): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=maoMdGI4Zao&t=619s

3 The social actions, research, and concepts developed by Redes da Maré in the fields of social politics are based on an interest in working with Rio de Janeiro’s issues, specifically in its poorer areas. The institution seeks to develop projects based on four pillars, one of which is “the right to public security and access to justice”. See: <https://redesdamare.org.br/en>

4 The 4th Bulletin: The Right to Public Security in Maré is an initiative of Redes de Maré [I removed info already in the main text], whose objective is to gather and systemize statistics relating to the impact of armed violence within the 19 favelas that comprise the Maré Complex. https://redesdamare.org.br/br/publicacoes


6 “Necropolitics” is a concept proposed by the philosopher, historian, political theorist, and university professor Achille Mbembe. His 2003 essay questions the limits of sovereignty of the state in its ability to decide who should live and who should die. For Mbembe, the denial of the humanity of anyone makes violence, aggression, and even homicide possible.


9 Lit. “big skull”.


11 Five boys and ten girls participated, most of them between the ages of 9 and 11: Carlos, Danyelle, Deborah, Esther, Gabriela, Gustavo, Karen, Luany, Maria Clara, Mauricio, Nickollas, Nivea, Pedro, Sara, and Sophya.

12 It is not possible to explore more deeply the theories of Jean Piaget (1896–1980) about the stages of childhood development in this chapter. However, it is important to stress here that Piaget...

13 Viola Spolin (1906–1994), an American theatre academic, educator, and acting coach, is internationally recognized as the originator of Theatre Games.

14 Ciranda: a folkloric circle dance popular in the Brazilian Northeast.

15 Translator’s note: I have kept the Portuguese “educandos” here, a Freirean coinage which implies a non-hierarchical relationship between facilitators and “educandos” in comparison with the hierarchical connotations of ‘teachers’ and ‘students’ (alunos).

16 Quadrilha – a Brazilian square-dance.

17 These festivities, which were introduced by the Portuguese during the colonial period (1500–1822), are celebrated during the month of June nationwide. The festival is mainly celebrated on the eves of the Catholic solemnities of Saint Anthony, Saint John the Baptist, and Saint Peter.

18 These three elements are identified by Spolin as part of the structure of the theatrical game: Where (where does this scene take place?); Who (who are the characters participating in this scene?); What (dramatic action – what do these characters do in this place?). According to the author, they are the structure in which the game takes place, so that these three elements can be worked either separately or in an integrated way.

19 This is a game from Africa recently introduced to Brazil. It is a variant of “amarelinha”, a type of cooperative hopscotch that uses music. This activity is in widespread use in educational projects aimed at affirming Afro-Brazilian culture, principally with groups of Afro-Brazilian children.

20 This chapter was written in February 2020. In March of that year, while we were preparing to resume the year’s activities, the COVID-19 pandemic arrived in Brazil. Face-to-face meetings were suspended. Throughout 2020 we tried to keep in touch with children and other participants in the programme, but for them Internet access is difficult. We held encounters by Zoom and maintained messaging by WhatsApp. Unfortunately, the inhabitants of Rio de Janeiro’s favelas are those most affected by the pandemic, and a situation that was already critical in 2020 is even more aggravated now, in March 2021.

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