

Echoes of theater: the potential of theatrical contagion in the education of students with autism

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Abstract

In theatrical contagion, the dynamics between participants reveal mutual influences expressed through bodily and psychic presence, which can transform perceptions, readjust aesthetic processes, and encourage artistic affections among people with different profiles. This study aims to enhance interactions between two boys with autism through theatrical practices. The research followed an action-research approach, with a collaborative and critical focus centered on theater pedagogy, comprising 27 in-person sessions over 10 months. The activities included storytelling techniques, puppet theater, and Assistive Technology resources—specifically Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC). The outcomes of this intervention showed that engagement with theater contributed to the improvement of skills related to attention, intersubjective exchanges, and socialization. The artistic practice offered research participants the opportunity to establish meaningful interactions, highlighting theatricality as a powerful medium for subjectivation and sensitive exchanges.

Keywords: theatricality; theatrical contagion; alternative communication; autism; collaborative-critical action research; theater.

1 Introduction

Historically, invisibilization, silencing, and normalization have been directed toward those who deviate from established standards, who are considered different, or who do not fit within notions of normality. This led the disciplinary power of psychiatry to establish processes aimed at defining and controlling individuals considered mad or abnormal (Prozorov, 2021). Around the world, coercive and aggressive practices directed at people subjected to manicomial institutionalization were recurrent. Not infrequently, individuals with mental disorders were targets of social control through security measures. Thus, those who deviated from standards of normality and humanity were categorized as insane, dangerous, non-human, and irrational. This resulted in a long history of exclusion and confinement of individuals labeled as dangerous

and legally unaccountable (Fernandes, 2024). The Brazilian reality was not very different. Amid political setbacks stemming from the dictatorial regime, mechanisms were already in force that placed people with intellectual disabilities in situations of exclusion. These abuses can be identified when analyzing events that occurred in a psychiatric hospital founded in 1903 and closed in 1980 in the city of Barbacena, in the state of Minas Gerais. Over nearly eight decades, a true genocide took place, marking Brazil's historical trajectory, as it resulted in the death of approximately 60,000 (sixty thousand) people through brutality disguised as care. So many deaths were orchestrated and institutionalized that a cemetery had to be built next to the asylum (Filho, 2019).

Within the same health institution, individuals of different backgrounds coexisted. Elderly people, adults, and minors lived in spaces permeated by the smell of bodily fluids and garbage, corporealities in a state of extreme deterioration, both morally and physically. Positioned and resting under the heat of the day, clearly filthy and in rags, they emitted intense cries and shrill sounds that reverberated throughout every environment of that hospital, forming a scene reminiscent of a war conflict, a terrifying image (Arbex, 2013).

In this context, it is essential to reflect on how dissident corporealities—that is, people with disabilities—are perceived, represented, and contribute to provoking significant changes in sensory appreciation and in aesthetically represented interpretation, especially in theatricality. Commonly, bodies that escape normality are considered grotesque, strange, and repugnant. In this way, nonconventional modes of functioning are ignored, repressed, and rendered invisible in their artistic expressiveness (Bianchi, 2021). From the perspective of theatrical contagion, what is unpleasant, disfigured, insane, rare, grotesque, repulsive, and dysfunctional is exalted and desired. Thus, in a theatrical approach centered on the desire for differences and singularities, physicalities and deviant behaviors interact subjectively with other subjects and with the environment, generating tensions and intersubjective exchanges that alter patterns of perception and understanding of the world, art, and the humanities. The theatrical contagion provoked by bodies outside the norm establishes other ways of being, existing, and knowing life, creating dissident epistemologies. Through difference, as a device for questioning normativity, other forms of existence (in life and in art) can enhance encounters between people with disabilities (Tonezzi, 2011).

Therefore, deviant corporealities and psychisms establish other paths and crossroads for theatrical creation, offering a new way of seeing the universe of art and promoting varied forms of interaction with corporealities that move through the same spaces (Alencar; Lewinsohn, 2023). Thus, theater presents itself as a device of transgression and freedom, demonstrating its potential to transform and erode hierarchically established standards, but above all to allow subjects with differentiated bodies to be perceived as powerful and as creators of new theatrical aesthetics (Oliveira, 2019).

The theatrical innovations conceived by the theater practitioner Pippo Delbono are examples of how disability can be a way of elaborating other modes of making theater. Delbono's life story took on new contours upon discovering his HIV diagnosis. After being diagnosed, the artist began to perceive changes in his body, increasingly fragile, weakened, and different. This new configuration of his being led the theater director to question the way he had previously been creating his performances. Faced with these dilemmas, Delbono began to frequent asylums in search of inspiration. The artist perceived people with disabilities as catalysts of a singular corporeal aesthetic, thus initiating a search for interactions with these corporealities, which were invited to join his work as artistic collaborators. During this same period, he met Vincenzo Cannavacciuolo (affectionately called Bobo), an elderly man with microcephaly, illiterate and deaf-mute, who brought about a true transformation in his theatrical aesthetic. The way Bobo communicated—through vocalizations and movements on stage—caught the audience's attention. The man who had come out of an asylum was founding a true revolution in the art of one of the great directors of Western theater (Tonezzi, 2011).

Similarly, an adolescent with autism named Christopher Knowles influenced the way Robert Wilson, creator of Image Theatre, developed his dramaturgical and visual work. Around the 1970s, the North American director received from one of his teachers audio recordings containing experiments with Knowles's voice. On the tape, the boy played with words and constructed vocal polyphonies, which approximated a spoken theatrical piece. The games of changes in the structure of the words uttered by Knowles formed a singular elaboration of language. The young man manipulated words and constructed forms and images with an uncommon skill, an imagistic and particular dramaturgy. That boy with autism gesticulated and moved in an uncoordinated manner; his speech appeared disconnected and his behaviors were outside the norm. Furthermore, he faced interactional dilemmas and had a cerebral disability, as he had been infected as an infant by the protozoan *Toxoplasma gondii*, responsible for toxoplasmosis. Nevertheless, Christopher demonstrated remarkable creativity in elaborating words, modifying them and creating a unique way of playing with morphosyntax and working with it dramaturgically (Pineiro, 2021).

Both the interactions between Delbono and Bobo and the collaborative works between Christopher and Bob Wilson represent artistic innovations inspired by collaboration with people marked by physical and behavioral differences, in order to create encounters that deconfigure established ways of making theater, allowing an understanding of the world from alternative perspectives and idiosyncratic interventions. It is through the relationships established by different subjects who place themselves before the theatrical scene, who interact and engage in artistic exchanges, that the idea of theatrical contagion emerges—a kind of aesthetic infection that invades the scenic universe and changes expectations regarding the experience and practice of theater (Tonezzi, 2011).

Spinoza elucidates the concept of affections as the reception of the reverberations of the environment in our body, which is affected by objects, settings, environments, and other corporealities. As other bodies intersect our life experiences, affecting our subjectivity, we undergo changes, adjustments, and transformations. This means that we are affected by the presence of the other, and these affections can be either empowering or inhibiting. In the first case, they allow us to guide our actions and interpersonal interactions toward the desire for happiness, in addition to increasing our power to elaborate socially constructed experiences. In the second case, we are driven toward the loss of our life potential and our desire to build experiences that lead us to freedom; thus, everything leads us toward unhappiness. By choosing to establish empowering encounters that drive us to act in our favor, or at the moment when other corporealities cross our subjectivities in a positive way, we approach propositional encounters that lead us to self-knowledge, through which we can open paths to overcome imposed oppressions, silencing, and invisibilization. In this sense, we are treading paths toward achieving freedom. These reverberations caused by empowering affections are called by Spinoza “good encounters.” In addressing this concept, the philosopher refers to the process by which we enhance our capacity to connect with ourselves and with others simultaneously, increasing the ability to interfere—through affections—in other bodies and enabling these corporealities to affect us in ways that potentiate our social relations (Leal, 2022).

Through affections and the ideas linked to them, humanity comes to know itself; the more one is affected by other bodies/existences, the greater the possibilities for self-knowledge. That is, we are culturally and socially constituted by allowing ourselves to experience affective exchanges (Marin, 2024). Thus, when a subject’s psyche is in a condition to reflect upon itself, it reaches a state of greater perfection—that is, it is affected by a sensation of joy. This joy becomes more intense insofar as the mind is able to conceive more clearly its own identity and its capacity for action (Leal, 2022).

The capacity for action is activated by various devices, among them music which, like other artistic elaborations, can expand our potential for action, establishing intersections and increasing the capacity to potentiate and prospect other culturally mediated actions through exchanges with knowledge (Deleuze, 2019). The European scholar argues that when we listen to a composition that captivates us, our capacity for action is momentarily expanded and dilated. When we listen to a composition we appreciate, the body and the soul, as is evident, interact poetically with the sounds we enjoy, provoking a state of aesthesis. The musicality we love represents our aptitude for action being amplified. At the moment when contacts combine, the two elements involved in this connection (ourselves and the appreciated song) elaborate an entity of a certain superiority; another element that composes our subjectivity comes to exist in an integrated manner with the things around us. In other words, within the melody we appreciate, it is as if relations are composed in such a way that they create a third being, of

which both the subject and the music are only parts. Thus, we can affirm that the capacity for action is expanding or increasing (Deleuze, 2019).

The examples of Knowles and Wilson and of Delbono and Bobo are evidence that empowering affections promoted by differentiated bodies within a context of theatrical contagion are capable of conceiving new dramatic and aesthetic approaches that are characterized as good encounters, but that above all destabilize classical models of making theater. However, how is the concept of theatrical contagion capable of potentiating intersubjective exchanges between two boys with autism? Studies situated within the field of performing arts reveal that individuals with autism face challenges in social interaction, difficulties that provoke repetitive behaviors, issues related to language, and limitations in establishing fruitful convivialities. These studies indicate the performing arts as devices capable of developing a significant increase in the ability to engage in social contexts and communicate, demonstrating that theater acts to highlight the potentialities of students with autism. An ally of this form of artistic expression is Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC), which, in addition to removing these subjects from silence by giving them the power of speech, is also an important tool for inclusion (Santos; Camargo; Givigi, 2023).

AAC makes use of bodily movements, gestures, symbols, pictograms, eye trackers, computerized voices, and other elements that facilitate the interactions of people with advanced communication needs, mitigating their language difficulties and enabling these subjects to express themselves. The aforementioned resources can complement or replace the communicative capacity of young people with autism. Investigations centered on the use of AAC as a communicative resource for these individuals show that it is possible, through such tools, to provide greater frequencies of social interactions, improvements in communication skills, and significant changes in expression and behavior (Nunes; Barbosa; Nunes, 2021; Pereira et al., 2020).

In this way, the present investigation aims to relate autism, AAC, and theater, seeking to potentiate interactions between two boys with autism through theatrical practices. Based on the concept of theatrical contagion, which consists of being traversed by affections provoked by living with the other, we understand theatrical education as a device capable of engendering encounters that lead historically invisibilized subjects to promote empowering encounters of their singularities. In this context, the experiences provided by theatrical art are, in essence, interactions between human beings in which corporealities build crossroads capable of promoting empowering intertwinements of good encounters.

1.1 SCENARIOS ON STAGE: EXPLORING AND PERFORMING THEATRICAL SPACE

Recognizing the importance of field dynamics in the investigation, this study adopts a qualitative approach that employs descriptive and analytical methods to explore how dramatic

expression can promote the development of individuals with autism. Data analysis is conducted from a flexible perspective, acknowledging that contextual factors may influence the research (Costa; Diniz; Viana, 2022).

This empirical study makes use of collaborative-critical action research, which emphasizes not only the observation of data but also the analysis of interactions and contributions of participants within the investigative environment (Pimenta, 2005).

This type of research originated around the 1940s with Kurt Lewin and was initially advocated as a method aimed at social transformation, addressing practical and organizational problems. After the 1980s, with Stephen Kemmis and Robin McTaggart, action research also assumed a collaborative research character (Jaconi; França; Almeida, 2023).

Over the years, other authors, such as Habermas and Paulo Freire, epistemologically influenced action research by bringing to the fore issues such as inequality and power, as well as processes of participant emancipation. Within the methodological approach of collaborative-critical action research, it is possible to deepen the understanding of specific issues, taking dialogue as an essential device (Hernandez-Piloto; Almeida, 2025). In this sense, action research employs sensitive listening to understand the researched field and its participants, and the researcher must be ethically and politically committed to praxis (Barbier, 2002).

Thus, the epistemological and methodological foundation of this research is sustained by collaborative practices between the researcher and participants, and by the possibility of indicating pathways based on a critical-emancipatory analysis of the relationships established among two boys with autism, the researcher, theatrical practices, and alternative communication (Carr; Kemmis, 1988).

The entire process is characterized by a self-reflective spiral approach. In contrast to positivist approaches, there is no strict division between the participant and the object of investigation, or between the researcher and the object of study. Instead, an interconnection among the different participants in the study is observed. In this way, events, principles, narratives, identities, experiences, and modes of thinking are evaluated and interpreted as essential components of the investigative trajectory (Reis; Alvim, 2021).

In this sense, the present investigation involved meetings in which the researcher observed the field and the participants in order to identify issues that could be addressed through theater in collaborative processes. Thus, in the initial moments, pretend-play activities were carried out, such as cooking, repairing toys in a mini-workshop, and creating narratives with objects. This occurred because the two boys already engaged in play activities frequently. It is worth noting that this activity also gained relevance because it is understood to have great potential to lead individuals with autism toward the development of social and communicative skills, as well as cognitive capacities, which may have effects both in adulthood and in childhood itself (Fiaes; Bichara, 2009).

Furthermore, we observed that, in many moments, the boys engaged in small spontaneous dramatic improvisations with the toys available. Thus, we decided to structure meetings in which improvisational play could be experienced. Evidence shows that spontaneous dramatization and theatrical improvisation, within the context of psychodrama with people with autism, can contribute to overcoming obstacles and advancing emotional development. Improvisation can foster adaptation to social roles, in which the person with autism begins to recognize, imitate, and interpret the world around them through theatrical fantasy, discovering their own limits and potentialities (Costa; Diniz; Viana, 2022).

In addition, storytelling with illustrated printed books, followed by retelling using Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC), was explored. It is important to state that access to literature constitutes a human right (Silva; Peruzzo, 2019) and can enhance interactional skills and contribute to the linguistic development of people with autism. Through engagement with this activity, individuals significantly increase their attention, name the world around them, expand their vocabulary, and retell the stories they have heard. Moreover, people with autism who have access to literature tend to show greater confidence in communication, ask questions, demonstrate critical thinking, express opinions, develop imagination and creativity, and interact more easily in social contexts (Sambak; Seniwati; Harisa, 2021).

Finally, we introduced Animation Theatre, or puppet theater. This theatrical technique was employed because one of the boys enjoyed performing dramatizations with his teddy bears. Thus, we found in inanimate objects a pathway to experiment with creative processes in the context of theater for people with autism. Research indicates that Animation Theatre can contribute to the development of communication and expression in these individuals, promoting inclusion and social interaction, stimulating creative and artistic potential, and serving as a powerful educational approach that fosters playfulness, spontaneity, and engagement in social situations (Santos; Camargo; Givigi, 2023).

This work is part of a project developed by the Study and Research Group on Language and Alternative Communication (GEPELC), which provides services to children, adolescents, and young people with autism at the Federal University of Sergipe. The participants in this study are two 12-year-old students with autism, given the fictitious names Victor and Gaye (V. and G.) in order to preserve their identities.

Both are enrolled in public schools in the state of Sergipe and have complex communication needs. Since the age of four, they have participated in multidisciplinary group sessions and use a low-technology system to interact with peers through the method of Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC). Both participants are currently in the 4th year of elementary school in public institutions.

Gaye, a light-skinned boy, lives with his parents and brother. Diagnosed with autism at the age of three, he participated in theatrical activities in which stereotypical behaviors were

observed, such as biting his own hand during states of agitation or dissatisfaction. In terms of communication, Gaye expresses himself deliberately, requesting toys and items in the therapy room. He predominantly uses AAC or gestures, such as pointing, to communicate. Gaye also tends to move his hands in small dramatizations and maintain focus on these movements for long periods. Although he does not demonstrate intentional interaction with Victor, he enjoys playing with plush toys, using them to create small individual dramatizations. Unlike Victor, who is uncomfortable with physical touch, Gaye does not display this behavior.

Victor, who lives with his mother and sister, is a Black boy diagnosed with autism at the age of three. He began theatrical interventions during the same period as Gaye, presenting stereotypies such as tapping his chin and nose during moments of agitation, as well as some echolalia. Although he does not demonstrate intentional play or interaction with Gaye, Victor shows comfort with the researcher, therapist, and teacher, smiling at them and accepting hugs. He enjoys observing his reflection in the mirror while dancing, as well as listening to music and watching animated videos on his cellphone while waiting for sessions. Victor is able to read and write and uses both verbal and gestural communication.

The corpus of this research consisted of 27 theatrical meetings with the two students presented above. The meetings were conducted in a group format, with the objective of aligning activities with the research proposal. The diversity among participants enriches and strengthens the group, enabling the exchange of linguistic and communicative experiences. These meetings facilitate the sharing of experiences, knowledge, and interactions, absorbing the unique characteristics of each member and contributing to collective enrichment (Givigi; Camargo; Silva, 2023). Following the methodological perspective, mediators and the two boys with autism participated in the theatrical proposals. The boys were highly consistent in attendance, rarely missing sessions; when absences occurred, meetings were held with the mediators and one of the boys.

The integration of AAC was crucial to meeting the communication needs of the participants. In the context of theatrical education, AAC primarily aims to promote the communicative and expressive emancipation of individuals with complex communication needs. Without the use of this assistive technology, the research could have deviated, resulting in less effective interactions among those involved. Therefore, participants' needs were properly identified and addressed, promoting greater autonomy and facilitating inclusive processes.

It is important to highlight that AAC may include both low-technology resources, such as communication boards and pictograms, and high-technology resources, such as artificial voice devices and specialized software. For this study, low-technology resources were chosen in accordance with the specificities of the research.

The theatrical intervention activities were conducted weekly, with an approximate duration of 1 hour and 30 minutes each. In total, 27 intervention meetings were carried out,

divided into two axes: “Theatrical initiation: first steps into the world of theater” and “Building bridges: theatrical interactions between students.” The systematic activity plan included storytelling with children’s books, theatrical presentations led by the researcher, therapist, teacher, and/or the research subjects, and the creation of dramaturgies using alternative communication.

The guardians of the boys with autism signed the Free and Informed Consent Form (FICF), ensuring the ethical compliance of the research and the appropriate use of information and images. In addition, the study was formally approved by the Research Ethics Committee (REC), as indicated by the Certificate of Ethical Appreciation Presentation (CAAE: 26715114.4.0000.5546).

2 Theatrical Initiation: First Steps into the World of Theater

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Students enter the school environment carrying a repertoire of life knowledge and family and social influences, which must be taken into account in order to enrich the teaching–learning process. One of the roles of the educator is to guide the pedagogical process in Theater so as to promote students’ social integration, broaden their worldview, challenge prejudices, and stimulate creative and critical development (Santos; Camargo; Givigi, 2023). Upon arriving at school, students bring with them this background of lived experiences, which influences and enriches their educational trajectory.

As suggestions and techniques to be explored with the boys participating in the research were gradually introduced, learning environments began to take shape. We started with pretend play and improvisations, then moved on to storytelling with books and AAC, and finally introduced Animation Theatre. Throughout the study, several approaches were implemented, each offering distinct processes. The unpredictable element affected the encounters among the boys, the educators, and the speech-language therapist, and the boys’ actions directly influenced our planning. We understood that it is always possible to build upon students’ existing skills and observe how they combine to enable achievement (Laplane, 2018).

During the theatrical activities, the changes observed required continuous adjustments in the facilitators’ approaches. For example, G. demonstrated an immediate desire to manipulate the puppets as soon as he saw them, whereas V., startled by the characters, stood up and attempted to leave the room. Theatrical contagions unfolded in an interactive and non-linear manner, with constant mutual influences between the boys and the facilitators within the classroom environment.

Given that none of the participants had prior experience with theater, creating opportunities for scenic appreciation was essential. In the initial meetings, marked by pretend play and improvisations with available toys, we observed that the students interacted positively

with the teacher-artist-researcher but showed some resistance to interacting with one another. To overcome this resistance, we introduced new resources, such as collaborative games that required interaction between the two participants; moments in which the researcher mediated more frequently in order to bring the children closer together; and the sharing of objects and toys so that both could practice bodily contact. In addition, through theatrical activities, we sought to facilitate the assimilation of basic theatrical concepts and skills.

Over time, V. and G. began to better understand the dynamics of scenic appreciation and became familiar with theatrical techniques. As a result, both became more attentive to the stories and demonstrated increasing enthusiasm during the presentations. During these performances, the participants began to adopt unpredictable behaviors, imitating the teacher-artist-researcher through gestures and bodily expressions.

The dramatizations included children's stories familiar to the students. The use of tactile materials, such as rod puppets, finger puppets, printed images, and hand puppets, was fundamental to maintaining the boys' engagement in the performances. While observing, they assimilated fundamental elements of theater, such as time, space, action, and characters. At certain moments, it was necessary to guide them regarding the importance of remaining in the role of spectators, as they showed a desire to touch the objects used in the performances. Care and affection were crucial, as the boys responded positively to affectionate gestures and kind words. Thus, mediation became an essential part of the research. The teacher-artist-researcher, the educator, and the speech-language therapist used dialogical interactions to help the students understand the need to wait for the appropriate moment in the theatrical presentation (Biancalana, 2018). The stories worked on were *Jack and the Beanstalk*, *The Three Little Pigs*, *The Party in the Sky*, *Little Red Riding Hood*, and *The Town Mouse and the Country Mouse*.

To ensure that the students did not miss important details of the stories, it was necessary to explain concepts such as the scenic space, guiding them with instructions like "stay seated here, the puppets are over there," and the role of the audience, as in "now it's time to watch the play." While the teacher-artist-researcher and/or the speech-language therapist conducted the dramatizations, the teacher played a crucial role in maintaining the students' attention and guiding them through the sequence of theatrical events. The performance and appreciation of the dramatizations were made possible through continuous mediation.

During one of the meetings, we presented the play *The Town Mouse and the Country Mouse*. V., who initially attempted to manipulate the rod puppets, was gently guided to remain on the mat as a spectator. Although he did not fully understand the plot at first, V. demonstrated remarkable concentration throughout the performance. Over time, he began to understand the differences between the characters and the settings, perceiving the distinct characteristics of the country mouse and the town mouse. V. showed an understanding of notions such as

costume, set, and scene changes, watching the puppets with the same curiosity as someone watching a film. This moment suggested that, in future meetings, we could allow V. to actively participate in manipulating the scenic elements.

The aesthetic mastery of theatrical language was acquired through observation of the performances. As the boys understood the differences between actors and characters, as well as the positions and functions of the animations on stage, an effective teaching–learning process was established. The boys learned to manipulate animated figures, understand vocal nuances, facial and bodily expressions, and interpret characters. The theatrical meetings were crucial for the development of linguistic skills essential to understanding theatrical art.

In plays such as *Little Red Riding Hood*, V. and G. eagerly awaited the moment when the “Big Bad Wolf” appeared and threatened the protagonist. They had fun watching the wolf on stage; V., at times, ran away frightened, but when called, smiled upon recognizing that it was merely a representation. The students’ curiosity was evident, and the puppets exerted a remarkable magnetism. G. and V. began to respond with gestures and movements to the puppets’ entrances or to vocal changes coming from behind the curtains. During the performances, we observed that the students reacted to the characters’ expressions with interest and enthusiasm, often smiling and leaning forward as if they wished to participate.

The boys’ bodies experienced a process of emancipation through the theatrical experience. As they immersed themselves in the process, an increase in bodily freedom, initiative, and desire to integrate into the story was observed. The engagement and disposition required to become involved with the theatrical scene were evident as they deepened their experience.

After each presentation, the participants were encouraged to create their own versions of the stories they had watched. This encouragement allowed G. and V. to assume active roles as actors and puppet manipulators. Using AAC, the students were able to express their understanding of each play, their interpretations of the games, and their perceptions of the narratives of the children’s books. These retelling moments were identified as important formative processes, and over the course of three to four weeks, G. and V. worked on the development of pictographic dramaturgies.

2.1 BUILDING BRIDGES: THEATRICAL INTERACTIONS AMONG STUDENTS

We identified theatre as a potential device for overcoming students’ resistance to perceiving and interacting with their peers in the classroom. This form of artistic expression promotes processes of socialization, humanization, and symbolic exchange, creating an environment in which positive encounters and coexistence are encouraged. Theatre facilitates encounters with others by offering a space in which direct interaction and physical contact are

central (Romagnolli; Muniz, 2014). Thus, through theatrical coexistence, an environment conducive to such relationships is established.

Interaction with other bodies is essential to human development and, at the same time, can be complex, generating suffering and anguish. However, these aspects are constitutive of the human psyche and are part of social processes. Although a child may initially appear indifferent within a social environment, the context in which they are embedded gradually promotes internal changes and transformations. In this way, the child also influences the surrounding environment.

The concept that human beings are formed within the social milieu (Vigotski, 2002) is particularly relevant for children with autism, who often face social exclusion and invisibility. For the formation of our identity as individuals, insertion into the social environment is essential, as individuality emerges through contact with the collective. The absence of the group hinders the child's full development, and the group is crucial for the development of the human being as a social subject. Human development is intrinsically linked to interaction with other individuals and with the social group. Without such relationships, growth may remain at a rudimentary stage. Through interaction with others, we learn to deal with conflicts, affects, and sensitivities—issues that emerge from social coexistence.

Play is fundamental to the formation of a sense of groupness, as it stimulates actions that promote interaction and the construction of the group (Pelbart, 2022). It was observed that interactions between the individual and the collective generate the necessary tension for group formation, encompassing spontaneity, desires, feelings, and subjectivities. Thus, interaction goes beyond task-related activities and is essential to group development.

When V. was absent due to illness or medical appointments, G. missed his peer. Using AAC (Augmentative and Alternative Communication), G. expressed his connection to V., highlighting the importance of subtleties in interpersonal relationships. Mediators needed to be attentive to these nuances to ensure meaningful encounters.

Child development occurs through contact with others, by sharing experiences and dealing with absences—an essential human need. For children with autism, social relationships are not only necessary but fundamental to their development (Givigi; Camargo; Silva, 2023). The connection between bodies is established only when there is an implicit desire for interaction and affection (Deleuze, 2019). Theatre proved to be an effective means of materializing these exchanges between the boys.

On the final day of one of the activities, G. showed an intense desire to manipulate all the puppets simultaneously. He alternated between picking up one puppet and switching to another, attempted to take the puppets that were with V., and often held two puppets at the same time. V., on the other hand, waited for the mediators to offer him a puppet or guide him in choosing one. When G. took the puppet that V. was holding, V. did not resist, demonstrating

flexibility. At that moment, it was up to us, the mediators, to intervene to ensure that G. requested the desired puppet and that V. received a new one in exchange, thereby promoting a fair and collaborative dynamic of exchange between the two. Theatrical contagions were gradually taking place.

Theatre created a social environment that facilitated the emergence of unique forms of interaction among individuals. As participants explored their own corporealities and used the puppets, it was possible to observe a gradual development in interactions. Over time, V. began to better accept G.'s presence, touch, and interference, despite initially presenting episodes of anguish when G. approached. This evolution in interactions contributed to the creation of more collaborative and constructive dynamics among the participants.

Engagement in theatre contributed to changes in socio-relational dynamics and challenged previously consolidated aesthetic hierarchies (Dainez; Smolka; Souza, 2022). Theatre enabled a gradual and organic rapprochement among students, facilitating acceptance of touch—which had previously caused discomfort—and improving attention to the actions of others. We moved away from a traditional teaching approach that prescribes passive learning, in which the student must remain seated, silent, isolated, and follow an ordered process, even in an environment overloaded with many peers (Laplane, 2018).

Although G. and V. were engaged in nonconventional forms of interaction, they were acquiring relevant competencies in theatrical language, such as an expanded repertoire for recognizing facial and bodily expressions; identification of emotions; sensitive listening; full attention to theatrical scenes; creativity; the ability to work collaboratively with peers; improvisational skills; textual reading and interpretation; recognition of character roles; and spatial and temporal awareness. Theatre enabled the development of the concept of theatrical contagion, whereby participants' emotions and actions influence and reflect one another. As students expanded their interactions and social understanding, theatricality became an effective means of deepening their connections (Marin, 2024). This process allowed them to develop and integrate in more meaningful ways.

During pretend play and improvisations with toys, G. and V. began to better recognize each other's presence, despite initial difficulties in direct interaction. These moments provided opportunities to practice listening and mutual observation. While one of them performed the scenic improvisation, the other observed, resulting in greater connection and reciprocal understanding (Conrado; Santos; Paixão, 2022).

Engaging them in the planned improvisation activity was a challenge. With the support of mediation, V. began to understand the need to focus on the scene. Over time, I observed that he became quite involved during the improvisation sessions. However, G.'s presence still frequently disrupted V., requiring constant mediation so that he could concentrate on the improvisation performed by G. Dramatic play demands an interaction between active

participation and careful observation (Mello Ribeiro, 2021). For example, during the improvisation of the scene involving repairing the toy car, Erica and V. watched attentively while the therapist and G. were engaged in the activity.

Over time, the students' gazes became progressively more attentive to their peer, and this clarity in perceiving one another's presence was manifested in their gestures and bodies at each meeting. When positioned as spectators, we observed that G. cast furtive glances toward V. Despite difficulties in maintaining focus on his friend, V. was able, through mediation, to concentrate on his partner. Perceiving the expressions of their peer allowed both boys to foster enriching interaction. In this way, they were establishing the foundations for increasingly expressive relationships.

Unpredictability was a constant in the sessions. G. demonstrated a strong impulse to participate actively in the activities; merely watching was not sufficient for him. At certain moments, mediators encountered difficulties in keeping G. in the role of spectator. It was necessary to be flexible and allow him to become involved in the improvisation. Moments in which G. integrated into the dramatic play added value to the interaction process between the children.

Strong bonds among the subjects were essential for intersubjective exchanges to occur effectively. As individuals became intertwined through these exchanges, intersubjective transactions grew more intense and meaningful. Building exchanges that enhance development is a challenge, yet it represents an effective strategy for promoting interaction, communication, and socialization among peers. Theatre, as a space dedicated to encounter, offers an environment conducive to the emergence of such processes. Within it, it is possible to facilitate relationships among multiple individuals, creating opportunities for interactions that enrich and expand each participant's experience (Bianchi, 2021).

3 The performance and its traces: the impact of Theatrical Contagion on the relationships and development of students with autism

In conclusion, the good encounter provided by theatrical language enabled interaction between two boys with autism, strengthening bonds and empowering affects. The participants allowed themselves to be affected by these theatrical contagions, fostering an environment of exchange and mutual growth.

In addition to developing basic theatrical concepts, the boys progressed in areas such as communicative functions, memory, attention, turn-taking, pragmatic language functions, social skills, and interaction. The creation of scenes and theatrical dramaturgies contributed significantly to this development, which was crucial for the gradual advancement of these aspects.

The innovation of this research lies in the combination of theatre, Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC), and autism to promote interaction among individuals with diverse characteristics. Theatrical practice not only broadened the cultural horizons of those involved but also fostered a more comprehensive aesthetic education. Through theatre—revealed as a space of direct and immersive human relationships—new forms of interaction and communication emerged among the boys. The study points to the need for further research that experiments with different theatrical approaches.

AAC was essential to the theatrical teaching–learning process, facilitating the assimilation of theatrical techniques and communicative intentions among the students. This approach also played a crucial role in understanding and developing pictographic dramaturgies. Mediation proved fundamental in strengthening relationships and refining teaching strategies.

The collaborative-critical action research approach was essential for expanding understanding of the field and for reflecting on the implemented practices, enriching the experience and promoting a more sensitive perception of students with autism—especially considering the researcher’s lack of prior experience with these individuals. Improvisations and pretend-play activities, together with the exploration of stories through books and the use of puppet theatre, created an environment conducive to the development of interactions. These interactions emerged both from the students’ own initiatives and through the mediation of the teacher-artist-researcher and the professionals who contributed to this study.

The investigation demonstrated theatre as a crucial device for significantly promoting interaction among students with autism and their inclusion in the social environment. The study respected the different stages of each participant, who experienced individualized development, avoiding comparisons and focusing on individual progress.

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