



THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF PERFORMING ARTS: FROM SOCIAL THEATRE TO EDUCATIONAL SERVICES IN VERZIANO'S PRISON (BRESCIA, ITALY)

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ABSTRACT. This article explores the transformative potential of performative experiences, presenting a social theatre project held in the prison of Verzano (Brescia, Italy). Key theoretical frameworks regarding the transformative power of performing arts are outlined, before focusing on their impact on the active engagement of participants through the lens of social theatre methodology. The transformative potential of such practices is explored within the context of the Italian prison system, with an overview of the main regulations governing theatre activities in prisons. The project FRAGILI LEGAMI, carried out in Verzano prison, is presented as concrete and exemplary case of the transformative capacity of performative experiences.

PAROLE CHIAVE: Performing Arts, Social theatre, Transformation, Prison, Theatre in prison

THEATRE PERFORMANCES AS TRANSFORMATIONAL EXPERIENCES: SOME THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL REFERENCES

Theatre performances have always been a space in which human needs emerge and are processed, since their birth; in ancient Greece, performances dealt with issues that were crucial to society, which was

called upon to attend.

Thus, this article explores the transformative potential of taking part in theatre workshops through active, embodied engagement, rather than analysing the experience of spectators. Before focusing on the transformation processes enhanced by a social theatre workshop carried out in Verzano's prison (Brescia, Italy), the main theoretical considerations about the transformative value of performance will be briefly reported and taken as theoretical point of reference.

With the advent of performance studies in the 50's, a deep reflection on the functions and values of theatre performances for human being was developed.

The study of performance specifically related to theatre, was developed by two main different schools, one rooted in the European context and the other in the American one. The leaders are respectively Erika Fischer-Lichte and Richard Schechner, whose main considerations will be reported.

Considering performance «a broad continuum of human actions ranging from ritual, play, sports, pop entertainment, performing arts (theatre, music, dance), everyday life performance» (Schechner, 1977: 27), Schechner defined performance: «a special world is created where people can make the rules, rearrange time, assign value to things, and work for pleasure». Performance, according to Schechner, is a place where to elaborate rules, values, needs. Moreover, Schechner identifies seven functions carried out by performances (Schechner, 2003: 46): to produce entertainment; to produce beauty; to mark or modify identity; to create or nourish community spirit; to heal; to teach or persuade; to get in touch with the order of the sacred or demoniac. Those functions aren't presented in a hierarchical order and can be simultaneously present in a performance.

Similarly, Fischer-Lichte believes that the specificity of performance relies in its nature of «autopoietic event which can produce meaning in an aesthetic way that combines with ethical, political and social aspects of life» (Fischer-Lichte, 2008: 44).

Fischer-Lichte and Schechner agree on a fundamental function of the performance, which this discussion focuses on, that of transforming individuals taking part in it, both as actors and spectators.

According to Fischer-Lichte, every theatre and performative event is generated and determined by the physical co-presence of actors and spectators in a continuous «autopoietic feedback loop» (*Ibidem*: 41) that makes performance simultaneously both product and productor in contrast with the traditional idea of art as a product-object existing independently from an external look.

Fischer-Lichte asserts that performance, meant as an event happening between actors and spectators, «opens up the possibility for all participants to experience a metamorphosis» (*Ibidem*: 23). Performance involves and transforms human beings in totality (body, soul and mind) leading them to a complete comprehension of their existence in the world:

By transforming its participants, performance achieves the enchantment of the world. The nature of performance as event - articulated and brought forth in the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators, the performative generation of materiality, and the emergence of meaning - enables such transformation (*Ibidem*: 181).

Schechner also recognizes that the ability to transform people taking part in them is a core component of performances: «performance activities are fundamentally processual: there will always be a certain proportion of them in the process of transformation» (Schechner, 1981: 84). He deepens the transformation that performances can produce in the performers, including the concomitant changes that take place in the audience (*Ibidem*: 90).

The broad conception of performance proposed by performance studies encompasses the branch of social theatre, the field to which the project presented in this article refers to, and that intentionally aims to transform participants' lives through theatre experiences.

Social theatre falls under the Anglo-Saxon umbrella term 'applied theatre', which refers to «theatre made by, with and for the community» (Prentki & Preston, 2009: 9), that means a «broad set of theatrical practices and creative processes that take participants and audience beyond the scope of convention mainstream theatre into the realm of a theatre that is responsive to ordinary people and their stories, local settings and priorities» (*Ibidem*: 9). What distinguishes applied theatre from other kind of theatre is indeed the different gradient of participation and transformation they promote; according to Judith Ackroyd, applied theatre experiences promote more participation and transformation rather than

other kinds of theatre (Acrotyd, 2000: 4).

Social theatre is a typically Italian practice, as recurring as problematic. An increasing number of theatre projects happen in various contexts under the term of “social theatre”, but not always with the same intent and meaning because of the proliferation of different and fluid experiences. It has been stated that it is not possible to provide a unique definition of social theatre, because of its «plural and polycentric» nature (Innocenti Malini, 2021b: 47).

The term «social theatre» was first officially used and introduced by Claudio Bernardi who defined it as «expression, education and interaction of individuals, groups and communities through different kinds of performing activities, including games, parties, rituals, sports, dances, events and cultural manifestations» (Bernardi, 2004: 58). In a recent publication, Giulia Innocenti Malini outlines the characteristics of social theatre two decades after its original definition (Innocenti Malini, 2021a: 12). The specific complexity of social theatre lies, in her opinion, in its will to pursue both artistic and aesthetic outcomes and to intentionally achieve goals of a social nature, sometimes educational, care-related, inclusive, formative, therapeutic, developmental. Social theatre projects are designed and redefined along the way in collaboration with participants, institutional settings, local contexts, and communities, responding to their cultural, social, and political challenges. These projects usually happen in non-theatrical contexts, involve primarily non-professional participants and are facilitated by practitioners and leaders with different experiential and educational backgrounds. Social theatre projects consist primarily of the creation of retrospective dramaturgies, developed through a workshop-based process.

Due to its «plural and polycentric nature» (Innocenti Malini, 2021b: 47), it is impossible to identify a single model of intervention, but only some recurring methodological criteria, first the same plurality of application (Innocenti Malini, 2021a: 88).

The workshop is identified as the core of social theatre’s method (Bernardi, 2004: 81; Innocenti Malini, 2011a: 87; Ghiglione

& Pagliarino, 2007: 49; Pontremoli, 2015: 72), being not only the main way to reach a final performance, but the heart of social theatre’s work. Social theatre is a practice that emphasizes the process, that happens mostly during workshop (Pasetto et al. 2024: 28): the goal is not necessarily to produce a final performance, but rather to offer a journey that best gives shape and meaning to the experience of the various individuals involved in the process (Innocenti Malini, 2007: 31). It is not possible to identify a single defined structure for a workshop session; given certain reference criteria, it can be structured in very different ways each time (*Ibidem*: 31).

In conclusion, if a transformative potential is inherent in all performance experiences, it becomes particularly evident and intentional in the case of applied and social theatre that places the participant at the centre of the process, along with their personal narrative; the emerging issues and challenges become the driving force of the creative process and the interactions among those involved. The aim is to follow a creative and performative journey that seeks to take charge of these issues, turning them into an opportunity for growth and empowerment for participants (Innocenti Malini, 2021a: 12).

That theoretical and methodological framework being stated, the paper will now present the transformative capacity of performing arts activities within Italian prisons, by deepening a project carried out within Verziano’s prison.

THEATRE AS A RE-EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITY WITHIN ITALIAN PRISONS

Applied and social theatre have a long and strong tradition of projects carried out in prisons. In Italy, theatre workshops have been held in prisons since 1980s’, with different approaches and methodologies, belonging to both social and traditionally professional theatre. This paragraph does not seek to reconstruct the history or the diversity of these experiences but rather to trace the main existing trajectories.

The Ministry of Justice reports that as early as the beginning of the 1980s, prison theatre - already existing in many institutions through amateur or traditional

activities - began to take on new meanings, methodologies, and objectives, which have gradually become more defined and consolidated over time (Ministero della Giustizia, 2025).

Theatrical activities started to spread in Italian prisons from the 1980s, partly thanks to legislation that defined the rehabilitative role of the prison system; Law No. 354 in 1975 stated that jail should be regarded not merely as a place of detention, but as a space for re-education (Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica Italiana, 1975).

Since the 1980s, an increasing number of prison theatre initiatives have emerged, differing greatly in both methodologies and objectives. The first recognizable theatre experiences in prison consisted mainly of theatrical training offered to inmates by theatre professionals¹. The presence of theatre professionals was so substantial that it gave rise to fully-fledged professional theatre companies within the institutions, the most renowned being the Compagnia della Fortezza at the Volterra prison².

A key step in the development of rehabilitative activities in prison was marked by Law No. 663 in 1986 (Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica Italiana, 1986), known as the Gozzini Law after its sponsor. Despite undergoing some modifications and restrictions over time, the Gozzini Law remains a fundamental point of reference for initiatives promoting the social rehabilitation of prisoners. This law was designed to make prisons less isolating and more open to rehabilitation, basing on the belief that all inmates, including those convicted of the most serious crimes, can be involved in re-educational programs aimed at their reintegration into society. In line with this perspective, cultural and

artistic activities were introduced in prisons to stimulate personal growth and offer new opportunities. As a result, greater emphasis began to be placed on theatrical practice rather than on final performance, focusing on inmates' workshop-based and creative activities and on their therapeutic-pedagogical function, thus promoting a more rehabilitation-oriented approach (Ministero della Giustizia, 2025).

The number and variety of projects increased significantly starting in the 1990s. Ministry of Justice, through its official website, attempts to keep an annual record of theatre projects carried out in Italian prisons: to date 83 projects are reported (Ministero della Giustizia, 2025). However, not all initiatives are systematically documented through the available platforms, making it difficult to obtain a clear and comprehensive overview for the definition of a nationwide programme. Similarly, in 2011 a National Coordination for Prison Theatre³ was established; yet, despite the large number of existing initiatives, only around fifty are registered in its official records⁴. The most recent survey conducted by the Department of Penitentiary Administration on theatre activities in Italian prisons dates to 2015 (Pizzetti, 2024: 155). It revealed that theatre initiatives were present in more than half of the country's institutions, and that 33% of these workshops have been active for over ten years. As evidenced by these three sets of data, obtaining a comprehensive overview of the variety of existing projects and methodologies is impossible⁵.

To summarize about the principal existing different approaches,

1 First, the group "Teatro Gruppo" led by Antonio Turco and founded by Ernesto Padovani; <https://www.polizia-penitenziaria.it/index.php/544-archivio/2007/aprile-2007/1167-teatro-epassione-1167>.

Eduardo De Filippo led the first in a series of workshops held in juvenile detention centers, in the prison of Nisida cfr Calebasso, L. (2009). Eduardo e i giovani a rischio. In E. Pozzi, E., & V. Minoia, (ed.), *Recito, dunque so(g)no: Teatro e carcere* (pp. 36-39). Urbino: Edizioni Nuove Catarsi.

2 Compagnia della Fortezza: <https://www.compagniadellafortezza.org/new/>.

3 Coordinamento Nazionale Teatro in Carcere: <https://www.teatrocarcere.it/>.

4 Official records can be found at this link: https://www.teatrocarcere.it/?page_id=13.

5 In an essay mapping the landscape of prison theatre in Italy, Delia Langer identifies three main directions (Langer, 2017: 110): workshops aimed at forming theatre companies; projects that focus on the therapeutic effects of theatre; and workshop-based initiatives that conceive performance as a restitutive presentation of the process undertaken. Although this mapping is now dated, these remain the main trajectories of theatre activities in prisons.

A key point for this discussion about the transformation promoted by theatre activities in prison is their framing within the Italian penitentiary system.

Given the historical development presented above, theatre activities in prison have been included within the so-called «treatment area», conceived by the 1975 law and consisting of a set of rehabilitative measures proposed to prisoners during their sentence (*Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica Italiana*, 1975). The main goals are «to support their human, cultural and professional interests» and «to promote a process of change in personal circumstances and attitudes, as well as in family and social relationships that hinder constructive social participation» (D.p.r. 30 giugno 2000 n. 230). The treatment programme is drawn up by the Observation and Treatment Group (GOT) and it is established at the end of an assessment process called «scientific observation of personality» aimed at «identifying physiological and psychological deficiencies or other causes that led to the crime and proposing a suitable rehabilitation program» (Ministero della Giustizia, Programma di Trattamento). Treatment must respond to the specific needs of each individual, which must be identified through observation of the prisoner's personality (Legge 26.7.1975, n.354, art.13).

Bill A.C. 2933 (Manca, 2022) contains provisions for the promotion and support of theatre activities in prisons. As set out in the bill's rationale, this is intended to contribute to the social and professional reintegration of prisoners. Theatre is already fully recognised as a form of recreational and cultural activity in the law on the prison system (Legge 26.7.1975, n.354, art.13; D.p.r. 30.6.2000, n. 230).

To conclude, these regulatory guidelines clearly highlight the transformative role assigned to theatrical activity within Italian prisons, which is primarily that of re-educating and reintegrating incarcerated individuals. The following paragraph presents a social theatre project carried out within Verziano's prison in Brescia as a concrete example.

THE TRANSFORMATIVE ACTION OF A SOCIAL THEATRE WORKSHOP: THE CASE OF VERZIANO'S PRISON

The FRAGILI LEGAMI workshop at the Verziano's prison in Brescia was established in 2011 as a creative, relational, and participatory space aimed at a mixed group of incarcerated individuals. The project, conceived by the Chair of Social Theatre at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Brescia campus, belongs to community-based performative practices; its goal is to foster transformative relational dynamics and to promote social inclusion through performing arts (Innocenti Malini, 2011b). Its initial purpose was not to address a specific need or to implement a targeted intervention, but rather to offer an alternative time and space - free from institutional dynamics - where participants could play, express themselves, experiment, and meet one another. The theatrical language - that by its very nature is symbolic, immediate, embodied, and collective - has enabled the creation of a climate of trust and the exploration of profound experiences that are not always accessible through verbal or rational tools (Ristretti Orizzonti, 2025).

The workshop was conceived and evolved over time in relation to the participants, facilitators, the host institution, the local community, and the historical context, through a dialogical and co-creative process (Bernardi & Innocenti Malini, 2017). The workshop - a space where individuals can share and reinterpret experiences, tell stories - allows participants to explore normally unexpressed aspects of themselves and to experience a positive form of cultural protagonism, restoring (regardless of one's condition) a sense of responsibility, dignity, and belonging. Theatre thus acts as a relational device, capable of strengthening bonds, building meaning, fostering critical thinking, and generating shared identities (Alessandro Pontremoli, 2015).

The workshop has been held weekly for fifteen years, involving both male and female inmates. After the forced interruption caused by the pandemic, mixed participation resumed. Activities focus on

scenic creation and improvisation based on autobiographical experiences, using tools such as collective writing, theatre games, and self-dramaturgy practices. The work is facilitated by a team composed of two social theatre practitioners, Carla Colletti and Barbara Pizzetti, in collaboration with prison's educational staff.

From the earliest stages of the project, it became clear that the theatrical space also worked as a tool for observation and listening, capable of bringing to light deep and collective needs.

The theme of parenthood quickly emerged, bringing to light the distance from children, the difficulty of communicating, the pain of separation, and the desire to 'be there' despite everything. It was precisely from this spontaneous and unplanned emergence that the second phase of the project took shape: the biweekly access to the workshop by the children of the incarcerated participants. This opening allowed the workshop space to become also a family space, where parents and children could share two hours in more welcoming and less normative environment than a traditional visit. During these encounters, they play, talk, have a snack, and simply spend time together. The emotional and symbolic value of this experience has had a profound impact on the parent-child relationship and has strengthened the project's identity as a space of connection and reconnection (Bernardi & Innocenti Malini, 2017). From the very beginning of the theatre workshop, there was a strong need to talk about children, about distance, perceived guilt, and the desire to still be recognized as parents. Theatre has offered a different language—embodied and symbolic—for navigating these themes.

While this is common and occurs in many social theatre workshops, the innovative and most transformative aspect lies in what followed the emergence of these needs.

In response to them, in 2019 the project evolved by initiating individual educational pathways and discussion groups, in collaboration with the healthcare and psychological teams of the correctional facility

(Antigone, 2022). Today, the theatre workshop and the parenting programs are parallel yet interconnected pathways that enable incarcerated individuals to address the theme of parenthood through different but constantly interrelated languages and approaches.

The social theatre workshop continued to act as a catalyst, fostering a deeper and more authentic narrative of personal experiences, and once again became a space for observation and renewal during the COVID-19 pandemic. The FRAGILI LEGAMI workshop also had to adapt to the new safety measures imposed by the emergency context, reorganizing into gender-separated groups to ensure distancing and health protection.

This redefinition generated new group dynamics and, particularly within the women's group, allowed for greater intimacy and sharing among participants, enabling the emergence of themes that had previously been latent or not openly discussed. Many of the women involved in the workshop began to recount experiences of oppressive relationships, toxic emotional dynamics, and actual situations of physical, psychological, and economic violence. In many cases, the women shared that the crimes for which they were incarcerated were closely linked to their relationships with their partners: crimes committed jointly, under coercion, out of loyalty, fear, or even by taking responsibility for acts carried out by their partners, believing they were less likely to be imprisoned as first-time offenders.

Consequently, in 2020, a new space was established, conceived not as an emergency service but as a place of awareness and deconstruction, where violence could be named, victims could be recognized without denying personal responsibility, and a path of personal empowerment could be initiated. Building on these themes, the project initiated a dialogue with the local anti-violence network, involving the city's anti-violence centres in a stable working group.

The goal is twofold: on one hand, to ensure support and accompaniment for women; on the other, to work towards the

creation of shared protocols for assistance and support. To address this complexity, an inter-institutional working group was established, involving the prison, anti-violence centres, and the Municipality of Brescia (Comune di Brescia, 2021).

In conclusion, this paragraph has illustrated the transformative and generative power of a social theatre project within prison: what initially took shape as an educational workshop has gradually given rise to new targeted services, able to respond to other emerging needs.

CONCLUSION

The paper started from presenting theoretical underpinnings of the transformative power of performing arts, with a particular focus on social theatre's methodology that aims to promote individual and community transformation.

This potential has been linked to the Italian prison context, which hosts numerous theatrical initiatives and is aimed at fostering transformation among incarcerated persons. Basing on existing Italian laws about prison's rehabilitative goal and on the landscape of prison theatre projects, their transformative power appears to be primarily linked to prison's re-educational and reintegrative objectives, being theatre experiences proposed among prison's treatment area activities.

The project FRAGILI LEGAMI in Verziano's prison has been presented as illustrative example. What makes this a paradigmatic case of the transformative power of applied theatre lies in the nature of the transformations it has triggered. Not only did it foster individual transformation processes among participants - as all social theatre projects aim to do - but it also contributed to broader changes within the Verziano's prison system itself. It led to the creation of new educational services inside the correctional facility. The transformation brought about here represents a true paradigm shift: not a theatre workshop offered as one of the educational activities provided by the rehabilitation department (as all theatre workshops are), but rather a space that - by listening to and taking

charge of the participants' needs and desires - served as a catalyst for the development of targeted educational services in response to those needs. The performative activities implemented have led to transformations not only in the participants themselves, but also in the institutional service provision within the prison.

In conclusion, FRAGILI LEGAMI project is a paradigmatic case of the transformative power of performing arts' experiences and of how they «can produce meaning in an aesthetic way that combines with ethical, political and social aspects of life» (Ficher-Lichte, 2008: 44).

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