



The place of Forum Theatre in the MCE methodology

PREPARED BY: Artemisszio Foundation

Forum Theatre is a dramatic method that can be used in intercultural trainings based on the method of Margalit Cohen-Emerique to support several aims and diversify the set of tools the trainers use from non-formal pedagogy.

What is Forum Theatre?

Forum Theatre is a branch of the tree of Theatre of the Oppressed (TO). The method family was created and developed by a Brazilian theatre director, Augusto Boal to tackle social questions, unequal power relations with performative practices.

The choreography of the Forum Theatre performance is that the actors present a story, where there is traditionally a protagonist, a main character, who we get to know at the beginning of the play. The character is usually in a vulnerable, but bearable situation that gets worse and worse throughout the play. The antagonists and the allies are present in the story presented in 4-7 scenes and ends in a catastrophe. This bad ending should work as a catalyst to motivate the spectators – called *spect-actors* in this case – to find better solutions, strategies that could help the protagonist to get in a better position. The actors replay the scenes, and the spectators can replace the main character and try out something else in his/her position. “Theatre is a form of knowledge; it should and can also be a means of transforming society.” says Boal. This transformative aspect is the reason why the application of Forum Theatre techniques can be useful in intercultural training.

One of the most quoted sentences from Boal is: “Anyone can do theatre. Even actors.” In this framework the performers of a play can be anyone, with or without previous knowledge of acting, who wants to think collectively about a social question or problem.

The process of creating a Forum Theatre Play usually starts with a first phase of *demechanisation* activities. This refers in the vocabulary of the process of liberating oneself



from the everyday routines, building up a collective creative flow where the creation of scenes can start. The activities, games of demechanisation are often based on movement, giving sounds or creating sculptures (*image theatre*). [Ide még](#)

The uses of Forum-Theatre in intercultural trainings

The first two steps of Cohen-Emerique's method - i.e. "decentering" and "discovery of the frame of references of the other" can be tackled through activities that are relatively "disembodied": even when we spice up the method with elements of non-formal pedagogy, most of the time participants are sitting and talking to each other, or sit around a table and work together on films, images, filling out grids etc. Rarely are they invited to move and really put movement in the center of their attention. The third step of the method, "negotiation" is quite different. We believe that it very much benefits the learning process to create an embodied transmission for this third phase. We have three arguments to back up this claim. First of all, most real life negotiations occur in settings where the interaction partners are face to face, physically present. Most communication situations are embodied: we are communicating using our bodies: gestures, physical distance, postures, even the use of objects comes to play a part in the interaction process. Our embodied routines may be activated, our emotional reactions triggered. All this could go unperceived if we just simulate a negotiation on paper. The closer a learning situation is to the real life situation, the easier it will be to apply what is acquired.

Our second argument concerns the intercultural dimension of communication. Since we are in an intercultural context, we can also assume that some of the ways we use our gestures, postures, distances etc. will be quite different from our interaction partners. Hence we need to be aware of the cultural diversity in verbal / para-verbal / non-verbal repertoires, so that we can be mindful in our own communication and also better understand the communication style of the other person. Theatre can help us discover in a playful way our own preferences and "sensitive zones" in communication (i.e. what is the interpersonal distance which makes us feel safe, whether or not we like physical touch or direct eye-contact etc.).

Our third argument concerns the skills needed for negotiation. Cultural differences in the way people communicate imply that the means of communication have to be negotiated at the same time as the subject of negotiation (the theme of the incident) is negotiated. We have to figure out together at what distance we like to stand from each other, what will be the level of formality of our speech, whether or not we can exteriorise emotions etc. Theatre work - in particular the



exercises of “demechanisation” can help us make our communication repertoire a bit more flexible so that we can adjust to the other person. Through the activities the participants can reflect on their routines, try out something new, and see themselves in an unusual place or role. Though that they can practice to change perspective, but firstly to analyze their own actions and reactions, not only in theory but in a dynamic, exploratory way.

Forum Theatre as a practice of negotiation

Forum Theatre originally pays special attention to the perspective (motivations, opportunities, wishes, resources, allies) of the “oppressed”, the person who suffers from the oppressive situation. In classical forum theatre plays, we do not make efforts to enter or open up the frame of references of the “oppressor”, the person who triggered the shock experience. And probably, some practitioners of the “Theatre of the oppressed” would be quite upset about the idea of “negotiation”, based on the assumption that oppressed people should not be required to negotiate. So the transition we are making to the intercultural context requires some changes. In the framework of culture shock the underlying assumption is that the person triggering the shock experience is not an “oppressor”, and the conflict is not about an oppression but is a manifestation of differences in perceptions, values, representations that stem from different cultural identities (or from intergroup identity dynamics). So in this context, it is important to explore the frame of references of both parties, and to negotiate a solution that respects the best possible way the identities of both parties. In negotiation we need to modify the focus and use predominantly the technique of the collective brainstorming considering the face and cultural context of the other person who is in the intercultural shock situation. We will observe and try out strategies from the perspective of the adult educator, social worker, etc. who brings in the situation, the group will collectively think about strategies from that side, as this can be useful for our participants. Of course, in case we are working with migrants and refugees for example, and the bring cases, we will try to find strategies for them to act more effectively in situations facing a social worker, and adult educators, etc. so this depends on our group.