

*Theatre of the Oppressed: High schools awareness-raising project**

Francesca Michieletto§, Laura Miotto°

Summary. *The Anti Violence Centre of Venice has been operating inside the Woman's Centre since 1994, and its aim is to promote actions of opposition to violence against women. In 2009, the Centre opened a new type of service that provides information and education to the new generations, promotes increased awareness about women's issues and provides the capability to prevent them. The project addressed to High School students offers two workshops: "Invisible wounds" that explores psychological, economical and social violence against women using Theatre of the Oppressed and the second workshop, "Men and Women in front of the mirror" aims to develop an analysis of gender stereotypes, using the methodology of Improvisation theatre.*

Key words: *Schools, psychological violence, gender stereotypes, Theatre of the Oppressed, improvisation theatre*

*Received: 25/08/2012 - Revision: 10/09/2012 - Accepted: 15/09/2012

Self-declaration of compliance with ethical standards: 10/01/2012

§Comune di Venezia, Direzione Cittadinanza delle Donne Attività Culturali – Centro Donna, Viale Garibaldi 155/A, Mestre (VE), Italy. Tel. 041 2690630. Fax 041 5342862.

°Associazione di Promozione Sociale Liquidambar, via Cappuccina 15/B, Mestre (VE), Italy. Tel. 339 1792537. Email: laura.miotto@gmail.com.

Interdisciplinary Journal of Family Studies, XVIII, 2/2012

When one thinks about violence against women, one imagines physical violence, such as rape or battering, up to the extreme: the homicide.

Regarding homicides, statistics are alarming: a study based on media information, says that during 2010 in Italy about 127 women were murdered by men (Casa delle Donne, 2012). These numbers show that the problem of violence against women still remains a pervasive problem, in spite of social changes, acquired rights and recent laws.

But violence against women is not just physical and sexual violence, there are also submerged kinds of violence that emerge in all the stories of many of the women who turn to anti violence centres. These stories talk about abuse of power, humiliation and ill treatment.

The Anti Violence Centre of Venice operates inside the Women's Centre, since 1994, and is focused on actions that oppose violence and ill-treatment against women.

The Centre counts on a multidisciplinary team, made up of people with specific education, and it integrates the skills of social workers, psychologist, lawyers and educationalists.

It operates within a network that includes public services provided by the Council of the city of Venice, police forces, tribunals and legal authorities as well as with enterprises offering private social assistance organised by associations, cooperatives, Shelter homes and phone help lines. The objective is to offer guidance and support to women who request help, within a framework that can assist them throughout a trajectory that will enable them to regain awareness, freedom and autonomy.

The Centre has activated several services: welcome service, psychological support, legal advice, the "women at work" service, secret address houses, listening points called "SOS violence" inside the city hospitals and a free telephone number 1522.

As a preventive measure, in 2009 the Centre also opened a new service, in order to provide information and education to the new generations, to promote more awareness about women's issues and to provide the capability to prevent them.

Schools, being places assigned to education and training, are the right places to build a new culture.

The project is addressed to High School's students and so (considering the age target of 15 to 18) we decided to use Social Theatre methodology.

Theatre has proven to be a fruitful tool of exercise in educational and community development projects.

Social Theatre, in particular provides a privileged setting to creatively address important issues of collective interest. It develops from the practices of theatrical animation and art therapy but nevertheless it has

specific characteristics and can be practiced in diverse contexts: at school, retirement homes and urban contexts etc. and is used to describe all theatrical practices that are not strictly part of artistic theatre.

By emphasising the process and not the artistic outcome, Social Theatre works through encounters, exchanges and inclusion during which the theatre experience becomes significant in terms of development and growth for all the participants (Pagliarino and Rossi Ghiglione, 2007).

This particular project has drawn from the techniques of the Theatre of the Oppressed and Improvisation Theatre, especially suited to addressing social themes through a non-confrontational technique.

The project offers the school classes two workshops that explore two different themes.

Invisible wounds workshop

This workshop explores forms of non-physical violence against women, analysing in particular psychological, economical and social violence. These take the shape of limitations on personal freedom, humiliation, controlling and intimidating attitudes and harassment that occur in the family and intimate relationships as well as at work and in a social environment. These forms of violence do not manifest themselves physically but nevertheless inflict serious harm to those subjected to them.

Marie-France Hirigoyen (2000) accurately describes the consequences of 'invisible violence' on women, both within the couple and in the work environment: a state of confusion, fear, isolation, and shock etc.

The main objective is to learn to recognise the signals through which psychological violence is expressed to prevent the establishment of abusive relationships and to develop a greater awareness among young women with regard to their relationship choices.

The tool used to explore this theme is the Theatre of the Oppressed (TdO).

The TdO developed in the 1960's in Brazil thanks to Augusto Boal, artistic director of the Teatro Arena of Sao Paulo as well as actor, director, playwright and world theatre UNESCO ambassador.

Boal created TdO taking inspiration from the Brazilian pedagogist Paulo Freire, author of “The pedagogy of the oppressed”, including some of his personal intuitions on liberation theology (2011).

The techniques and exercises of the TdO (Boal, 2011) offer an analytical tool that is liberating and awareness-raising through an approach that is based on a non-directive dialogue. By developing intuitive, sensory as well as rational capacities, this method allows the participants to become the protagonists of the action, placing them within the themes of social oppression and experimenting routes of action-reflection on stage, that will then be applied in life.

It is therefore one of the most effective instruments to explore themes of social oppression.

Among the techniques that shape its methodology, the Theatre of Image is certainly one of the most important. One of its main hypotheses is that human beings are constituted by a totality composed by body, mind and emotion and that the learning/changing of real issues must pass through a process of work/exercise on all three of these aspects.

In the workshop conducted in the school classes we used the techniques of the Theatre of Image to create Image/Sculptures using the body. The aim was to engage the students in exploring the theme of psychological violence and discrimination against women by starting from 'heard of' statements (collective stereotypes). The workshop took inspiration from a series of affirmations present in clichés (i.e. *«To denigrate one's girlfriend because of what she does or thinks and her physical appearance does not mean one is being violent»*; *«It is normal for a man to receive higher wages than a woman even when they have the same job position»*) and the participants would try and define their position, in an attempt to understand if, to what extent and why they agreed or disagreed with the statement. On the basis of the sentences read, the students formed some “sculptures” with their bodies, following the techniques of the Theatre of the Image. Creating a space on the stage, every group presented their representation to the rest of the class who was able to actively intervene to modify it.

In this manner the students shared their personal opinions on the issues, discussing the dynamics of relationships and cultural, economic and social forms of discrimination.

The choice of allowing space for body expression did not overshadow the importance of verbal sharing of the experience both during the workshop and at end.

Men and Women in front of the mirror Workshop

This workshop aims to develop an analysis of gender stereotypes (Ciccone, 2009), exploring the perception of the male figure, both from the point of view of the female students (how young women perceive men), and that of the male student (how men perceive themselves). The aim is to encourage relationships between men and women that are based on sharing and respecting differences. According to Barbara Mapelli, Gisella Bozzi Tarizzo and Diana De Marchi (2001): «It is impossible to be, to grow to develop a personal concept of oneself, without a relation with the other and engaging with differences, even those that connect and distance us, but that are in any case necessary for a process of self-awareness that includes freedom, responsibility, choice. In short, growing-up» (p.63).

In the case of this workshop we decided to offer theatre-bodily experiences inspired by the methodology of Improvisation theatre.

In Italy this methodology has been used since the late 1960's, and particularly popular after the publication of the book "Theatre Exercises and Improvisations" by Viola Spolin (2005) Spolin worked as a trainer of young theatre students in Hollywood, where she founded the Young Actors Company in 1946, and in Chicago where she co-founded the Game Theatre, an Improvisation Theatre workspace in which dozens of actors and directors participated .

The improvisation technique allows the individual to experience. This means to penetrate the environment, to be entirely involved in it on all levels: intellectual, physical and intuitive.

It is a moment of discovery, of experimentation and of creative expression.

It is exactly this expression that can be used as a tool to develop group dialogue and consideration on the perception of the male figure held by the students.

In particular the workshop explored perceptions of the male figure by focusing on:

- social perception: simulation among the students of a talk-show situation during which, in a playful manner, the students will cover specific roles (impersonating writers, politicians, professional actors) and describe themselves with adjectives within a framework that allows self-representation and representation of the other gender;
- group perception: advertisement images were presented that represented men and women in attitudes and roles that projected discriminatory

- messages of either gender. The students were asked to carry out improvisation scenes taking inspiration from the proposed images;
- individual perception: having concluded the work on group perception each individual was asked to formulate a reflection regarding the message conveyed by the advertising image and the observations expressed during the improvisation.

After each workshop the school class had a follow-up meeting with the aim of offering a space for students to elaborate on the elements that had emerged during the workshop exercises, to inform and raise awareness on the themes of the project and to share information on the Anti-Violence centre/Women's Centre.

This meeting encouraged discussion, focus groups and debates through the examination of audio-visual materials and resources.

References

- Boal, A. (2011). *Il teatro degli oppressi: Teoria e tecnica del teatro*. Molfetta (BA): La Meridiana
- Casa delle Donne per non subire violenza di Bologna (2012). *Indagine sul Femicidio in Italia*. Retrieved from http://www.casadonne.it/cms/images/pdf/pubblicazioni/materiali/femminicidio_2010.pdf
- Ciccone, S. (2009). *Essere maschi: Tra potere e libertà*. Torino: Rosenberg & Sellier
- Freire, P. (2011). *La pedagogia degli oppressi*. Torino: EGA
- Hirigoyen, M. F. (2000). *Molestie morali. La violenza perversa nella famiglia e nel lavoro*. Torino: Giulio Einaudi
- Mapelli, B., Bozzi Tarizzo, G. and De Marchi, D. (2001). *Orientamento e identità di genere: Crescere donne e uomini*. Milano: RCS – La Nuova Italia. (p.63)
- Pagliarino, A. and Rossi Ghiglione, A. (Eds.) (2007). *Fare Teatro Sociale*. Roma: Dino Audino
- Spoilin, V. (2005). *Esercizi e improvvisazioni per il teatro*. Roma: Dino Audino