

Affective Education through the Art of Animation Theatre

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Abstract: The starting point for this paper is my Ph.D. dissertation “Animation Theatre as an Art and as an Element of Aesthetic Development and Education” (Animation Theatre is a wider conception of Puppet Theatre).

My starting point is also my later practical-pedagogical project called “The Learning Potential and Figurative Language of Animation Theatre — a Survey of Basic Aesthetic Learning Processes, Content Areas and Teacher Qualifications”.

These projects have shown that animation theatre holds great potential in terms of making way for the pupil’s aesthetic, emotional, and ethical learning and “Bildung” (German concept for the general cultural and social development of the individual).

In the article I focus on some of the potential for this form of theatre.

Key words: typical communication, confidential knowledge, emotional learning and working together, humor and utopia

1. Introduction

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In the following, I focus on some of the potential for this form of theatre.

In my book “Marionet og menneske, animationsteater — billedteater”, (Marionette and Man, Animation Theatre — Visual Theatre) I have summarized the following typical communicative features, allowing myself to be inspired by other researchers, and furthermore referring to domestic and international performances that I have studied and experienced.

Typical features in the communication of animation theatre:

- Ambiguity and “opalization” (two-sided appearance).
- Metaphor and transitional phenomena.
- Permanent alienation.

- Synergy.
- Abstraction and stylization.
- Special theatre conventions.
- Protection of the player's integrity.
- Dialogic work process.
- Pantomimic.
- Humour and utopia.
- Theatre of paradox, live figures, although...
- Cross-aesthetic expression.

In the following I want to focus on some aspects that have a close relationship to affective learning.

Animation theatre has its own clear and complex profile and affords a richness of different crafts, design processes, stories, working methods and subjects.

The synergistic dimension is strongly manifested in this theatre art. Many kinds of knowledge and functions work together and constantly change. The different elements work together in fostering innovation, so that the sum of the various expressions, apart from being linked, also creates synergy (Konstanza Kavrakova Lorenz: *Das Puppenspiel als synergetische Kunstform*, 1986). Demands for synergy may be put on a great variety of art forms; still, synergy is prominent in animation theatre, where it exists latently. The perspective is the development of what I might call "synergistic competence". This potential for learning appears to be in demand, particularly in relation to the multi-media boom in our present culture. Perhaps, learning through stylized and complex animation theatre can help develop an important synergistic ability to act. The vision could be that the child, and we ourselves through the aesthetic learning processes, becomes equipped to transform some of the complex, contradictory and fragmentary impressions of contemporary culture into dynamic forces. However, that may be: As play, area for learning with educational content, this theatre form seems to be underestimated today. It could be a cross-aesthetic/cross-professional juncture.

2. "Confidential Knowledge"

The actor acts by using his/her body and voice. When the animation figure "acts" it requires a person, a player/animator, as it can neither move nor speak on its own. Its movement and language are controlled from the outside. Perhaps the figure is handled by more than one person, perhaps it is mechanical, or both, in alternation. Maybe there is a voice-over from a third person, or a tape recorder. The players can be invisible or hidden, and sometimes they may function as actors or narrators. Thus, the formal language of animation theatre is quite complex. Henryk Jurkowski notes that a characteristic feature in many modern animation theatre shows is change and interchange — a gliding — between the numerous elements and forces involved; a relationship he terms "pulsation" (Jurkowski, Henryk i Thomas Seebeok, 1983, p. 144).

On stage, the animated figure seems to be alive, although we realize at the same time that it is inanimate material. The special ability of an animated figure to communicate rests in this ambiguity. Therefore the animation process is extremely important. It is in itself a knowledge of familiarity and confidentiality with a strong appeal to the visual and tactile senses. It demands attention and quietness. This state of mind seems to be a need and, at the same time, it promotes concentration.

Animating is a state of mind, and reaching it presupposes time. Perhaps children and adults need such intense

contemplation. Perhaps this is why most people become captivated by it and allow themselves to be drawn into it. For a moment, animation and touch suspend the boundaries of identity — we touch, and are touched, and become part of the world. In this presence something magical and ritual comes about that is shared by players, others, artisans and artists. This often silent knowledge is decidedly a knowledge of confidentiality- a category of knowledge set up by Tore Nordenstams and described by Mogens Nielsen in “Tavs viden og den praktiske dimension i dannelsesprocessen” (Silent Knowledge and the Practical Dimension in the Educational Process, DANSK nr. 1. 1996).

Animation is pantomimic in itself, with a strong appeal to the visual and tactile senses. Animation demands attention, quietness and concentration on the shape, material and surface of the animation object. The auditory sense is summoned when “an object’s own sounds” are investigated and subsequently used in a small play. In order to allow this familiar knowledge the space to consolidate itself as the basis of an actual show, a plan can be suggested in which object experiments are succeeded by non-verbal training and playing. Later the non-verbal working processes may be combined with simple improvisations with verse, rhymes, and singing, and followed up by improvisations with short lines that have been learnt well enough not to make demands on the memory. Another form well suited for novices is to have the players perform their show while a narrator, who has memorized the part, narrates. The advantage being that the narrator can let her/his story follow the stage action, while the actors are fully concentrated on the animation, the plot and the interplay.

Whether or not a narrative/story is practiced in a miming or verbal fashion, the dramaturgy is crucial. According to level and context, various dramaturgical models and terms may be presented or detected, after which they can be used as tools for practical work, depending also on training and a sense of timing, tempo, and pulse. Dramaturgical learning comes into effect both in connection with the development of improvisations, interpretation of existing texts, and analysis of finished performances.

Animation theatre relies strongly on the sense of touch and the tactile experience of the hand, but it also involves the whole body, and therefore its language must be integrated with dramaturgy, drama, and theatre pedagogy in general. Many drama exercises could be combined with animation work and even underpin it.

3. Emotional Learning and Working Together

Rituals and games with animated figures are a primeval form of expression, which in recent years has garnered new interest — perhaps, because they challenge a culture of reification characterized by a technology boom and hyper-consumption — and instead represent a material culture that also seeks spiritual and religious dimensions.

In our part of the world, children grow up in a culture epitomized by things and the mass consumption of things. Moreover, the things and idioms of contemporary culture may be characterized as contradictory and fragmented. Does this situation stimulate the development of an aesthetic and ethical sense? Do we become more self-absorbed as a result? Or do we attain a better chance to “go beyond” mere consumerism? In animation theatre, work with scenographic materials is especially provocative, because the material objects, so to speak, perform. This theatrical idiom, which is based on making objects and inanimate figurines come alive and take on corporeal form, is suited for communicating fundamental scenographic knowledge — a knowledge that can be used aesthetically, ethically and didactically. It might be a provocation for emotional learning and for working together.

According to art researcher David Best, the artistic experience is characterized as an emotional and cognitive

shock (Rationality of Feeling, 1992). So we are not dealing with a dichotomy of opposites, but with a complementary relationship. Best uses the term “emotional learning”. “Performing for somebody” is always experienced as a very important “emotional and cognitive shock,” regardless of the institutional teaching context. Here is a cathartic effect that seems to strengthen both social and subject-specific elements and augment a special “frustration sturdiness”. The point of departure for the stories of animation theatre may be found in both fact and fiction. Both the formal-linguistic and the image-creating dimensions are essential and take place through cooperation and through the characteristic metaphors and metamorphoses of the animation figure. The researcher Anni Gilles calls this a “dual mirror” (“Le jeu de la marionette – L’objet intermédiaire et son métathéâtre”). She claims that the figure is the bearer of both identification and projection on the part of the player as well as the spectator. This renders the theatre form generous, but also demanding. But the performer’s integrity is still protected in a special way as responsibility can be attributed to the performing figures or objects. The animated figure communicates through a permanent alienation and, in principle, this places performers and spectators on equal footing, both in terms of the figure and the story. The figure functions as raw material for communication and, as such, become an appropriate medium of dialogical pedagogy.

Recent research into the functioning of the brain shows important results for communication through an animation figure (Raab, Thomas: “Når bevægelse bevæger”, Rapport om projektet OutCasts, 2008). We communicate through our language, through the mime of our face and through our body language. But these expressions are often contradictory. Here actors’ theatre is especially complicated because the actor has his own mime and history with him, so to speak. The puppet or animation object is empty and free from prejudices and therefore this communication can be much clearer. Researchers find a mirror neuron system of great interest for the understanding of how our brains function. This shows that a movement and an action is reflected in a sort of mirror in our brain when we are watching, for example, a performance. So, we are directly affected in our brains by the mime and body language — and feelings — of the other. But this mime has to be rather simple and animated — that means in a rhythm and not like the movements of a robot. This very clear communication can be highlighted in animation theatre. To cultivate this knowledge might be an important way to understand the emotions of other people and — maybe — for our development of empathy.

4. Humor and Utopia

The figures of animation theatre have a powerful ability to fascinate. This is true of all basic figures, regardless of their shapes and sizes. Humor seems to be one of the driving forces in the work. All participants — teachers and students — talk about humor in connection with the study of animation, regardless of whether it involves children or adults. Humor breaks with habitual thinking and paves the way for positive “breaches of pattern”. Humor is related to the joy of life and it touches upon the basis of all learning.

There seems to be a close connection between humor, imagination and the fantastic. The metaphors and metamorphoses of animation theatre are by nature surprising, and they amuse both children and adults because they turn the things that we thought we had under control topsy-turvy. The figures are surreal, but — in contrast to the animated film — they move about in a real space in an interplay with the human body. The stories and movements make use of their own kind of fiction. I call them utopian, in the etymological sense of the word: i.e., that which has no place and, in addition to this, in accordance with Ernst Bloch’s notion of utopia, which assumes a dimension of yearning and hope (“Geist der Utopie”, 1964).

The figures of animation theatre are challenging because they are omni-competent. Thus they become powerful signs of human action, possible as well as impossible. In the animation figure we witness the natural sizes and proportions of the body being altered completely and the laws of gravity suspended. The utopian element also relates to the movements of the players when they move the figures during play. So the utopian element also covers the set and the often unusual visual angles the plays are seen from. Certainly, performances of animation theatre may be generally characterized by this utopian feature. The characteristic features of figurative language in the aesthetics of animation theatre and communication contribute to the development of an imagination, which I shall term “the utopian imagination”. It is essential to stimulate the “utopian imagination” in education, because it points towards the development of divergent thinking and supplements constructive, reconstructive, and compensatory types of imagination. The typical formal language of animation theatre rests in these utopian features. Along with the theatre-form’s practical-aesthetic fields of work, theories, and methods of communication, these subject-specific features constitute a great potential for children’s learning and social life in the 21st century.

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