



OPENING BORDERS!¹

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¹ Presentation talk in the context of Cross Media Arts (1 st International Conference on Social Arts and Transdisciplinarity) held on Évora, 24/25 June 2016.

ABSTRACT

On the centenary of Yehudi Menuhin we want to enlighten the role of this artist in rescuing artistic practices of cultural minorities and its contributions to fight against violence, racism and xenophobia at European schools and communities. This was his big dream and inspired intervention during the last twenty years in many different countries through the MUS-E Project (Muses Europe / Artists in schools).

We discuss in this paper the role of social arts in cultural diversity contexts and we will point Key methodological

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features used in a particular training in action process of MUS-E artists, who worked both in schools and in the community from an interdisciplinary artistic approach producing the Fantastic Imaginary Fair.

Keywords:

Community participation; interdisciplinary artistic approaches; fighting violence and discrimination.

MINORIAS/MINORITIES

Setting the scene

The MUS-E Project (Muses Europe / Artists in school) is an artistic, social and educational project created by Yehudi Menuhin, a great musician, and, above all, a great citizen. He was an outstanding violinist since childhood and became a world acclaimed maestro on the second part of his long life. His career was built over a fundamental vision of universality; he considered himself a citizen of the world. He worked over a vast repertoire from Bach, Ravel and Beethoven to modern music, with passages through baroque music and jazz improvisations. He enjoyed sharing and spreading all kinds of diverse music. His deep interest and respect for different cultures and musical genders led him to play with Ravi Shankar, as well as with anonymous gypsy musical groups, who he helped to promote.

As a true humanist he worried through his life with the great issues of humankind in the twenty century. He determined himself to assume a political an active role in the implementation of a democratic education and in the defence of the rights of minority groups. This constant struggle was recognized when he was entitled Lord and won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979.

He defended the idea of a plural Europe that could grow peacefully together and that by the practice of the arts since early childhood, it would be possible to promote tolerant European citizens. Based on this thought and vision he started the MUS-E Project.

"C'est en rébellion contre les phénomènes de réduction, qui touchent la dignité, la valeur, l'originalité, la créativité des êtres humains, que j'ai créé une Fondation Internationale qui porte mon nom." (Menuhin, 1999)

The MUS-E Project aims are: to promote the benefits of cultural diversity, through the contact with different background artists and experience the involvement in artistic creative processes; to increase respect among individuals and develop the sense of interdependence; to prevent racism, violence and subtle forms of discrimination.

Childhood is an important time for social learning (Hendrick, 1990) and the school is one of the most privileged places and time where children are more likely to apprehend skills related to social attitudes and interaction.

Menuhin believed that a child early artistic practice induced in a school environment, by teachers and artists, working around the definition of an artistic object, would enable children to promote their self-valorisation as individuals, therefore contributing to the construction of a more tolerant world (Menuhin, 1998).

According to Ardouin (1997), the access to artistic culture is the setting of humanity specially from the moment when the individual sees himself as a singular being and becomes conscious of the fact that knowledge and behaviours have its origin in a culture and are the results of human histories.

Today, Yehudi Menuhin's dream is being developed in 12 European countries, one of which is Portugal.



MUS-E Project Portugal.

MUS-E Project Portugal celebrates its twenty years of activity. Progressively, and since 1996, when a protocol was signed between Menuhin and the Ministry of Education, MUS-E Project Portugal has had a chance to grow and strengthen its intervention in different contexts across the country.

MUS-E Project bases its school and community intervention over the idea that the inclusion of cultural diversity, through the experience of art expression, contributes to increase greater respect between individuals.

To value diverse cultures and identities is to establish the possibility of presenting oneself with pride of being and belonging to a specific culture as well as being able to discover, share and reinvent new ways of doing and experiencing culture and reinventing identities.

The MUS-E Project assures the conditions for respect and tolerance to flourish by giving special attention to the context of socio-cultural diversity where each school centre is set, as well as taking special care in the process of recruiting artists to be part of the team.

Today, MUS-E Project Portugal incorporates a multidisciplinary team of 25 artists who, in their daily artistic activities begin to make sense of concepts such as: respect for diversity, cooperation and solidarity.

Évora is a southern city of Portugal with 70.000 inhabitants. Évora town centre is an UNESCO World Heritage city with monuments going back to Megalithic and Roman origins and is surrounded by a rich Mediterranean well preserved ecosystem. Évora population is not very diverse in terms of ethnic's origins, but the presence since a long time, off a Roma cultural group continues to bring challenges in terms of inclusion. Roma families live at the suburb social neighbourhood Cruz da Picada. It is in this context that the MUS-E Évora Project takes place since 1999.



The collaborative artistic process: a case-study

When studying the problems related to cultural differences, one has an imperative need to understand the part played by socio-economic differences over different social groups. The social issues gains greater significance in the affirmation of cultural identity.

il faut insister sur la nécessité de politiques de reconnaissance, dans lesquelles le problème est d'articuler des efforts pour satisfaire à des demandes ou des attentes d'ordre économique et social, et d'autres permettant de cesser de disqualifier par le mépris et la discrimination sociale et raciste des individus et des groupes. Une politique du sujet, ici, passe par des mesures d'équité sociale et de reconnaissance culturelle, elle peut appeler des efforts de médiation et de restauration de la communication partout où elle se défait et serompt au profit de logiques de rupture. (Wievorka, 2004, p.45)

In fact, typical situations of uprooting – and culture confrontation – lead to creation of ghettos. Many of the ambivalent feelings are directly connected with the notion of fidelity/treason, with the byname connection/rupture and also with the concept of identity. We are in the borderline of a cultural shock (Tavares, Pereira & Sousa, 1997). Moreover, there is an issue that concerns the education system itself that raises certain questions that need to be stated. These have to do with the difficult relation between school culture and family culture, especially in minority cultural groups like the Roma community. This opposition between two education systems that privileged different competences (family and school), not rarely incites the child to produce breakouts of anxiety and of real aggressiveness.

In fact, the work we carried out through the use of methodologies of intercultural/transcultural approach of the different forms of artistic practices, tries to deal, within the possible, with these kind of non-tolerant behaviour towards the other and towards what is different.

We will focus on the analysis of the key factors of a supervised training process of the Mus-E Artists, which was developed in the context of the MUS-E Évora Project. It will give you an account of the creative processes of specific artistic practices using one of the most relevant examples – the Fantastic Imaginary Fair) co-produced with PIM Theatre Group and it will point out its implications in the community.

Inspired by the work of Menuhin we believed that this type of intervention, via the creation of artistic and aesthetic objects of interdisciplinary nature, could empower the community and reinforce partnerships between local agents and institutions.

The research took place at Cruz da Picada Primary School and neighbourhood, during 3 years. The project involved artists, students and teachers, as well as social workers, volunteers, families and other community members. A group of 8 artists worked in an interdisciplinary perspective including the areas of music, theatre, dance and the visual arts. The research project was structured into the following phases: 1st, interviews with artists, students, teachers and parents were conducted in order to get their ideas about the cultural practices of their community and how they saw integration and inclusion issues in the school programmes and in the artistic practices. The second and broader phase was the development of a supervised collaborative training in action process carried out by the artists' team and the teachers while working with the school children. In the end another set of interviews was conducted in order to get the participants' views of the project process and results.

While intervening in the development of children and adults, and while intervening in the school context, establishing a system of practices, relations, norms and values, the MUS-E Project reveals to be a fertile ground for research involving the experiences of its participants: children, teachers, artists, families and community. We see the artists' personal reflection as an essential training condition. We developed this research process inspired in "Community of Practices" (Wenger & Snyder, 2001), which provided a collaborative support for an on-going reflection on the practice work of artists (arts based research).

At the beginning, supportive guiding was given to artists in their dance, drama and music workshops, in order to adapt their actions to the specific multicultural context. A review of literature, prior to the research launching, had a double purpose: it helped to situate our research problematic and it provided a deeper understanding of the specificities of the Roma culture, whilst providing artists with sources of motivation for their work.

The collaborative training support process was realized through a supervision cycle, connected to the needs expressed in the interviews, as a way of overcoming the difficulties detected by the artists. Immediate willingness to start up a cooperative training programme was felt amongst all elements of the team, who spontaneously came up with workable material from different sources and designed a preparatory plan for the artistic work sessions. After the assemblage and conclusion of the first formal work cycle, the project came to a point of no return, winning the will to continue. And it happens along 3 years.

To frame our intervention it became necessary to look at the contemporary perspectives in multicultural artistic education, to ensure that the same range of opportunities in the field of art is offered to all children, through the use of shared diverse artistic programmes. Stout (1997) stands for the idea that artistic programmes should be thought with diverse contents, suggesting, at the same time, that the process should enhance skill acquisition directly related to critical thought in opposition to a social equalitarian vision. The intercultural artistic education approach considers that the existence of projects that promote a better knowledge of multicultural art production, such as “Artists-in-Schools Projects”, is extremely positive. The families inclusion and participation, is also a source of positive impact and a way to increase levels of specific cultures and arts interchange.

This intervention should focus on the factors inherent to the valorisation of cultural diversity, through the inclusion of elements and materials of diverse cultural expression in MUS-E artistic performance. Furthermore, Michael Rosen (2014) points out some quality conditions for artistic projects developed with children:

“... children and young people involved in the arts should: 1) have a sense of ownership and control in the process; 2) have a sense of possibility, transformation and change – that the process is not closed with pre-planned outcomes; (...) 5) feel there is a flow between the arts, that they are not boxed off from each other; 6) feel they are working in an environment that welcomes their home cultures, backgrounds, heritages and languages; (...) 10) be encouraged to think of the arts as including or involving investigation, invention, discovery, play and co-operation and to think that these happen within the actual doing, but also in the talk, commentary and critical dialogue that goes on around the activity itself.” (Rosen, 2014)

In this quote Rosen highlights the relevance of individual differences, and the valorisation of the contribution of individual performance, apart from the group of belonging was also a major concern. This is an issue of particular importance in promoting the individual richness of personal expression, creativity and art creation.

Data was collected through direct observation, interviews and field notes on the supervised collaborative training support of artistic practices. These sets of data registered in the course of the project, were analysed and discussed allowing to point out the key characteristics of this kind of practices which may draw a set of guidelines towards a better school and community artistic practices.

Let us now focus our discussion on a specific result of this artistic collaborative project.



MINORIAS/MINORITIES

“A Feira do Imaginário” (The Fantastic Imaginary Fair)

“The Fantastic Imaginary Fair” is a story of a creative adventure shared by artists, children and adults not easily defined: A partnership between artists and the community? Art education experience? Training or transformation artistic action? Creative processes in contemporary art? Perhaps it has to be defined within and beyond all these possibilities.

This project was developed by a set off partnerships, which created the human, artistic, technical, and financial conditions that made it possible:

School /MUS-E + ACIME (Ethnical Minorities Integration High Commission)

MUS-E/artists /PIM Teatro/EPRE (Évora Detention Centre)

Artists/children/school staff/families/social workers/
volunteers/community

In such a peculiar fair one could find just about anything for *sail*: fears and magical potions; wishes and flying hats; dreamed chairs and talking books. There, one could encounter musicians, jugglers, acrobats, and monsters...a setting so familiar to most of these children, many of them descendants of Roma, sons of shrewd merchants (Bezelga, Espiridião & Carvalho, 2007).

Figure 1 Feira do Imaginário, Pç Sertório, Mus-E Project, Évora, 2006.



We thought of a fantasy fair because we wanted to create a truly new fair, made especially for us, completely thought out by each one of us... each artist work, according to their own set of methodologies and techniques, towards the realization of this artistic object, full of uncertainty and unknown...(A1)

We made it into a fair because it was pertinent to take that specific community's socio-cultural characteristics into account. That community's main professional occupation has to do with fair commercial activity.

We thought of a fair where children could sell their products, in an environment of freedom and creativity, reflecting some experiences well known to them – the fair, their favourite place of meeting and mingling, their place of initiation in terms of social, professional and family spheres.

In the texts written by these children, we could perceive their real prospective will/wish of having financial profit out of their sale. This became a real matter of careful examination and we tried to find ways of preventing real money be used. Together we invented a sort of currency, which was not real money, and at the same time was not fictitious. So we created a rather real, useful, valuable currency made of glass bits and pieces, gold and silver nugget imitations, precious little things.

The performance structure we used for this project seemed to us to be the most appropriate, as it was absent of most small constraints of a show production. It is not necessary to rehearse a fair!

A fair is the place of improvising, of strange unpredictable noises, words. It is a place of effective communication, face to face. It is a chaotic place of colour and contrast.

Figure 2 Performance at Pç Sertório, Mus-E Project, Évora, 2006.



In terms of creative processes, each artist worked creativity/imagination with their groups (teacher and students), according with their age, school level interests and skills, and according to the artist's own resources (artistic memory of past experiences, "pedagogical toolkit"). Also, the artist's own personal work, carried out in a non-school context, positively

contaminated his work with the children.

Some of the artistic objects of "The Fantastic Imaginary Fair" were devised in laboratory process.

For instance, we should bear in mind that some of that children have or had relatives in prison, and that some of those prisoners have family attachments with children from that school. So, we invented a communication channel for those separated families. The stalls of The Fantastic Imaginary Fair, were imagined and projected into drawing plans, built by a group of prisoners from EPRE (Évora Detention Centre), assembled by Inês de Carvalho, a theatre designer and a MUS-E artist.



Figures 3/4/5 Stalls EB Malagueira and Pç do Sertório, Mus-E Project, Évora, 2005/2006.

Another successful artistic experience was the construction of magical books. A book is an object that can provide access to wider worlds, enabling us to live parts of other lives, observe and understand the things of the world with wider opened eyes. The children built book-boxes plenty of stories.

The process of transformation of simply ordinary objects, like the old chairs picked up at the municipality warehouse, afforded many worlds in which each one dreamed!

“After full working days in an untied room (where brushes were left unclean, odd materials and objects popping up here and there) inhabited by excited children and overwhelmed adults... The objects happened, different, special and unique. Themselves. Personal. Filled with life, story and powerful magic. Common objects, looked before as vulgar trash, now unique phenomena that anyone would want to possess. Chairs became aeroplanes or carriages and by saying the right words, they could takes us where no travel agency dear imagine...” (Espiridião, 2008)

Figure 6/7/8 Work in progress Chairs, EB1 Cruz da Picada, Mus-E Project, Évora, 2005.

(atenção que a foto daqui está em baixo no final da página)

Figure 9/10 Transformed Chairs, EB1 Cruz da Picada, Mus-E Project, Évora, 2005.



To “The Fantastic Imaginary Fair” came parents, other relatives and friends, people from our community and from further out. All surrendered to the fair, let be surprised, touched. They all bought objects and addressed teachers and school workers with a friendly smile and kind words.



It was one of these rare moments where parents / relatives come together and felt really proud for their children's school achievements.

In the end we were left with empty stalls but everyone had something precious inside their hearts!

Public presentation of a performance (as a result of the project/research) is quite often very desired by the project participants and its community, as well as by the project financial sponsors. Quite frequently this constitutes an obstacle to the practices considered more effective to the artist/community relationships. It is too often observed that practical situations imposed by this kind of pressure, commonly felt by artists in the context of their professional environment, reveal as restraining factor to the children (part distribution – the fixed characters and theatre scenes, the repetitiveness of rehearsals). Something is sacrificed in the course of this process, sometimes the pleasure, sometimes the quality of the artistic product and sometimes even the process itself...

We aimed for the balance between the quality of the process and the quality of the result, standing for the idea that drama practice should be a source of pleasure. Promoting manifest artistic and aesthetic quality that reaffirm the group as a whole and that permit successful experiences.

Figure 11 Performance at Pç. do Sertório, Mus-E Project, Évora, 2006.



We always take the challenge of maintaining a partnership to the last consequences, by considering that the best outcome of the presence of

artists in the school context happens within the creative process level, where the roles of the artists and the children are negotiated and mingle.

We hope that those moments/experiences be liberating, transforming, revealing, can lead to new forms of learning and being. It was indeed a successful experience, that excited us and continues to do so, and that we want to share with others.

There was, clearly, the intention of the participants to tell their stories, share their world with others. And it is clear that these stories bear the weight of their liveable experience, becoming a creative, expressive communication. Like Matarrasso (2017) says about participatory art:

(It is) “(...) structured around the creation of an artwork by professional and non-professional artists. It is that partnership in creation (...) because it is the creation of art, participatory art has three other shared characteristics: - a theoretical and aesthetic framework that guides those who make it happen; - a duration in time, with a beginning, a middle and an end; and - a presentation of the work created” (Matarrasso, 2017)

There was creation, appropriation, reflection, projection, realization and, finally, communication. “The Fantastic Imaginary Fair” was the result of a dream that had the opportunity to come true. And it surely did! Surpassing all expectations.

FINAL REMARKS

It's time now to underline some aspects of this artistic collaborative research and its impact in the participants, particularly the children and the artists.

It is important to underline the “motivation aspect” present throughout the work, felt not only by the artists but also by the children, teachers, and other participants, which revealed decisive for a “well-being atmosphere at school”. This is the baseline ethos from which children as well as adults can find the disposition to work, to discover, to share their knowledge and experiences and engage in deep processes of learning. The power of the artistic languages to connect and exteriorize (Bruner, 2001) the children's own desires, thoughts, subjective worlds and dreams was paramount in giving an opportunity to raise their own voices. This was what Menuhin

believed and taught us in his exemplar life creating opportunities to ear “the voice of the voiceless” (Menuhin, 1999).

The collaborative process of this artistic project seemed to had a contribution into both children’s motivation to school and their ability to self-regulate their behaviour. The children, who used to miss school, progressively began to come to school for the purpose of attending a dance or theatre workshop. We can also consider that children’s expressive/artistic skill improvements expressed on the quality of the joint-products and their ability to pursue the work for long periods (even after school time) occur, in our view, due to the change and adaptation of methodologies in specific situations related to their own cultural experiences, as Eisner’s ideas on academic achievements’ of children who are not connected with the “school culture”(Eisner, 1998).

For the artists, this process contained a chance to “feel as active elements of a team”, and also to “become aware of their social and educative part” along with the artistic part, which defined the artistic action itself. By finding a direction and by “making sense” of their work in the context of a collective shared work process, the artists were repositioned in a plan of belonging, which levelled their position to that of other elements who intervene in the school context. The artists’ views, opinions and suggestions towards events that take place in school, “gained weight and respect”.

The arts based research proved to be an exceptional opportunity to try out the practice of new methodologies in art education. In the case of drama, for instance, the planning of the experience worked as an encouragement for the artist to take on research and update his/her knowledge, and prepare his pedagogical intervention from a solid conceptual and theoretical support. As the work developed in the four main artistic areas the borders started to fade in order to serve primarily exploration and valorisation of various field of interest through collective artistic creation where cooperation between children and artists and between artists from different backgrounds emerge. According to the experience of artists at co-creative artistic practices develop a sort of team identity, promote professional network and questions the concept of individual authorship emphasizing creative partnership and interdependence.

Because this process was entirely built over the idea of team communication and exchange of real experiences, the whole project gained consistency and overcame the borderlines of the different artistic areas, drawing a path of confluences towards performative public events, with the participation of the whole community.

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