

WHO ASSESSED IT

ENTRADO – brief movements of a supervision in progress*²

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When PELE asked me to be a part of its ENTRADO team, it never occurred to me how interesting this professional and personal enterprise I would have the privilege to experience would be. Two and a half years after ENTRADO, I am again invited to give my opinion on this story. This was a story created by several speakers to whom different parts had been given. Mine was to “assess” or, as I prefer to put it, to supervise the project. This kind invitation, to which I now reply, is a written motivation to once more retell some of the passages of that story. I will do it by assuming a double role: as the professional, who at a certain point guided the several impressions left by all the participants; as the social actor, who is interested in creative processes of cultural and social basis, which in turn transform anonymous social actors into leading characters.

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When PELE and we started this collaboration, the purpose was to accompany the process of theatre creation which underlies the ENTRADO project. We wanted to do it not from the inside, from behind the prison walls, but from the outside, keeping a relative distance from the actors, from the micro-spaces and time, from the relationships which, in the meantime, had developed between inmates, the artistic team and the prison board and further elements of the EPP. The first movement of the story was the decision that this observation would focus itself on the perceptions, the experiences, the affections, the expectations, the speeches of those actors without any in loco interferences in a territory that would be closer and more natural to the direct actors, already integrated in this environment, than to ourselves. So, our first moment of observation – in the sense of the confrontation with the social environment we were dealing with – was the moment of the routine conversations with the artistic team and the moment of the careful and guided reading of documental sketches produced by the team, the inmates and all other participants. We did this between December 2009 and September 2010. During this same period, along with other movements set on different tempos, we interviewed 12 of the institutional actors involved and we did 17 inquiries to some of the inmates who took part in this project (17 out of a possible 32), we registered the participating direct observation during the public performances of the play and we analysed the various documental sources related to the project.⁴

² * This text is the result of an external assessment of the theatre project ENTRADO, assessment made between December 2009 and July 2011, within the partnership established between PELE and the Sociology Institute of the Faculty of Letters, Porto University (FLUP). Tânia Machado, a Sociology Master's Degree student at FLUP, contributed to this assessment process with the treatment of the gathered information. This text is written according to the rules of the old orthographic agreement.

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⁴ The application of the interviews and the inquiries continued throughout 2011 given some time and

With the external supervision of this project, we soon acknowledged its particularities: on the one hand, the singularity of the Thespian art as a mechanism of a co-process of cultural creation (creators, inmates, social and educational collaborators, prison guards and the prison director); on the other hand, the difficulties in making this project visible and feasible within the institutional prison context. These difficulties originated not only on the logic of how this institution operates – a prison, the EPP –, but also on the opposition of different actors, both internal and external to the prison context. However, the time this process took transformed it gradually in a project which was shared, conquered and built by all participants.

Today, the analysis that we make of this first movement highlights precisely the first impression of the story: it was a “Once upon a time” very difficult to start. But, after it started, it acquired the necessary importance on its own: in the prison, at PELE, at the IMAGINARIUS Festival, in the media, among the chats in the prison corridor, among the guards, the social rehabilitation collaborators, among the directors, the artistic team; in the spaces among which news circulated of “a play made inside a prison with inmates”... and, especially, when this theatre project ended.

We can say that the primary goals of this project have been achieved. Without disclosing the where and the who, there is a common opinion about ENTRADO amid the actors who participated in it. Firstly, we emphasize: turning the daily routine in the prison into something different, the change in the way these inmates look at themselves under this “new condition of playing their own part” light, the amplification of the potential of self-esteem and motivation in each actor, the boost to the collective work of creating a text and of having the know-how of how to be on stage, based in task sharing and in the respect for one another. We'd say being able to visualize a temporary and episodic collective catharsis about guilt and forgiveness. The fact that the inmates were responsible for building the plot around guilt and forgiveness has shown us this possibility, almost an attempt, to give a new dimension to their life choices, the misfortunes in their personal, family and professional trajectories. Basically, to have an outlook on the place each one of them has living in society. Secondly, and in another dimension, the creation of the play and the way it was conceived as a means of generating proximity between the prison and the outside community and the new establishment of the common negative representations this same community has about what prison is and what inmates are.

The second movement of this project analysis, the rehearsals movement, validates these components even further. For some months and under the conditions ordered by the prison's direction – once a week, on a stipulated day and time – the rehearsals were, according to the inmates, a liberating mechanism because they allowed them to experience a certain freedom, mainly mental and affective, inside a secluded place. Not only were they taken to spaces which they identified as outside the “prison areas” to rehearse at unusual times for them, but they also did it with people who didn't belong to the prison, who regarded the interaction with the inmates according to standards (respect and equality) somewhat different from the ones by the prison establishment. That made them sometimes forget the time and space they were in.

On the other hand, and according to the point of view of those who worked on this project presenting other dimensions – the creative and institutional feasibility- the rehearsals consolidated different perspectives as far as the development of this process was concerned. In a certain way, the financial hindrances associated to this project – insufficient resources, which weren't enough to stop the production; the institutional opposition, particularly from the prison, regarding the changes in the usual routines whenever the theatre invaded the prison space, and the practicality and the usefulness of such a project taking in consideration the characteristics of the target-population: male inmates, of different age groups and academic backgrounds, with unstructured family and social trajectories, and with social routes connected to the informal economy, to drug addiction and to organized crime and, consequently, socially excluded. From another perspective, the heavy working hours of the elements in charge of security and surveillance; the de-construction of the masculine stereotype and its proportional relation with the non-participation in theatre and singing activities; the lack of seriousness or the restrained seriousness of those who were closely watching the inmates' work; the relative distance of the prison direction when this project and its structural aspect were under discussion – the consolidation of a theatre group inside the prison. All these elements, which the analysis of the documental and non-documental materials allowed to track, were other characteristics which made some of the movements more unstable and more demanding in the logic of reciprocal negotiations between the several actors involved – institutional, social and educational and artistic.

The visual interest in this story acquires more definition when we move on to the third movement of the analysis of this process: the three days when ENTRADO was publicly presented. The direct observation and participation equally helped us in the attempt of following the project unfolding in loco, in physical, social and real time. For us, the outsiders, it was a “newcomers” experience too. For different reasons, of course, but still a temporary «newcomers’», which highlights other central features of the project. Once again, other particular characteristics of this project are emphasized: the movement of people inside an unconventional show venue; the recreation of a prison in a show venue for three days; the feeling we got we were momentarily occupying a space and a time which weren't ours, wandering through the prison labyrinth in the night; the tight security of those spaces and times, which did not diminish the fleeting sensation of freedom in the reception act of the play; the fact that we turned the reception of the cultural act into an analysis of what is and what isn't art; the privilege we had to be part of a reality which is not our own for some moments and, mainly, to be confronted with people in unequal and reversed roles. All of them. The ones who did the play; the ones who watched the play.

For the insiders, the ones who once had been “newcomers”, the leading actors, this was perhaps the most important moment. Useful, motivated, guilt free: this was how they felt during those nights facing the public. Probably in a temporary way, since the existence of this project didn't go beyond this third movement. Of the whole process, the three days of public performance of the play were the most significant moments highlighted by the inmates: for the emotions involved, which fluctuated between nervousness and the fear of failing and the personal satisfaction; for the

contact with relatives and friends and for the positive and enthusiastic reactions of the audiences who watched the play: the institutional, the theatrical, the social and educational, the academical, the anonymous... By voluntarily participating in this project, it was the inmates' intention to show their families new potential information: their old and new skills. For those who accompanied the inmates for the length of this process, these moments were the peak of the creative work developed by them: to take it from the time-space of the rehearsals to the time-space of public visibility.

At this point, a fourth movement of this analysis is sketched: what does remain besides the project itself, circumstantial and located in a definite time and space? As ENTRADO ended, so did the theatre activity in the prison. Among the inmates sadness, disillusionment and frustration; among the creative team the inability to change the contexts of negotiation between the EPP superior hierarchies; among the social and educational team and the guards, the explicit seriousness as far as the great potential of such projects in a prison context is concerned; among the board of direction the return to the previous logic of how a prison must be managed and the impossibility to change the final decision of its superiors.

This analysis puts us before the ambivalence of these creative processes. It shows us the positive characteristic of this project, the enrichment it allowed in terms of the development of crucial social skills for the future social rehabilitation, the inmates' feeling of pride and self-realization. It adds to it the fact that all the participants – inmates and artistic team – have reinforced their will in continuing with this project or in participating in similar projects within the prison context. They are much needed experiences, both in a personal and in a social level; they are ways of demystifying the stereotypes which are usually associated with the prison population; they are ways to co-discover skills that the inmates themselves didn't know they had, they are moments when the prison routines are broken, due to the fact that inmates socialize with each other and with the artistic team. This familiarity created during the several movements of the project represented the development of feelings of friendship, empathy, solidarity and trust among the participants – lay and expert. According to the participants, ENTRADO was the reflex of the construction of a motivating and successful group work, which made feelings of pride and self-worthiness emerge.

However, this project has another dimension, which goes beyond what is more immediate and circumstantial – the date of the end of the project and its dissolution as an experience to be kept active in time. It is during these moments that we question ourselves on the following: where and how are these inmates? What has this project done in fact for these people? What remained from this project besides numbers, audiences, individual experiences, fleeting sensations, the reports and newscasts in the media, the public opinion reactions, the brief opening of the prison to the outside community...? What remained was, it seems to us, the possibility of these people – while inmates – experiencing an option made by themselves for a short moment in time: they voluntarily participated in a creative process. Even if it wouldn't a priori imply any immediate change in their life journey, inside or outside the prison. We are glad to think that such possibility was above all an experience in the daily life of a

prison, which was briefly changed, where they shared not only relational and technical skills, but also likes and interest for theatre and singing, which had been discovered in the meantime. As the inmates underlined in the notes of their inquiries: more than a great experience, for some of them it meant finding an artistic interest for theatre and singing, and they did not exclude the idea to put it into practice in the future; or, in other cases, a way of looking positively to the future, the outside world and the social rehabilitation. It gives us very much joy to believe that the story has features of an open ending.