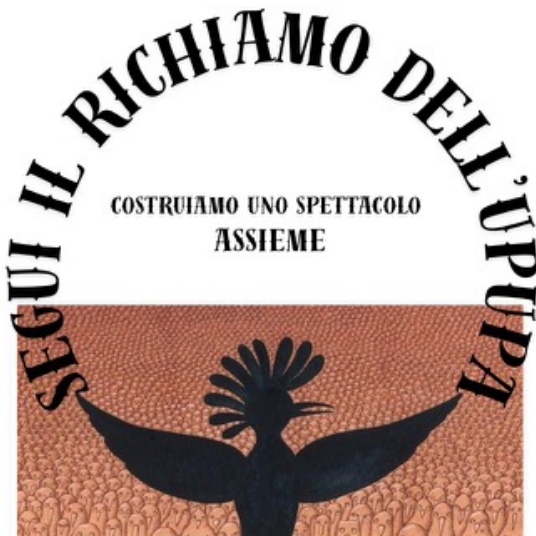


THE CONFERENCE OF THE BIRDS A THEATRE WORKSHOP AS A PSYCHOSYNTHETIC SPACE FOR ADOLESCENTS

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When the Psychosynthesis Centre of Brescia and Bergamo invited the young people to take part in the theatre workshop, the poster simply read: “Follow the call of the hoopoe. Let’s put on a show together”.

There was no indication of what we would be doing, or who would be there: it was all meant to remain a surprise. The choice of the word ‘assieme’(together) was no mere coincidence: it contrasts with ‘insieme’ – a mathematical concept of elements staying still in the same place – whilst ‘assieme’ indicates movement towards a place, moving in the same direction, just as a flock of birds does. That is exactly what happened, month after month, with this group of young people aged between fourteen and seventeen.

The first tangible sign of this shared movement came one evening, when the group entered the auditorium holding umbrellas from which small paper cranes were hanging: opening them and making them rotate slowly, as the music swelled, became the symbolic image of the show – a flock flying towards the Hoopoe. Behind that scene lay a whole year of weekly meetings, rehearsals, moments of silence, resolved conflicts and trust built step by step: it is from this workshop – born from the convergence of theatre and psychosynthetic educational counselling – that the project ‘Flying to Discover Ourselves: the Conference of the Birds’ emerged.

Giving voice to the inner world

The starting point was an ancient text, *The Conference of the Birds*, a 12th-century Persian poem attributed to the Sufi mystic Farid ud-Din Attar, which has also come down to us in Peter Sis’s illustrated version. The poem is, first and foremost, a response to the chaos and despair that oppress the world: faced with this bewilderment, the Hoopoe gathers the multitude of birds and invites them to set out in search of the lost king, the Simurgh, through seven valleys full of deadly pitfalls. Those who manage to cross them reach a place where few dare to go.

In the original work, there are more than thirty birds, and even the choice of which ones to bring to the stage was, for us, a first small exercise in psychosynthesis: a process of observing the characteristics of each bird, and what, one by one, they revealed about us and about the young people who would be playing them.



It is easy to see why this story speaks so directly to teenagers. Those who work with young people in this age group, recognises in each bird a part of themselves that the teenagers themselves embody: the Falcon who fears losing the status to which he is accustomed; the Parrot, a prisoner in a gilded cage that he mistakes for home; and the Turkey, convinced that his wings are not strong enough to fly. It is no coincidence that, in the version the young people wrote and staged, the Turkey asks the Hoopoe: “...Why do I always feel like

the weakest?”, and the answer is simple: “...Because you only look at the mud beneath your feet”. These are dialogues that the young people have rewritten in their own words, remaining true to their own feelings and to the struggle of looking within themselves to find their strengths rather than their weaknesses.

Adolescence as a threshold

Within the theoretical framework outlined by Roberto Assagioli, adolescence is viewed as a necessary evolutionary crisis: a time when the I seeks a new form, in which the individual is called upon to progressively redefine his or her personal and relational identity. The emotional fluctuations, uncertainties and even the rebellious tendencies typical of this phase are, from this perspective, expressions of a process of personality reorganisation, which requires patient support.

In our initial sessions with the young people, to begin this process of support, we started precisely with the figure of the hoopoe and its enigmatic call. I asked them what marvellous message, in their view, the hoopoe had uttered to persuade all the birds to gather and set off. The answers were immediate and evocative: some claimed it held a priceless secret, others believed it knew the location of a hidden treasure, and still others thought it possessed the magic formula to set everything right in the world.

The amazement in their eyes was genuine when I revealed the truth:” ... the hoopoe had promised neither riches nor magic spells; it had simply cried out ...Help!”.

This was precisely the invisible yet powerful thread running through the entire theatrical and human journey. The realisation that the most revolutionary and courageous act a human being can perform is not to prove oneself invincible or self-sufficient, but to have the audacity to ask for help. A gesture of humility and profound openness which, almost magically, sets life in motion and ensures that, on the other side of bewilderment, someone responds and comes to the rescue.

In an age that leaves young people with ever less of a safe space, far from the pressures of assessment, academic performance and judgement, one of the aims of this work – perhaps the most important one – is precisely

to help young people become better people, to the extent that they themselves allow us to do so. The outcome is not in our hands: we cannot determine it or guarantee it.

For a counsellor, helping means, above all, this: creating situations that are helpful, and then taking a step back, trusting in what will happen, and trusting that the answer already lies within the young people themselves.

The value of peer education

The peer group is where this reorganisation of identity truly takes place: it is the space in which the adolescents learn who they are, by experimenting with what happens if they leave the group, what they risk if they remain too within it, and how different they can be while still feeling seen. Many adolescent choices stem from what the group makes possible: at this stage of life, the peer group becomes a more powerful mirror than any adult, capable of guiding choices and behaviours more effectively than much well-meaning advice.

This is where peer education comes into play – a concept that emerged in the 1970s in the United States to discuss difficult issues with young people using a language more effective than that of adults – turning the traditional educational model on its head: it is the group members themselves who, in turn, become the protagonists of the process. For the counsellor, this means sharing the role of point of reference, helping everyone to discover the resources they already possess. It is an approach consistent with psychosynthesis, which upholds the idea that everyone can become, in their own way, a guide for someone else.

This involves creating the conditions for the group to

gain experience and reflect, with the adult acting as an attentive presence that ensures a sense of security. The counsellor thus acts as an external unifying centre: a temporary point of reference that helps each young person to rediscover, over time, their own inner centre.

Theatre: a workshop for growth

Theatre, with its deeply collective nature, has proved to be an ideal vehicle for all of this. From the very beginning, the methodological choice was clear: to build the show progressively, through the active participation of the young people themselves, in the dialogue, the set design, the costumes, the choice of music, and communication with the outside world. Each young person was able to find their own place in whatever they felt was closest to their heart and most fulfilling for them. Even the choice of which character to play, or to remain behind the scenes, was for many just as important as the performance itself: those who chose to work on set design or the technical side found the same recognition as those who chose to act, in a group where every role was of equal value.

This approach reflects a specific philosophy – the psychosynthetic approach – which prioritises the transformative process alongside the final outcome: the primary aim of the workshop has always been to foster processes of personal and relational awareness. The stage became a symbolic space where the teenagers were able to explore their own means of expression, free from the pressure of performance-based assessment typical of so many other contexts they experience, first and foremost at school.

*The young people experience
this journey through the
audacity of possibility*

– that is, the ability to remain true to their most authentic core amidst the complexities of adolescence. It is the courage, in the words the Hoopoe addresses to the Turkey, to look at one's own wings rather than the mud beneath one's feet. And in a theatre group, this boldness is always

practised in company: it is learnt by watching someone else discover it first, and it is passed on to those who come after.

The structure of the group, too, has reflected this philosophy: conceived as an open system, capable of welcoming new participants even once the programme has begun – a feature consistent with the educational nature of the project, which prioritises the experiential and relational dimensions.

In search of synchrony

Every session, before any rehearsal, began in the same way: a dance meditation dedicated to the cardinal points, designed to help each person find their centre and, at the same time, to ensure that the group began to move in unison. Once established, this ritual became much more than just a warm-up: some of the young people took it with them outside the workshop, and still use it today before a test or at times when they feel lost. We chose to bring it onto the stage too, making it part of the show itself. Equally important was the work on the music, chosen track by track from the young people's own suggestions, prioritising the pieces with which the whole group most identified.

Alongside words and music, there is the body: moments of mutual connection, just like activities such as painting, acting, writing poetry and telling stories. One of the aims behind all this is to build a network of relationships based on being and doing.



A community on the move

The workshop could not be confined solely to the relationship between the young people and their mentors: from the outset, it was conceived as an experience that would also involve the adults in the youngsters' lives. An important step was the work carried out with parents, through meetings dedicated to jointly exploring the educational aspects of the project and introducing some key concepts regarding adolescent dynamics, offering families a perspective on adolescence as a complex phase, yet one brimming with transformative potential. The Municipality of Sirmione also chose to support the project, providing the necessary venues for the weekly meetings and the final performance, with limited resources but with consistency.

This collaboration demonstrates, once again, how culture and theatre can be practical tools for social cohesion, the prevention of social hardship and the promotion of informed and free citizenship, and how a local authority can choose to invest – with limited resources but consistently – in a space designed for the youngest members of its community.

Making the programme free of charge was a deliberate ethical choice: to guarantee access to every young person, regardless of their family's financial circumstances, so that access to culture and the community remains a right. From this perspective, looking after a group of teenagers takes on a value that goes beyond the individual experience of the participants themselves, becoming a resource for the entire local community.

Pizza night

There is one sign, above all others, that convinces me that something genuine has truly happened in this first year: the choice of the theme for the programme starting next October is no longer mine alone. The young people got together and came round to my house with a piping-hot pizza, asking me what we would be doing this year. I already had a proposal ready, but it was the young ones who embraced it and made it their own, tweaking it and

making it far more engaging. A choice radically different from that of the year just ended; the next project will be dedicated to creating a show designed specifically for young children.

It is a shift in perspective that adds a whole new dimension to the entire process. Up to this point, the youngsters had been working on a text and its meaning for themselves, for their own age group, and in relation to their own questions. Now they will also learn to take it a step further: to take what they have understood and read, and adapt it so that it can be understood and embraced by those much younger than themselves. It is a valuable exercise: it means putting themselves in the shoes of the listener, finding simpler words and images while maintaining the depth of what they wish to convey, and feeling, for the first time, responsible for passing on a lesson, as well as receiving it.

I like to see this stage as the beginning of a sense of reciprocity: teenagers who, until recently, were the recipients of adults' attentive gaze, are now preparing to offer that same gaze to those who come after them.

Il mio canto libero (translated into: *My Free Song*. It is a very famous Italian song title)



One of the most delicate and important scenes in the

show is the opening one, where it is revealed that the Hoopoe is weary of the world. I had imagined it using shadow puppetry.

The young people, however, suggested a different approach: a montage of images, projected as a sequence of slides. The images they produced were powerful, charged with pathos, and at times unsettling. It was important to them that I welcomed them with an open mind: those images were their way of bringing to the stage the struggle they feel in observing a world which, in their eyes, often seems to be ablaze.

We chose to convey that same intensity to the audience right from the very start of the show.

But it is an openness that, scene by scene, transforms itself – both in the show and in the young people themselves – because, together, from that world in flames they managed to draw out points of reference and shared values, capable of restoring hope.

It is significant that the final song of the show was *Il mio canto libero* (My Free Song) by Lucio Battisti.

Hearing the young people sing it was a truly intense experience, but it was even more so when they came down into the audience, and adults, families and spectators of all ages stood up and formed, all together, a huge circle, becoming, for a few minutes, a flock in flight themselves.

A flight that never ends

I wanted to share this account with you because I believe it speaks to something broader about how psychosynthesis can be present in the world beyond its usual settings, even within a group of teenagers learning to trust one another.

This educational work thrives in the relational process it triggers in each participant, far beyond the theatrical performance that emerged from it: it remains an open, evolving experience, heading towards a future yet to be

written. If a group of teenagers has discovered – over a year of Tuesday evenings – that their wings were stronger than they thought, it is worth continuing to create spaces that allow other young people, in Sirmione as elsewhere, to make the same discovery.

As for me, this experience has confirmed that psychosynthesis is a living tool, applicable in the most diverse contexts, capable of bringing about genuine evolution both in the places where it is practised and in the people who apply it.

