

School objects and their contribution to dance education

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ABSTRACT: This reflection aims to compile the different school objects found during an ongoing research, which purpose is to determine the Escola Superior de Dança path. Preliminary and deductive reflections may arise from this object list and from the experience as a former student and as a current teacher in this institution. Within the scope of dance education and in the higher education context, we believe that the Escola Superior de Dança path may also be determined through the use that teachers and students do of school objects, believing that education improvement is also based on the ability to use and re-use them nowadays.

1. INTRODUCTORY NOTE

This article aims to briefly present and explain some of the school objects found during the research conducted under the research project “The Escola Superior de Dança path, in the Higher Education context, through the mapping of school objects”. The selection of these school objects, showed below, tries to be representative of the scientific areas that largely, but not exclusively, compose the 3-Year Undergraduate Degree in Dance of the School of Dance. Whenever possible, even though in an early stage, we will try to draw some inferences about the particular use of each object.

2. BRIEF HISTORY OF ESCOLA SUPERIOR DE DANÇA

However, first it is important to clarify the context of the ongoing research. Thus, this research was conducted in the Escola Superior de Dança of Instituto Politécnico de Lisboa (IPL), hereinafter refereed as ESD. The ESD was established in 1983 when the artistic education was reformed. This is one of two dance schools in Portugal with higher education offer, and the only one in the polytechnic system. Its activities started in the National Conservatory building, together with other artistic schools. In the mid-90’s, it moved to Palácio do Marquês, also in Bairro Alto neighbourhood. Nowadays, and most recently, a brand-new building is expected. In the meantime, since March 2018, it is temporarily located in the Campus of Instituto

Superior de Engenharia de Lisboa of IPL (Escola Superior de Dança, 2018).

Over its more than three decades of higher education in dance, ESD underwent several reforms of its education offer as a result of its reconfiguration. In the mid-80’s, outlined by the Decreto-Lei [*Decreed-Law*] n. 310/03, on 1st July, the Bachelor’s Degree in Dance opened with two branches: Education – targeting dance education and teacher education; and Performance – aiming to train interpreters/ ballet dancers and creators (Portaria [*Ordinance*] n. 648/86, on 31st October). Ten years later, in a first stage, the Specialized Studies Higher Course (also named CESE) opened and, later, in 1998, as the result of the publication of the Portaria [*Ordinance*] n. 413-A/98, on 17th July, it was possible to award the 4-Year Undergraduate Degree in Dance, with two branches like the previous Bachelor’s Degree. In the mid-2000’s, with the adaptation of the studies’ plan to the Bologna Treaty, the Degree in Dance (DD) course was restructured and the Interpretation/Creation branch became dominant (Despacho [*Order*] n. 1255/07, on 25th January). From this point forward, several other courses emerged such as the Master’s Degree in Methodologies of Dance Education and the Master’s Degree in Contemporary Choreographic Creation, which were eventually closed. Only the Master’s Degree in Dance Education (MDDE) is currently running. This new conversion of the higher courses establishes a progression between these two degrees and moves towards a more generic initial training and later the specialization.

However, and going back to the scientific areas, it is important to clarify that DD has three great areas,

namely Interpretation/Creation, Analysis and Contexts, and Project. If, on the one hand, the Interpretation/Creation and Project areas focus on practical Curricular Units (such as Dance Techniques, Repertory Studies or Composition, among others), on the other hand, Analysis and Contexts assemble the theoretical and theoretical-practical domains (such as History of Dance, Anthropology of Dance, Anatomophysiology, Kinesiology, etc.). It is in this subdivision that some researched school objects will be presented. These objects aim to improve the teaching-learning process, creating other links of identification, perception, reflexion, autonomy, creativity capable of stimulate new ways of thinking and acting on behalf of the technical and artistic development of the students (Mogarro, 2012/2013).

3. RELATIONSHIP OF THE SCHOOL OBJECTS

3.1. *In the scope of the theoretical and theoretical-practical curricular units*

To explain the trajectory of the ESD it is necessary to analyse the school objects in “action”; in this way, when "they are in the context of their use that make the teachers and the students, they become powerful instruments to illuminate the pedagogical practices, in the classroom and daily routines" (Mogarro, 2012/2013, p. 88).

In the scope of the theoretical curricular units, the human skeleton prototype (Figure 1.), used in the Anatomophysiology and Kinesiology classes, stands out. Due to its fragile characteristics, this object has been replaced over the years. However, it is the same archetype used since the beginning of ESD. Therefore, and although the research results are still unknown, we believe that this object is still used today due to the fact that the curricular units are still taught by the same teacher and that the object clearly illustrates the characteristics and the identification of the bone system (in full-scale), which has remained the same in the human body for hundreds of years.



Figure 1. The human skeleton prototype

Other of the objects used, in a Production module of the Project curricular unit's, is a model of a theatre stage (Figure 2.). Like the skeleton, in this case in a smaller scale, it shows the basic structure of a theatre stage with removable parts (for example, drapery, scenery, lighting sticks). Although the morphology of the theatres has been readjusted over the years, particularly at the end of the 20th and 21st centuries, a traditional organisation still exists, which broadens the options chosen by choreographers, directors, among others. Thus, this is an object, which has been used for over a decade.

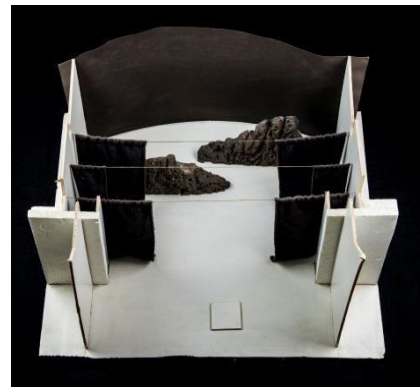


Figure 2. Model of a theatre stage

3.2. *In the scope of the practical curricular units*

Targeting the practical classes and particularly the ones, which are the basis of the ballet dancer or interpreter training, the barre is used in the classic dance technique classes. The barre can be made of wood or metal and is usually fixed on a wall of a dance studio, but it can also be portable. Barres are placed a little above the waist and allow students to support themselves when doing isolated exercises working different parts of the body. There is an individual notion of this body core and strength training, which later allows a more conscious core work of the ballet dancer, this is, without the barre support. So, there is a previous work of psychomotor development with barre support that promotes the body development and its actions, later linked to the performance (Kassing & Jay, 2003). Although it has been used for about 400 years, a highly systematized and formalized technique, the barre can also be used in other techniques with this central objective of the individualized work of the body, developing psychomotor skills, fundamental to the performance.

As dance education in contemporaneity is ruled by processes of movement transmission and/or by democratic processes, in which the student has an autonomy guided by a teacher, it is important to talk about the object explored in the class Seminars-Conferences in MDDE and occasionally in other curricular units of DD. This tool, named “Mind and Movement” (Figure 3.), was developed by the English choreographer Wayne McGregor. He built a box with a set of cards, which systematized his

methods and processes, creating a guide to convey his work (and legacy), as Almeida (2009) states “(...) to bring to surface nuances of the past that may be forgotten and sometimes are unattainable in other forms of documentation” (p.216). This tool guides the user in using the sensations and the images leading thus to different performative results from the different instructions written in the cards, creating a wide range of actions and ways of operating concerning contemporary interpretation and creation (Leach & deLahunta, 2015).



Figure 3. Box: “Mind and Movement”

4. CONCLUSIONS

Many other objects were found in this research that can be framed in work categories and student records (Cordova, 2016) and even others that can be found in virtual platforms (Kessel, 2014), namely support textbooks and student registrations in curricular units of Anatomophysiology, Kinesiology, Movement Notation and Analysis, and Dance Pedagogies and Methodologies on which theoretical and theoretical-practical curricular units are based. VHS and DVD videos and, with the development of the new technologies, online videos (for example, youtube and vimeo) are objects of support of the curricular unit Repertory Studies, since they have “become” school objects after they had become a record tool of a dance product or a process. As Máximo-Esteves (2008) refers “(...) they are the methodological tools that teachers use more often to record observation data” (p.88). In addition, we selected others such as of dance notation scores, a record and “visualization” version used in the pre-technology era, or models of benchmark diagrams of the technique of classic dance. Contrary to the prototype of human skeleton, this downsizes the perspective of a dance studio to a scale where it is possible to have a global view of all directions used in the performative practice and in the subject learning from a particular vocabulary that allows the clearly identification of certain movements (Foster, 2006).

However, all these objects have a vital role, namely supporting the student development, triggering their skills of reflection, analysis, identification, perception, autonomy, creativity for a later transposition to the body according to different performative acts (Kassing & Jay, 2003). As arts education is highly changeable, it is expected that the finding and the approach of the different school objects may also be different over the almost 40 years of dance training in ESD. Many generations of teachers went through ESD; many education perspectives were scientifically improved... But all of them play a role in the history of a national reference institution that can be mapped, as it is the aim of this research. It is true that the working instrument and tool in dance – the body – has remained the same. It is also true that there has been an obvious evolution in dance throughout its history and in its contexts like the ritual dances, contemporary social and theatrical dances. However, one speculates that the teaching approach is different as a result of an inevitable evolution not just in the scientific areas but also in the artistic areas. It is under this light that this research finds its focus, understanding the “how was it?” and “how is it?” through future interviews conducted to teachers and students of different generations. If, on the one hand, “the same reality may be approached in numerous ways” (Godinho, 2007, p.10), on the other hand, what defines the school object is its intentionality (Souza, 2007). But would we all innovate throughout our process as teachers? Would we change our approaches, but keep our objects? Would the change of objects grant a better teaching-learning process? Or would the approach to the same objects reveals an intimate relationship between the past and the present, this is, the contemporaneity set by Agamben (2009)? Surely, teachers use objects in order to solve an identified problem, since “all pedagogical problems are about finding a suitable procedure to guide the students in their training process” (Batalha, 2004, p.123). There are many questions to be answered and that currently hover over this research. Therefore, believing in this contemporaneity, it is important to invoke the anthropologist Vieira (2011) in the education and cultural diversity context stressing that “in the contemporary world the old and the new, the local and the global, the modern and the traditional, the universal and the particular coexist, producing a cultural heterogeneity connected to individuals no longer defined by unified and stable entities, but by opposite and continuously displaced entities” (pp.144-145).

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