

# Flash in mob

## Art shows cultures from different lifescapes

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### Abstract

*The paper presents a collective and participatory research endeavour within the theatrical production "MoltiMe 2023 - Flash in Mob". The primary objective of this research was to explore the role of art as a cultural phenomenon, in which the researchers assumed dual roles as participants and conductors<sup>1</sup>. Drawing upon the notion that cultures are inherently characterised by multiple identities, we interpret culture as an experience of relational and situated belonging. These affiliations are deeply embedded within lived relationships, constantly undergoing a process of mutual recognition, negotiation, and contestation. The researchers discuss the experience and performances engendered by their involvement, underpinned by the pedagogical intent of questioning the theatre project's transformative influence.*

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Il contributo presenta un percorso di ricerca collettiva e partecipata all'interno della produzione teatrale "MoltiMe 2023 - Flash in Mob". L'obiettivo primario di questa ricerca era esplorare il ruolo dell'arte come fenomeno culturale, in cui i ricercatori hanno assunto il doppio ruolo di partecipanti e conduttori. Partendo dal concetto che le culture sono intrinsecamente caratterizzate da identità multiple (Sökefeld, 2001), interpretiamo la cultura come un'esperienza di appartenenza relazionale e situata. Queste affiliazioni sono profondamente radicate nelle relazioni vissute, costantemente sottoposte a un processo di riconoscimento reciproco, negoziazione e contestazione. I ricercatori discutono l'esperienza e le performance generate

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dal loro coinvolgimento, sostenuti dall'intento pedagogico di mettere in discussione l'influenza trasformativa del progetto teatrale.

Keywords: theatre experience, MultiMe, narration, human mobility, auto-ethnographic

Parole chiave: esperienza teatrale, MultiMe, narrazione, mobilità, autoetnografica

## **1. Theatre as transformative learning**

Theatre serves as an experimental domain that offers opportunities for transformative learning experiences. Through active participation in this project, the authors assumed both the roles of researchers and participants. This participation involved self-reflection, as discussed by M. Mortari and S. Luraschi, as well as the physical embodiment of the roles being portrayed. In this essay, we share our experiences from “MultiMe - Flash in Mob”, a theatre workshop organised by the Centro Studi di Ricerca Fileo. Theatre, in its essence, challenges our established certainties and unlocks novel possibilities for conceptualising belonging not as a fixed and discrete entity but as an ever-evolving and fluid process of self-discovery and growth. The act of human mobility becomes an art form within this transformative space.

At the same time, one might wonder how individuals who are naturally less inclined to perform might ‘feel’ and engage with this experience. Equally important is the exploration of whether this experience could potentially encourage those who may be more self-aware to participate and delve deeper into their sense of self. Participation in and enjoyment of MultiMe is possible even for those who do not consider themselves performers. Both the weekly workshops and the final performance are structured to accommodate the participants’ comfort levels, allowing them to engage as far as they are inclined. Sara’s gentle and adaptable guidance, coupled with the group’s collective flexibility, cultivates an atmosphere that is nurturing, non-judgmental, undemanding, and reassuring, catering to individual preferences regarding performance involvement. In this theatre workshop, the deep exploration of self-awareness invites participants to acknowledge “where we are” and “what and who surrounds us”. This unfolds within a supportive environment and a network of nurturing

relationships, in which bodies, words and emotions can interact freely. We seek reference points within our own identities, encompassing our cultural backgrounds, values, physicality, personalities, and thought processes, as well as within the identities of others. The extended duration of this year-long workshop aids in achieving the delicate balance of “unity without confusion and discernment without separation” even amid diverse perspectives and differences, thereby facilitating our individual and collecting journeys.

### *1.2 MultiMe - Flash in Mob*

For several years now, Fileo has been actively promoting the participatory theatre experience known as MultiMe. The name itself reflects the aspiration for individuals to explore their multifaceted identities – a recognition that each of us embodies a complex tapestry of identities, all bearing the richness of diversity. It acknowledges the intricate interplay of individual identity within the collective, wherein one’s membership in a group can both enrich them and provide a sense of belonging, creating an addition dimension to their sense of self. This dynamic is influenced by the fact that each group member has lived in various places, and these diverse contexts have contributed to shaping their identity. Creating small memberships. The realisation of this impact often occurs retrospectively, unveiling not just a third dimension but, in many cases, a fourth, fifth, sixth, or even seventh dimension of one’s existence and way of life.

Participatory theatre is an inclusive, unifying, non-divisive and liberating experience, fostering an environment characterised by tolerance, space, freedom, protection and safety. Participatory theatre denounces, but from the heart and through its inner light, it lights up darkness. In this setting, there are no professional actors; instead, individuals share their inner worlds with the audience through the simple act of being present on the stage.

The 2023 edition of MultiMe, which culminated in a performance on 17th June 2023, featured a diverse and multicultural group of participants who had been active since November 2022.

The weekly meetings took place at the Abbey of San Paolo d’Argon, each lasting about two hours and following this structure:

- the initial part was dedicated to welcoming participants to the abbey, sharing daily updates, greetings, and often enjoying a snack;

- the “physical” part began with a brief circle warm-up, where each participant introduced themselves by name, accompanied by a sound and a gesture representing their emotional or physical state for the day. All the other participants repeated it as faithfully as possible as this allowed them to become acquainted with their fellow theatre companions;
- The core of the event unfolded differently each week, addressing themes, moods, thoughts, or stories through diverse artistic languages, including drawing, singing, body improvisation, voice improvisation, clay work, and interaction with objects and space. The session concluded with participants sharing and listening to the outcomes of their creative endeavours;
- Finally, before saying goodbye, the group gathered in a circle to participate in a unique form of greeting, inspired by the Burkinabé tradition known as the Dassa, to rejuvenate energy and express gratitude to the group.

Through the creative language of theatre, the participants comprised various backgrounds and identities, from shy children to Italian social workers, Senegalese siblings, and young professionals.

The main theme of the 2023 workshop revolved around the interplay between light and darkness, explored through bodily, artistic, vocal, choral, and breathing exercises, both individually and collectively. These exercises aimed to equip participants with the tools to articulate their thoughts, create an atmosphere of shared well-being, and foster an environment conducive to self-expression, listening and story-telling.

This journey, defined by the intention to explore our place in the world among the contrasts of light and darkness, emerged as a tapestry of lights and colours, shadows and sounds, experienced collectively, and reflecting the transformation inherent in human mobility.

This unpredictable journey, echoing the words of M. Gualtieri, becomes «an adventure of knowledge: [we are] each time solicited and guided towards the pinnacle of [our] freedom» where the expression of that freedom underscores the value of «the unpredictable [...] and the embrace of emptiness»<sup>2</sup>. It emphasises the need to remain open to the unexpected, to

<sup>2</sup> M. Gualtieri, *Paesaggio con fratello rotto*, Einaudi, Torino 2021.

be perpetual strangers within reality, and to be continually amazed by its boundless energies.

## 2. Auto-ethnographic reflections on our experience

### 2.1 *Dalila: story in stories, the power of words*

During a theatre rehearsal session, I selected words like “Union”, “Francesco”, “secrets”, “right”, “vacuum”, “challenge”, and “reach”. Following the customary warm-up exercises, our conductor encouraged us to choose words while thinking ‘of a story you would like to write’. This experience led me to reflect on the power of narration and recognise that every narrative inherently imitates actions. When we recount stories, we reference actions and events, striving to mirror their authentic dynamism. Stories, laden with their distinctive elements, serve as an important tool for introspection, prompting individuals to interpret their existence through narrative lenses and place it into within broader cultural contexts. This enables us to attribute meaning to experiences that might otherwise appear devoid of it.

However, it is important to recognise that every word cited or written, old or new, is never just a term; it encapsulates a mentality that belongs to us, personal experiences, cherished places, and even nuanced and imaginative revisions. Lexemes and lemmas are also acquired through our interactions and conversations with others. This attempt to write in ‘other people’s’ words – often sourced from articles and journals - prompts reflection on how we interconnected within the narratives of others, underscoring the necessity in helping us re-evaluate ourselves.

Our lives are ceaselessly intertwined with narratives, the stories we tell or we hear, the stories we dream or imagine or wish we could tell. All woven into the narrative of our lives, which we engage with through self-reflection, often in a continuous, sometimes episodic, and occasionally unconscious dialogue with ourselves.

This exercise has proven interesting, fostering self-examination, deconstruction, and a renewed understanding of identity. It underscores the significance of difference and otherness, providing insight into the shared humanity to which we all belong. In this exploration, each of us is encouraged to present our truest selves.

Words, which I hear or read, are necessary and make me feel human. As I contemplate reading, I am reminded of H. Cixous' reflections, who states «we are reading, in the morning as soon as it is day, we read – from the cradle, from our first gaze, we yearn to belong to a gaze, to fall under a gaze, already we are reading. We are giving ourselves to be read, forging connections, mirroring ourselves in the gaze of others. Is this the genesis of our humanity?»<sup>3</sup>.

## 2.2 Elena: the presence and absence of light

As I dismantle the paper construction Paolo and I just crafted, the assignment has taken an unexpected turn. A shadow briefly veils my expression, underlining the difficulty of “letting go”. It is a challenge that extends beyond mere ideas; it encompasses the body, which must adapt to unfamiliar rhythms, and the comforting roles we typically assume in favour of embracing new forms. However, in these moments when I manage to truly “let go”, I discover within myself a receptive void – a space where the presence of others is acknowledged<sup>4</sup> and where enough light filters through to illuminate the identities, cultures, and emotions of the group. This exercise in decentralization, delving into the logic of others, and engaging in win-win negotiations<sup>5</sup> while acknowledging the complexity of identities<sup>6</sup> has been an integral part of my educational journey and now forms a core facet of my experiential learning.

Working with people from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and generations enriches my perspective on the concept of “light”. Light manifests when alternative viewpoints aid in defining directions and pinpointing the sources of illumination. Conversely, it dwindles when my gaze is overshadowed by my individualism, my rigid structures, and ego. Light emerges when I discern the exquisite details within others' stories. It dims when my mind finds solace in silence, allowing experiences and thoughts to settle.

<sup>3</sup> H. Cixous, *Volleys of Humanity*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2011.

<sup>4</sup> E. Levinas, *L'epifania del volto*, Servitium Editrice, Milano 2010.

<sup>5</sup> M. Cohen-Emerique, *L'approche interculturelle dans le processus d'aide. Santé mentale au Québec*, XVIII, 1 (1993), pp. 71-92.

<sup>6</sup> C. Pasqualini, *Complessità e identità umana. L'uomo Morin - L'uomo di Morin*, in A. De Simone (ed.), *Identità, spazio e vita quotidiana* QuattroVenti, Urbino 2005, pp. 249-284.

The presence or absence of light fills up space with meaning, which aligns with the laws of nature. «For instance, when light meets a tiny crevice of similar proportions, it generates patterns of interference and diffraction on a screen, produced by the interplay of light and shadow. Some areas appear bright due to the precise positioning of light particles. What's remarkable is that these particles seem to instinctively "already know" how to arrange themselves on the screen»<sup>7</sup>.

The personal perception of space is intimately linked to the realm of interpersonal relationships and the construction or identification of social contexts. The identification of a group, for instance, hinges upon the comprehension of a social scene in which certain elements allow the differentiation of subjects present, their interactions, and the categorisation of these subjects into social groups<sup>8</sup>.

In our theatre work, we train in spatial awareness and the perception of the group as a whole. This ongoing practice equips us with the keys to participate in the "social scene" and collectively craft narrative with shared significance. Sharing entails shedding light on various and diverse aspects.

«When interest shifts elsewhere, it casts a shadow on previously held concerns, much like a searchlight lights up a new area while leaving another in darkness. This is unavoidable, as consciousness can maintain only a few images in clear focus at any given time, and even this clarity fluctuates. Nevertheless, the forgotten ideas persist»<sup>9</sup>. In every MultiMe session, I witnessed the power of the group to simultaneously illuminate different areas of interest and the fineness of direction in preserving most of them.

### 2.3 Sara: *I lead, and I feel, lights and shadows of understanding*

Conducting a participatory theatre workshop is a transformative act<sup>10</sup>. As I observe the participants' bodies from the outside, the words they express through their movements resonate deeply within me. I become a conduit

<sup>7</sup> G. Carosi, *La luce: secoli di scoperte per spiegare l'importanza della ricerca*, 2022. [https://www.treccani.it/magazine/chiasmo/scienze\\_naturali\\_e\\_tecnologia/Luce/Luce\\_CSB\\_Luce\\_secoli\\_di\\_ricerca](https://www.treccani.it/magazine/chiasmo/scienze_naturali_e_tecnologia/Luce/Luce_CSB_Luce_secoli_di_ricerca).

<sup>8</sup> J.M. Henderson - A. Hollingworth, *High-level scene perception*, in «Annual review of psychology», 1 (50/1999), pp. 243-271.

<sup>9</sup> C.J. Jung, *Man and his symbols*, Doubleday Books, New York 1969.

<sup>10</sup> M. Buccolo - S. Mongili - E. Tonon, *Teatro e formazione. Teorie e pratiche di pedagogia teatrale nei contesti formativo*, FrancoAngeli, Milano 2021.

for the narratives that emerge, attentively noting every glimmer of insight produced by their kinetic expressions<sup>11</sup>. The language of the body weaves a narrative tapestry<sup>12</sup> in which I see my own reflection. In this immersive experience, I share the Here and Now with the group, seamlessly moving in and out of their stories, much like a container for their emotions and narratives. My role is like a guiding beacon, illuminating the path towards our collective goal: the realisation of narrative urgency, a vital necessity. Throughout this journey, I perceive the actors as if they were maps, offering me essential navigational cues. They prevent me from losing my way, enabling me to gather, embrace, nurture, and ultimately become a vessel for a rich net of emotions and stories. The narratives interweave like the strands of a collective “re-telling” rope, and in the process, they reveal facets of my own narrative. I embrace this sense of wonder and reciprocity, allowing myself to be astonished and to reciprocate in turn.

In MultiMe theatrical experience, I encounter and embrace the power of the present moment as a source of immense creative potential. From here, I witness the emergence of the group’s narrative journey. The group, to me, represents «a world of energies, forces and flows»<sup>13</sup> eagerly awaiting the manifestation of their collective experiences through body, voice, and word. I await, too, the opportunity to expand our field of vision, to transcend the confines of the gaze, and to transform theatre into an immersive experience for actors, myself as the facilitator, and the audience where a third space becomes the canvas for this transformation. Leading a group and being a part of it are not necessarily dichotomous experiences; on the contrary, leading the group while intimately experiencing its inner dynamics, likely akin to what the audience will later encounter, allows me to fully embrace theatre as a daily practice. Above all, it teaches me to remain present, to act, to pause, to restart, to slow down, to accelerate, to move, to pause again, to listen, to be, first and foremost, present with myself and, consequently, with others. Theatre moves us through stillness and halts us through motion, and navigating this dual polarity of emotional states enables me to undergo a profound journey of personal growth and evolu-

<sup>11</sup> G. Oliva, *La pedagogia teatrale. La voce della tradizione e il teatro contemporaneo*, XY.IT, Busto Arsizio 2019, p. 13.

<sup>12</sup> N. Ferri, *Embodied research. Ricercare con il corpo e sul corpo dell’educazione*, Armando, Roma 2022.

<sup>13</sup> T. Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture*, Routledge, London 2013.



tion. While some elements may escape us, they pass by and are often those we don't truly need. What does arrive is what we can work with – diving into themes, words, breaths and imagery that resonate within us, to then share it others. Eventually the wave sets in motion once again. The theme of light, introduced in our early meetings, serves as a powerful metaphor. It has allowed me to illuminate various facets of the group and its individual members, highlighting their urgent narratives while respecting the parts they choose to keep hidden. Not because these concealed aspects lack beauty or worthiness of display, but because they require the shelter of darkness, remaining hidden until they are ready to emerge – or perhaps they never will. Not all facets of our identity are meant to be exposed; thus, the theme of light has enabled me to safeguard and protect certain intimacies while also exploring the depths of darkness. Light and darkness coexist harmoniously; one cannot exist without the other. Theatrical exploration of contrasts allows us to discover the balance between these forces. Theatre challenges us with questions like “Where are we?” and “How are we in this position?”, not just physically but, more importantly, mentally. In the group, we face many mental experiences, because the body possess the extraordinary ability to transport us physically into the world while simultaneously immersing us in complex mental landscapes. This encourages us to remain silently anchored within ourselves. The Flash in MOB performance showcased actors and actresses, including myself, who have mastered the performing arts. They possess the ability to touch hearts and evoke visceral emotions. During the performance, audiences are invited to engage in mindfulness exercises, dismantling thoughts and prejudices, and shedding the mental labyrinths of daily life that our minds tend to construct. Instead, we collectively embark on a narrative journey in the Here and Now, an experience that can be altered and transformed by both actors and spectators alike. The performance becomes a solo journey within the context of a group.

*“The light is a smile  
a golden crack in the black night sky.  
A breath of wind in the sultry fog of a polluted city  
a laugh, a light joke that relieves you when an argument starts to get serious.  
Light is defusing a bomb before it gets dark, in your face,  
it reflects what burns, without burning.  
It's a hole in the sky above, a mother and father  
to whom you can hold out your hands*

*while you walk alone on your own free  
and riskily generative path alone they are there.  
Light is trust and knowing that she is there  
even when you can't see her during the day.*

ALL THE TIME OF LIGHT”

L. Spreafico<sup>14</sup>

## Conclusion

Is there a connection between these theatrical moments? The practice of MultiMe offers participants the opportunity to delve into their own life stories and narratives, as well as those of others<sup>15</sup>, leading to personal learning experiences. Each theatre rehearsal gives rise to and fosters a sense of belonging to a collective narrative. Art, in its myriad forms, serves as a vehicle for the expression of cultures, both physical and visual, dynamic, and evanescent.

As M. Gualtieri observes, «[...] everything on stage seems out of proportion, because in reality it resembles dealing with a torrent, a fire, an earthquake, or something that defies the confines of composure and stylistic restraint. It is a really fiery domain, where one's face and robe can easily be singed. Yet, we think that theatre is precisely this: an immersion in the present, a song of the present, akin to the classical tradition, communicating with contemporaries – those who share this moment with us – using signs that resonate with their experience»<sup>16</sup>.

Could performance, then, be an act of light, illuminating various art forms, cultures, and ultimately, ourselves?

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<sup>14</sup> Poetic narration of one of the participants.

<sup>15</sup> D. Demetrio, *Raccontarsi. L'autobiografia come cura di sé*, Raffaello Cortina, Milano 1996.

<sup>16</sup> M. Gualtieri, *Paesaggio con fratello rotto*, Einaudi, Torino 2021.

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