

Review of Magela, A. (2025). *Theater education – why, what, how. Philosophical, educational and action-based guidelines and principles for teachers*. Waxmann.

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This review examines the book's central claim that theater education should be understood as a specific mode of cognition rather than as an instrument for developing transferable skills. It discusses the relationship between the book's philosophical framework and its pedagogical proposals, focusing on theater cognition, theatrical attention, embodiment, and the production of subjectivity. It argues that the work offers an original and philosophically rigorous contribution to contemporary debates on theater education and educational theory, while also considering the relevance of Magela's approach for performative language education and its potential for situated and relational language learning.

Keywords: theater education; theater cognition; performative language teaching; embodied learning; theatrical attention

1 Introduction

In *Theater Education – Why, What, How: Philosophical, Educational and Action-based Guidelines and Principles for Teachers* (2025), published by Waxmann, André Magela proposes an elaborate philosophical and pedagogical framework for rethinking the place of theater education in contemporary schooling. The scope of this 170-page book is already visible in its structure: it opens with an introduction and a parable, followed by seven chapters, with an unconventional “Chapter Pre-3” inserted between Chapters 2 and 3, and concludes with an inspiring afterword.

Drawing on contemporary philosophy, theater pedagogy, and cognition studies, he seeks to demonstrate that theater education can extend far beyond the theater classroom and become a means of cultivating the ways in which students perceive, understand, and relate to everyday life (Magela, 2025, pp. 7- 9). Rather than considering theater as a pedagogical instrument serving other educational purposes, such as the development of creativity, communication, or personal growth, Magela argues that theater constitutes a specific way of knowing the world through particular modes of perceiving, attending, and acting within it. Theater cognition is presented not as a means of achieving other educational ends, but as a

constitutive dimension of human cognition and, therefore, as a domain of knowledge with its own epistemological value. From this perspective, theater education deserves to occupy a central place within general education, on a level comparable to linguistic, mathematical, or scientific forms of thought (Magela, 2025, pp. 27-29).

This proposal can be read as a significant contribution to current international debates on education, particularly those promoted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Andreas Schleicher, the organisation's Director for Education and Skills, has repeatedly argued that schools must cultivate capacities that cannot easily be automated. Read within the context of contemporary education, Magela's proposal enters into dialogue with these debates while shifting the discussion to a more fundamental level. His proposal does not simply consist in defending the development of certain human competencies in response to these challenges, but in asserting that theater cognition constitutes a fundamental dimension of human cognition and that the specific purpose of theater education is to cultivate it. In this sense, Magela shifts the justification of theater education from an instrumental paradigm, in which theater is valued for its contribution to the development of particular competencies, to an epistemological paradigm, according to which theater constitutes a specific form of cognition. In my view, this is the book's most significant contribution.

Taking this premise as its point of departure, this review argues that Magela's most important contribution lies in his attempt to establish theater education as a specific mode of cognition. To develop this argument, I first examine the conceptual architecture underpinning this claim and then consider how it is translated into pedagogical practice. Finally, I analyse the strengths and tensions of the proposal by placing it in dialogue with broader debates in contemporary educational theory and policy.

2 From theory to practice: training theatrical attention

At the heart of Magela's pedagogical proposal lies the notion of theatrical attention. If theater cognition refers to a particular way of perceiving and relating to the world, then theater education becomes, above all, a training of attention. Its purpose is not merely to teach theatrical techniques, but to cultivate students' capacity to perceive situations, relationships, and possibilities for action with greater sensitivity. Drawing on Michael Tomasello's concept of joint attention, Magela argues that this capacity is neither innate nor fixed, but socially learned and developed through practice (Magela, 2025, pp. 22-24).

This conception is closely linked to Magela's somatic approach and to what he calls the "epistemology of acting." Theatrical learning becomes transferable to everyday life only when

it is embodied rather than merely understood intellectually (Magela, 2025, pp. 36-39). Experience therefore precedes conceptualisation: students first engage with situations through action, while reflection emerges afterwards. Knowledge is understood not as the starting point of learning but as something that develops through bodily and relational experience.

This emphasis on embodied experience recalls aspects of Jerzy Grotowski's work, particularly its focus on presence, listening, and encounter rather than representation. Similar principles also guide Magela's classroom practice. Many of the proposed exercises rely on minimal verbal intervention, encouraging students to remain within the action while teachers introduce new instructions without interrupting the continuity of the experience. These procedures sustain what Magela calls theatrical intensity, understood not as emotional excitement but as the experiential force through which perception and action are transformed (Magela, 2025, pp. 20-23).

Such an approach offers an important alternative to educational contexts increasingly dominated by explanation and assessment. Rather than encouraging immediate interpretation, Magela invites students to dwell in experience, allowing understanding to emerge through action. As in Jacques Rancière's conception of aesthetic experience and, as Magela himself illustrates through Mr Miyagi's teaching in *The Karate Kid*, learning unfolds through practice before becoming conceptually intelligible.

Underlying these practices is a relational conception of learning in which knowledge is co-constructed rather than transmitted. The aim is not simply to acquire theatrical techniques, but to cultivate forms of attention that extend beyond the classroom into everyday life.

3 Simplicity as complexity: the pedagogical value of the exercises

One of the book's greatest strengths lies in the theatrical exercises proposed throughout its chapters. At first glance, many of them appear remarkably simple. They do not rely on complex theatrical techniques, elaborate staging, or highly specialised training. Yet it is precisely within this apparent simplicity that the pedagogical richness of Magela's proposal emerges. Rather than presenting theater education as the progressive mastery of increasingly complex theatrical forms, Magela develops a pedagogy centred on theatrical attention. The exercises function as pedagogical devices through which students gradually develop their capacity to perceive, respond, cooperate, and act within different situations. Their purpose is not to produce polished theatrical outcomes but to cultivate theatrical processes (Magela, 2025, pp. 23-27). Magela nevertheless cautions against understanding these exercises as models or

recipes to be applied mechanically. Rather, they are triggers whose effectiveness depends on the teacher's ability to read what is happening within the group and to adapt the guidance of the experience continuously (Magela, 2025, pp. 8-9; 26-27).

The potential of these exercises also extends to performative language education. Consider, for example, the “ABCD improvisation” presented in Chapter 5, “Prototypical Exercises for Theater Education.” The exercise follows a simple sequence of actions with clearly defined roles: “A enters; B enters; A investigates B; C enters; B and C isolate A; D enters; C tries to take D; A, B, C and D seek to leave” (Magela, 2025, pp.111-112). This structure could provide a productive framework for a language-learning group: students could engage their bodies while working within a clear sequence of actions into which vocabulary and expressions related to the lesson can be incorporated. The sequence thus functions as an open script: it provides enough structure to support language use without over-rationalising the task or predetermining the interaction. Language emerges through action and in response to what others are doing, requiring students to listen, perceive, and react within the unfolding situation, much as they do in everyday communication.

From a pedagogical perspective, this is one of the book's most valuable contributions. Magela's exercises can be incorporated into a wide range of educational contexts without losing their conceptual depth. Their value lies not in their external form but in the relationships they generate and the quality of attention they cultivate. Rather than beginning with abstract concepts, Magela proposes experiences from which increasingly sophisticated forms of perception and understanding emerge. Learning is therefore inductive, gradual, and experiential: students do not understand theater cognition before acting, but discover it through practice. This reflects one of the book's central premises: theater education seeks to cultivate capacities that are already present, in potential form, within students' everyday experience. Accordingly, the teacher's role is not to transmit theatrical knowledge, but to create the conditions in which these capacities can emerge and develop (Magela, 2025, pp. 33-44). Perhaps the most original aspect of Magela's proposal is that theatrical exercises are to theater education what problems are to mathematics: they are not the content of learning but the means through which theater cognition is cultivated (Magela, 2025, pp. 26-27).

4 Philosophical and pedagogical implications

One of the tensions running through the book concerns the relationship between its pedagogical ambitions and the density of its conceptual framework. Magela's effort to provide theater education with a robust philosophical foundation is undoubtedly one of the book's greatest strengths. At the same time, its extensive engagement with concepts drawn from

Deleuze, Guattari, and Foucault may require a degree of familiarity with contemporary philosophy that exceeds the background of many practising teachers.

This does not necessarily constitute a weakness. On the contrary, it reflects the author's commitment to treating theater education as a rigorous field of knowledge. Nevertheless, one may ask how these theoretical frameworks might be translated into a more accessible language for those working in schools on a daily basis. The practical exercises proposed throughout the book often succeed in bridging these two levels; even so, the distance between conceptual sophistication and pedagogical accessibility remains an open question.

A second aspect worthy of discussion concerns the pedagogical traditions with which the book enters into dialogue. Although Magela engages extensively with post-structuralist philosophy, embodied cognition, and theater pedagogy, readers familiar with Latin American educational traditions will recognise important resonances with the work of Paulo Freire, even though these connections are not developed explicitly.

Particularly significant is the book's insistence that theater education should not be understood as the transmission of knowledge from teacher to student. Throughout the text, learning emerges from experience, attention, and the activation of capacities that already exist, at least potentially, within learners themselves (Magela, 2025, pp. 23-27; 33-44). In this respect, Magela's proposal recalls Freire's rejection of the banking model of education and his conception of teaching as a process aimed at creating the conditions under which knowledge can emerge, rather than depositing information into passive subjects.

The political horizon of Magela's proposal, however, moves in a different direction. Whereas Freire's educational project is primarily oriented towards the development of critical consciousness and emancipation from relations of oppression, Magela situates the political question within the terrain of the production of subjectivity. Theater education becomes a space in which students learn to perceive the forces that traverse their everyday lives and to produce singular ways of relating to them (Magela, 2025, pp. 138-140).

From this perspective, school theater ceases to be merely a means of developing expressive skills or fostering critical thinking. Instead, it becomes an ethical-aesthetic practice capable of intervening in the ways subjects perceive, act, make decisions, and construct their own forms of life. In Magela's own words, theater education should contribute to the ethical and aesthetic dimensions of students' everyday lives. Moreover, this pedagogical project is oriented towards the singular production of subjectivity, a process that the author relates throughout the book to the cultivation of theatrical potency as the capacity to expand forms of perception, relation, and action in everyday life (Magela, 2025, pp. 137-140).

Applied to second, foreign, or additional language education, this perspective can enrich the language classroom by moving learning beyond the textbook and into embodied situations in which language is experienced in action. Rather than simply reproducing words and grammatical structures, learners can inhabit situations in which their bodies, words, and relationships respond to a meaningful context. This becomes particularly significant if learning another language is understood not only as acquiring another communicative system, but also as encountering different ways of organising experience. Austin's theory of speech acts adds another dimension to this connection: language does not merely describe reality but acts within it; through words, we do things (Austin, 1962). Language learning can therefore be understood as inherently performative: learners do not simply acquire words but learn to act with them in situated, embodied, and relational contexts. Magela's approach offers a particularly fertile framework for creating precisely these conditions in the language classroom.

This understanding of theater education as a space for the production of subjectivity is arguably one of the book's most original contributions. The political dimension of theater education is no longer defined solely by the themes it addresses or the forms of participation it promotes, but by its capacity to intervene in processes of subjectivation, fostering singular, complex, and inventive ways of inhabiting the world. In this sense, theater education appears not merely as an artistic or pedagogical practice, but as an ethical-aesthetic practice of the production of subjectivity.

5 Conclusion

Whether or not readers fully endorse Magela's philosophical framework, *Theater Education - Why, What, How* succeeds in posing a question that is both timely and significant: if theater cognition constitutes a fundamental dimension of human experience, should theater education not occupy a far more central place within contemporary educational systems than it currently does?

The book's greatest contribution lies not simply in advocating for theater education, but in redefining the terms on which that advocacy can be made. By presenting theater as a specific mode of cognition, rather than merely as an artistic or cultural practice, Magela offers a compelling argument for the relevance of theater education in the twenty-first century. His proposal invites teachers, researchers, and policymakers to reconsider the role that theatrical attention, embodied experience, cooperation, and the formation of subjectivity might play in responding to the challenges facing contemporary education.

For this reason, Magela's proposal is particularly relevant to language education. Learning another language can itself be understood as a theatrical act: a rehearsal of other ways of speaking, perceiving, relating, and acting in the world. Incorporating theatrical practices into the language classroom creates spaces in which learners experience language as an embodied and relational mode of cognition, rather than merely as a system of grammatical rules to be mastered. In this sense, Magela's approach offers performative language educators valuable tools for cultivating the vital potential of language learning, a potential that is often diminished by an overreliance on abstract explanation. Equally valuable is the book's ability to articulate philosophical reflection and pedagogical practice. Its theoretical framework is sophisticated and, at times, demanding, yet it remains closely connected to classroom practice through a rich collection of concrete exercises and detailed pedagogical guidance. This balance between conceptual depth and practical applicability makes the book a particularly valuable resource not only for theater educators, but also for anyone interested in embodied learning, aesthetic education, and contemporary educational theory.

Ultimately, *Theater Education - Why, What, How* challenges us to rethink not only why theater should be taught, but also what theater is, how knowledge is produced through theatrical experience, and what kinds of human beings education seeks to cultivate. In doing so, Magela opens a stimulating philosophical and pedagogical conversation whose implications extend well beyond the field of theater education.

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