

Reshaping Failure: The Design of *Hospites Teatro's* Theatre Games

Romi Sofia Abatangelo

University of Turin

Department of Humanities

Torino, Italy

romisofia.abatangelo@unito.it

Keywords

Theatre games, theatre pedagogy, playfulness, failure.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Hospites Teatro is a theatre group based in Bologna, born in 2018 from the encounter between the Brazilian performance artist Eduardo Landim and a group of young actors from different areas of Italy (hospitesteatro.it n.d.). The group's research is focused on the development of *socio-actoriality* (see *Hospites Teatro*, 2025), an artistic practice - situated at the crossroad between performing arts and social sciences - aiming to reframe relational habits through play. Playfulness (see Masek and Stenros 2021; Sicart 2014) can then be identified as a key element of the group's approach. In his role as artistic director, Landim encourages a playful attitude within the group's performance training, which includes warmups, physical exercises, singing sessions, and improvisational activities. This serves, on one hand, to challenge the cliché of solemnity traditionally associated with theatre and, on the other, to counter the fear of making mistakes and foster creative freedom. *Hospites Teatro* has also developed a repertoire of theatre games that constitutes an integral part of the group's research process and is continually updated to align with their artistic and pedagogical goals.

Games are frequently employed in theatre pedagogy as training tools for developing physical and improvisational skills (see Barker 1989, [1977] 1983; Boal [1992] 2005; Kendrick 2011). Barker's ([1977] 1983) work on theatre games underscores their pedagogical advantages, firstly emphasizing the inherently experiential nature of theatre pedagogy, and secondly arguing that acting cannot be taught directly but can only be facilitated by creating situations in which actors learn experientially. In that regard, Barker recounts how technical exercises often left his actors feeling distressed, as they became extremely preoccupied with the end result. Instead, using games enabled Barker's actors to direct their attention towards the game goal rather than the training goal, focusing on the experience of play while simultaneously developing their physical and creative abilities. The idea that rules and goals can be used to design and facilitate experience has been extensively explored in game studies. Among others, Sicart (2014) emphasizes how play can be shaped through rules, while Nguyen (2020) describes games as *libraries of agency*, systems for

Proceedings of DiGRA 2026

© 2026 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

codifying, annotating, and transmitting specific agential modes. Games are thus employed in theatre training to create spaces of agential possibilities in which actors can discover, experiment, and test their skills.

Among *Hospites Teatro's* pedagogical activities, this essay focuses on *Teatrario*, the group's weekly theatre course. Guided by Landim and by the actors of the group, *Teatrario* primarily employs games and playful activities to engage participants and shift their attention from individual prowess to interpersonal interaction. In a fieldwork essay, Comis (2024) observes that, in all games designed for *Teatrario*, difficulty is progressively increased: as participants begin to internalize the game's dynamics, new elements are introduced, requiring them to manage multiple physical and cognitive stimuli simultaneously. This process consistently pushes participants to their limits, fostering a state of flow (see Chen, 2007). To protect this flow state from creative blocks, *Hospites Teatro* had to develop strategies to treat errors as a natural part of the process, striving to counter the tendency to respond to mistakes with shame and fear and instead reframing them as creative opportunities. The group's playful attitude remains the primary strategy to handle the negative impact of mistakes, since playfulness is a powerful tool for reframing unpleasant situations (see Masek and Stenros 2021). The games created by *Hospites Teatro* are also deliberately structured to address mistakes in a playful and meaningful way. This reflects not only the group's strong interest in creative exploration and interpersonal interaction, but also the explicit intention behind the *socio-actorial approach* to reframe ingrained habits through the playful deconstruction and subversion of *cliché-typical* patterns (see *Hospites Teatro*, 2025) associated with failure.

This approach is particularly evident in two of the games developed during the 2024/25 edition of *Teatrario*. The first is a redesigned version of a classic theatre game, *Tag*, in which players who make mistakes are progressively eliminated until only two participants remain (see Kendrick 2011). For *Teatrario*, the game has been reworked by removing the elimination rule, which previously determined both the success and failure conditions. Instead, mistakes are collectively celebrated with a cheerful twirl and then the game can resume. This change encourages a playful attitude toward mistakes while simultaneously creating space for the gradual introduction of improvisational elements involving both voice and movement. The second game started as a simple ball game in which participants were asked to throw and catch a tennis ball in specific ways. Although no explicit failure condition was implemented for dropping the ball, participants still displayed the tendency to react negatively to their mistakes, and in so doing, interrupting the flow. To counter this tendency, two additional elements are introduced: firstly, the participant who drops the ball must emit an "emergency sound" while running to retrieve it; subsequently, the participant is invited to improvise a short monologue on the theme "We are the best" before the game can resume. These two elements highlight errors while transforming them into creative opportunities: the monologue offers a moment in the spotlight to the clumsier participants, while its theme creates an ironic contrast with the mistake that triggered it.

These two games show how *Hospites Teatro* reframes failure in order to subvert conventional expectations around failing in games. In *Tag*, removing the elimination rule subverts the association of mistakes with failure, allowing participants to keep playing and encouraging them to take more creative risks. In the ball game, participants' *cliché-typical* reactions to mistakes that would disrupt the game flow

are replaced with a pre-structured response that allows them to keep playing even when they fail. Analysing these theatre games through the lens of game studies then highlights how even seemingly small changes in the ludic structure - with a particular attention to failure conditions - can radically change the participants' experience, opening a promising area of inquiry at the intersection of game studies and theatre pedagogy.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to begin by acknowledging my relationship with *Hospites Teatro*, firstly as a former trainee with the group from December 2024 to October 2025, and secondly as a participant in *Teatrario* from October 2023 to June 2025. This research emerged directly from my embodied experience as a participant in *Teatrario* and has been further enriched by semi-structured interviews with the group's members.

I am deeply grateful to the artistic director of *Hospites Teatro* Eduardo Landim and to the actors who worked with the group during my traineeship (Laura Astarita, Leonardo Balestra, Federica Benini, Chiara Comis and Roberto Giani) for their invaluable insights and for their continued support during the development of this research project.

REFERENCES

- Barker, C. 1989. "Games in education and theatre". *New Theatre Quarterly*, 5(19), 227-235.
- Barker, C. [1977] 1983. *Theatre games: A new approach to drama training*. Methuen London.
- Boal, A. [1992] 2005. *Games for actors and non-actors*. Routledge.
- Chen, J. 2007. "Flow in games (and everything else)". *Communications of the ACM*, 50(4), 31-34.
- "Chi Siamo". Hospites Teatro. Accessed on November 18, 2025.
<https://www.hospitesteatro.it/chi-siamo/>
- Comis, C. 2024. *Oltre il teatro. Breve indagine etnografica tra comunicazione, linguaggio e performance*. As part of the Ethnographic Research Techniques Course (Zelda Alice Franceschi) within the Faculty of Anthropology, Religions and Oriental Civilisations: University of Bologna.
- Hospites Teatro. 2025. *International Seminar on Socioactoriality: A Cross-Cultural Space for Scenic and Social Agency*. <https://bio.site/hospitesteatro>
- Kendrick, L. 2011. "A paidic aesthetic: an analysis of games in the ludic pedagogy of Philippe Gaulier". *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training*, 2(1), 72-85.
- Masek, L. and Stenros, J. 2021. "The meaning of playfulness: A review of the contemporary definitions of the concept across disciplines". *Eludamos: Journal for Computer Game Culture*, 12(1), 13-37.
- Nguyen, C. T. 2020. *Games: Agency as art*. Oxford University Press.
- Sicart, M. 2014. *Play matters*. MIT Press.