

Theater as a strategy for youth engagement in the fight against Aids

O Teatro como estratégia de engajamento de jovens no enfrentamento da Aids (resumo: p. 17)

El teatro como estrategia de compromiso de jóvenes en el enfrentamiento del Sida (resumen: p. 17)

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Despite advances in the fight against Aids, there has been an increase in HIV infections among youngsters in the last decade. This motivated the Museu da Vida to produce a play about HIV/Aids aimed at this audience. We present results of a study conducted with the public of 11 to 19 years based on the observation of nine presentations, five post-play debates and 220 questionnaires. Besides the positive reception and strong adherence from viewers, we observed the play was able to engage them in the debate on HIV/Aids. However, there is a lack of dialogue on the issue, which may be associated with the maintenance of stigma and discrimination. We conclude that the strategy of uniting health and theater in a science communication activity was successful, but there are still many challenges in terms of coping with HIV/Aids, especially among youngsters.

Keywords: Science communication. Science and art. Health and theater. HIV/ Aids.



Introduction

Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (Aids), caused by the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), took the world by surprise in the 1980s and quickly became a global health emergency due to its accelerated spread and high lethality rate. At the time, health officials predicted that scientists would develop a cure for the disease in a few years, which did not happen. Approximately 32 million people died from Aids-related complications¹.

Notwithstanding, the development of antiretroviral therapies, prevention, and awareness campaigns, and social movements' joined efforts, afforded better conditions for people living with HIV. They also reduced the global number of both new infections and Aids-related deaths. All this progress allowed health authorities to envision the end of the epidemic. In 2016, United Nations' member states set a goal to end Aids by 2030, affirming their commitment to “zero new HIV infections”, “zero Aids-related deaths” and “zero discrimination”² (p. 5).

Despite all accomplishment and optimism, HIV and Aids remain a major challenge, both globally and nationally. Brazil has registered an average of 40 thousand new cases in the last five years³. While the general detection rate of the virus has gradually decreased throughout the country, following a worldwide trend, there is an increasing rate of new cases in some population segments. Between 2006 and 2015, male infection increased, mostly in young men in the 15 to 19 and 20 to 24 age groups. The number of cases almost tripled in the first group and more than doubled in the second⁴.

It should be noted, however, that the virus does not affect people in the same way. Veiled situations of inequality hide behind these figures. Throughout the world, and particularly in Brazil, impoverished and marginalized groups are more susceptible to HIV infection⁵. Besides, Aids is also an “epidemic of meanings”, which are constructed by the social, cultural, and political responses to the disease. Stigma and discrimination taint this facet of the epidemic, problems not resolved at the same pace as the rise of biomedical advances⁶.

As part of Oswaldo Cruz Foundation (Fiocruz)'s efforts to both tackle the Aids epidemic^(g) and address the increasing number of infections in young people, the *Museu da Vida*, a space for science communication in Fiocruz, partnered with the National Infectology Institute Evandro Chagas – also linked to the foundation – to produce a theater show on Aids directed to young audiences. Inspired by the story “*O rapaz da rabeça e a moça da camisinha*” written by José Mapurunga, a cordelist from Ceará, and directed by Leticia Guimarães^(h), the play “*O rapaz da rabeça e a moça Rebeca*”, uses the tale of a forbidden romance to raise spectator awareness towards HIV prevention and destigmatization. This paper presents the results of a study conducted with the play's audience. From these results, we seek to understand the play's potential to engage young people in the debate on HIV / Aids, and its capacity to tighten their relationship with the theme, thus contributing to the country's and Fiocruz' efforts to control the epidemic.

^(g) More on Fiocruz's efforts to fight the HIV/Aids epidemic in: <https://agencia.fiocruz.br/hiv-aids>.

^(h) See full Cast and Crew credits in: <http://www.museudavida.fiocruz.br/index.php/noticias/518-ultima-semana-da-peca-o-razap-da-rabeça-e-a-moca-rebeca>.

Theater in the fight against Aids

The Ministry of Health's awareness and prevention campaigns are some of the Brazilian government's main communication strategies against the disease. Launched in the 1980s, they feed on Brazil's scientific production and epidemiological data on HIV / Aids. Despite the relevance of such campaigns, some of their related discourses receive criticism. Among them are the focus on condom use, their release of technical information with little context, and individual accountability⁵. The alarmist tone of the first campaigns and the moralistic tenor of current advertisements are also subject to question^{7,8}.

A less conventional HIV / Aids communication strategy is the usage of theater. Through their language and aesthetics, the performing arts have been able to approach, sensitize, and provoke, thus, stimulating the public's critical eye toward this and other health and science themes. Along those lines, a series of plays have been produced to shed light on the issue, the importance of prevention and treatment, and taking down the stigma surrounding the disease^{9,10}. This strategy affords a more direct and dialogical communication to the public, bringing creativity and sensitivity to it¹⁰. Besides, plays about Aids are managing to go beyond informative and preventive discourses, and address themes such as sexuality, love, responsibility, respect, solidarity, and diversity¹¹.

The *Museu da Vida*, located on the Fiocruz campus in Manguinhos, North Zone of Rio de Janeiro, has systematically invested in integrating science, health, and theater initiatives since its opening in 1999. Through *Ciência em Cena*, the museum keeps scientific-oriented theatrical productions in its permanent program. The project has a multidisciplinary crew, from both the performing arts and scientific communities, counting with two venues, the Virgínia Schall Science Stand and the Epidauro.

The show "*O rapaz da rabeça e a moça Rebeca*" was staged at the Virgínia Schall Science Stand between 2015 and 2017, and watched by 3,712 visitors. The play was staged in arena format, with evocative elements of the cordel and the Brazilian Northeast, such as colorful costumes, rhyming dialogue, and live performed regional music. Four actors play the four characters in the play: the narrator, João Tapeba, Rebeca Wanderlei, and his father, Visconde. The story is set in the fictional city of Cantinguba-dos-Aflitos, where the poor Tapebas cannot marry the wealthy Wanderleis. Notwithstanding, João and Rebeca fall in love and live a forbidden romance, all against the will of Visconde. During the couple's first date, Rebeca, always equipped with a condom, hands one out to João. When Visconde sees the lovebirds together, he expels João from the city. Before leaving, Joao promises to return and marry his beloved. Rebeca decides to wait faithfully for him. Playing his fiddle around the world, João becomes a notorious musician. During his exile, he has unprotected sex, is infected with HIV, and develops Aids. Upon returning to Cantinguba-dos-Aflitos, Joao's illness makes winning the approval of Visconde even harder. Yet, a divine being appears, *O Pavão Misterioso*, bearing the message that Aids is not a curse, nor a death sentence nor a punishment, stating that there should be no prejudice against the disease. Pavão's speech shifts Visconde's views, making him see that his daughter can marry João and not get infected, as long as the couple is cautious. Visconde, then, finally gives in, hands a package of condoms to his daughter, and gives the lovebirds his blessing.

The play's showing lasted 40 minutes and, on weekdays, was followed by a 20-minute debate between the actors and the audience. As in other productions of *Ciência em Cena*, the debate's goal is to promote an interactive space, in which the viewers are encouraged to make play-related comments and questions. In the specific case of *O rapaz da rabeça...*, the actors seized the opportunity to talk about the concept of combined prevention⁽ⁱ⁾ – going beyond the use of condoms, already covered in the show, and addressing other preventive methods, such as Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis and Post-Exposure Prophylaxis. The performers also discussed stigma and discrimination, seeking to deconstruct stereotypes found in the play's text. It is worth mentioning that the actors underwent training to address such issues suitably during the debate.

⁽ⁱ⁾ "Combined Prevention is a strategy which uses different prevention approaches (biomedical, behavioral and structural) applied at multiple levels (individual, in partnerships / relationships, community, social) to attend to the specific needs of certain population segments and specific modes of HIV transmission." Source: <http://www.aids.gov.br/pt-br/publico-geral/prevencao-combinada/o-que-e-prevencao-combinada>.



Image 1. The four characters in the play. Standing, from left to right, the narrator (Pablo Aguilar), João Tapeba (Roberto Rodrigues) and Rebeca Wanderlei (Leticia Guimarães). Sitting, the Visconde (Luiz Paulo Barreto). Photo by: Peter Illiciev



Image 2. Live music performed by the actors in the play. From left to right: João (Yves Baeta), Rebeca (Leticia Guimarães), and the narrator (Pablo Aguilar). Photo by: Maria Buzanovsky



Image 3. First sexual intercourse between João (Yves Baeta) and Rebeca (Leticia Guimarães), represented by a choreography with a condom. Photo by: Maria Buzanovsky



Image 4. Rebeca (Leticia Guimarães) waits for João Tapeba to return and marry her. Photo by: Roberto Jesus



Image 5. O Pavao Misterioso, The Mysterious Peacock (Roberto Rodrigues). Photo by: Renata Fontanetto

Theoretical frameworks and methodological procedures

This work pertains to the field of science communication, understood here as a practical and theoretical field that seeks to understand, strengthen, and enrich the connections between science and society. It is part of a broader research effort to investigate the multiple facets of science- theater interface as a strategy for science communication¹².

There are multiple ways to conceive the connections between science and society. We use the public engagement movement in science as a guiding light, which began to take shape in Europe and the United States in the 1990s and became more prominent in many countries during the last decades^{13,14}. Its main banner is creating open-dialogue spaces, stepping away from scientific education conducted by specialists and focusing more on enabling the public to appropriate useful scientific knowledge¹⁵. From a theoretical point of view, it politicizes science communication by emphasizing the importance of citizen participation in the production of knowledge, in defining the direction of science, and the crucial role this participation plays in the proper functioning of democracy. Thus, the concept of engagement used in this article is associated with dialogical communication between specialists and non-specialists, and the active participation of citizens in the governance of science and health. We use it mainly to understand if and how the play in question can emotionally and cognitively engage viewers, so they can take in the knowledge at stake and actively participate in the debate on HIV / Aids.

In theoretical and methodological terms, our premise is that theater spectators, while involving their senses and experiences, relate to plays in a unique way. For De Marinis¹⁶, the interaction between spectacle and spectator is marked by the joint production of cognitive and emotional values, without one imposing on the other. Desgranges¹⁷ (p. 31) considers the spectator's active participation in a theatrical work takes place in the involvement he establishes with the stage, his willing attitude towards the event, his attention to scenic propositions, his alert attitude, his vivid glance. As with science communication, the theater increasingly invests in public engagement and, through it, the formation of critical-thinking citizens, ready to question reality and transform it¹⁷.

To that end, gathering concepts from public engagement in science and focusing on the theater spectator, we analyzed the reception of *O rapaz da rabeça e a moça Rebeca* by the Museu da Vida's audience. We used quantitative and qualitative methodological instruments, analyzing the various creative stages of the show's production. In the present work, we rely on data from observation reports, post-play debates, and questionnaires. However, we focus our analysis on the latter category, since they are more directly compatible with this article's goals.

The fieldwork was carried out in two stages, the first, with school groups (PEsc), in June 2016. The second, with spontaneous audience (PEsp), on two weekends, one in November and one in December of the same year. In both stages, before the activity started, we explained to Museu da Vida's visitors the content and voluntary nature of the research, following the Ministry of Health's Resolution No. 510, 2016¹⁸. The analysis was based on nine presentations – seven on weekdays and two on weekends – which resulted in nine observation reports and 346 completed questionnaires (274



from PEsc and 72 from PEsp), in addition to five recorded debates. However, for the purposes of this article, which focuses on adolescent and young audiences, we examined only the 220 questionnaires answered by viewers in the 11 to 19 age group (175 from PEsc and 45 from PEsp).

The observation reports were filled out by at least two researchers – who sat strategically in the middle of the audience – during the play’s showings. They recorded the spectator’s immediate reactions. The report sheets had slots for each scene of the play and the researchers evaluated the spectators’ level of attention/dispersion, their interaction – with other viewers, the cast, and the show – and their engagement with the music and comic scenes. The researchers registered signs of entrancement and fatigue and noted audience remarks during and after the play. The debates’ audios were recorded and later transcribed for further analysis. During this stage of the study, we examined the audiences’ most discussed topics and their impressions of the play. We also examined the level of comfort experienced by the young viewers while discussing the topic, noting any signs of embarrassment. Lastly, we had the questionnaires, which consisted of open and closed questions regarding the play, viewers’ cultural trends and habits, and the subjects’ personal information. All 220 questionnaires were tabulated and analyzed. For the analysis of quantitative data, we used the Microsoft Excel program. For the qualitative analysis, we used inductive analysis methods, seeking to identify and explain response patterns.

Results and discussion

Profile of surveyed spectators

Based on questionnaire data, in our corpus, we observed subtle differences between the school audiences and the general public. Therefore, we present each separately. The school audiences consisted of mostly young women (112), aged between 12 and 19 years old, some enrolled in 8th thru 9th grades (86) and others in grades 10th thru 12th (83). Almost a third of them lived in the West Zone of Rio de Janeiro (55). The remaining group lived in the North Zone (43), Baixada Fluminense (38), and Rio state’s suburbs (24). The South Zone and cities in Rio’s greater metropolitan area were claimed by only one spectator each. As for the spontaneous audience, women were also in the majority (27), all aged 11 to 18, mostly attending elementary and middle schools (27). Their residences were evenly spread out between the West Zone and Rio’s greater metropolitan area (19 each). The north and south zones were claimed by only two residents each, and only one lived in the downtown area⁽¹⁾.

We found that a significant part of the spontaneous audience members (20) were attending a play for the first time. Of those who attended the theater in the twelve months prior to the survey (19), most (10) had seen between one and three plays during the period. Of the school audience spectators’ that attended the theater in the year before the survey (79), most (55) had also seen between one and three plays in the period. Regardless of the spectators’ degree of familiarity with the performing arts,

⁽¹⁾ For the categorization of the research participants’ places of residence, we used the division into zones and regions used in the Cadernos Museu da Vida. For examples, see: http://www.museudavida.fiocruz.br/images/Publicacoes_Educacao/PDFs/CadernosdoMuseudaVidaOPublico doMuseudaVida.pdf.



the vast majority reported liking or really liking theater (78% of school audiences and 97% of spontaneous audiences). Only a minority group, within the school audience, claimed to dislike or detest this art form (14).

The public surveyed in this study has, in many aspects, a similar profile to that of the Museu da Vida's typical visitors. It consists mainly of students from underprivileged regions of both Rio de Janeiro city and state, whose families are excluded, throughout history, from cultural activities such as going to museums and theaters¹⁹. These groups sharply contrast the usual profile of theatergoers in Rio de Janeiro: white, highly educated, upper-class men and women living in the city's wealthy South Zone²⁰. Our data, therefore, reinforce the importance of Museu da Vida's theater as a means of social and cultural inclusion, as well as science communication.

A general assessment of the Play

As was seen in questionnaire data, the vast majority of the consulted spectators, in both school and spontaneous audiences, rated the play as excellent, giving it the highest score on a scale of 1 to 5 (82% and 87%, respectively). It is worth noting that the percentage of spectators who gave the play the highest score was significantly higher than those who reported having the highest interest in the theater in the first place. This suggests that the play exceeded the expectations of part of the audience.

We asked respondents to elaborate on the "scores" they gave to the play, pointing out its positive and negative aspects. The show was praised for its comic merit as well as its informative, educational, and awareness-raising effort. Viewers praised the play's good form and content. Spectators frequently attributed the plays' success to its "light" and "fun approach" of an "important", "heavy" theme. A theme which, in the youngsters very words, is still "taboo" in society.

Many school audience members responded similarly to open questions regarding the positive and negative aspects of the show. They commented on the play's chosen theme, addressing Aids, prejudice, and disease prevention, considering one of the play's great assets, due to the "serious", "real", "current" and "seldom talked about" nature of the issue. Other highlighted aspects were the use of music, dance and comicality, the plot itself, and the actors' performance. Spontaneous visitors (who answered closed questions) rated, in first place, the plot of the play; in second, the actors' performance; and, in third, both its music and comicality. Few mentioned any negative aspects. Most left that slot blank or simply wrote "none", "nothing", and "I liked everything". The few noted criticisms referenced technical problems or isolated issues.

Thus, we can confidently state that, overall, the viewers of *O rapaz da rabeca e a moça Rebeca* held the play in high regard. Even though most did not actively choose to attend the show (school audiences) and did not include theater in their array of usual leisurely habits. They appreciated the show's address of a "serious" and "heavy" theme. That alone would be an assertive result concerning the interface between health and



theater in the context of science communication and health promotion. On the other hand, the young people's view of HIV / Aids as a "serious", "heavy" and "seldom talked about" issue raises important questions for the broader debate on the topic, as will be discussed further on.

Adherence to the theatrical play

Within the observation reports, we identified a high level of alertness and interaction between cast and audiences during the presentations. Thus, it is worth noting the commendable decision to stage the play in arena format. The mentioned format promoted active physical engagement, contributing to the viewers' concentration and interaction with the actors. The live music tended to captivate and engage the audience, who often swayed with the rhythm, clapping, and clamping their feet. The comic scenes, in turn, provided good audience responses, eliciting several bursts of laughter. We also observed that key moments of the play usually generated surprise, tension, and other reactions. The degrees of applause at the end of the play varied between medium and effusive and were often followed by praising cries such as "very good!" and "Uhul"(Hooray).

Therefore, we were able to verify that the student audience had a strong adherence to the theatrical play²¹. Beyond passive observation, we witnessed a willingness to actively participate in the show, even in youngsters unfamiliar with the theater who don't master the signs and linguistic tools that are, for some authors¹⁹, prerequisites for a significant theatrical experience. Along these lines, it is worth highlighting the play's vital role in promoting audience formation, providing a positive experience to novice viewers who tend to be excluded from the fruition of cultural activities such as the performing arts. Thus, the choice of an engaging theme for young people, told in the form of a love story, with a comedic tone, a northeastern setting, and scored with regional songs, may have been instrumental in strengthening the bond between the public and the theatrical universe. And contributing to enhancing the youngsters' grasp of theatrical language.

Engagement with the theme

The spectator's engagement with the play transcends the physical and verbal games present in the show. A significant exchange of emotional and cognitive values happens in the room¹⁶, which perdures long after the final applause. This exchange stimulates appropriation, reflection, and the formation of critical opinion on the play's themes, which, in turn, can and should irradiate to the reality of the spectator^{16,22}. We observed, mostly in the questionnaire data, that the show also caused a similar engagement between audience and play, to the extent that we were able to identify it as an active participant, as explained in the concept created by Desgranges¹⁷. In other words, the viewers realized the creative and productive act of interpreting the work, just as it is desired by the movement of public engagement in science^{14,15}, since the participant appropriates the knowledge shared in the activity and adheres to the proposed debate, taking a stand and mobilizing arguments to defend it.



In this sense, the messages that resonated the most among the consulted viewers regarded prevention, tackling the sexuality and Aids tabu, and ending the stigma associated with the disease. It is interesting to note that, in some comments and responses, these messages were mentioned together, as seen in the following excerpt, taken from a questionnaire filled by a member of the school audience: “For our prevention. And for speaking openly about the subject; so we, young people, can be more attentive, more open with our parents and friends”. Young people must relate to these messages, so they can own them in a meaningful way and incorporate them into their habits, experiences, and discourses.

We also observed that the play generated a debate around gender issues. For example, when asked about the female protagonist’s habit of always carrying a condom, everyone, without exception, commended her, saying she was responsible, intelligent, and prudent, mobilizing statements associated with women’s responsibility in preventing sexually transmitted infections (STI) – “Rebeca shows women’s new role in sexual intercourse, participating actively and consciously. Very nice.” – and female empowerment – “... it is a way to prevent STDs [sexually transmitted diseases], and a form of empowerment, since common sense dictates that the man is the one who should carry a condom”. Some questioned the gender roles established by society – “I considered her attitude very bold, since relationships are often marred by prejudice and, seeing a female character doing that, was very interesting”. It is crucial to take a stand and reinforce the female role in HIV prevention, considering our social context contamination with structural sexism, in which young women are still in a vulnerable position in regard to Aids and have little freedom of sexual expression.

The most controversial theme among viewers was the relationship between serodifferent people. Provoked by a question regarding Rebeca’s decision to marry João Tapeba even though he was HIV positive, viewers tended to commend her attitude, considering it correct, “beautiful”, “admirable” and “courageous”. Most of them approved the decision, stating both rational and emotional arguments to back it up. Some claimed, for example, that relationships with serodifferent partners can be safe: “Nothing against it, because, if she loves João, she can marry and have sex with him, as long as she wears a condom”. Others, in turn, focused on the importance of the protagonist’s decision in the effort to deconstruct stigma around Aids – “An important decision that shows everyone that prejudice is unnecessary”. Among the emotionally charged statements, we highlight those claiming that love conquers all – “I think that love needs no justification. She stayed with him despite being aware of the risks and possible consequences. That’s Love”. On the other hand, some viewers considered the decision to be risky, presenting more neutral arguments, without taking a stand – “We can only talk about a situation if we are experiencing it firsthand because it is a very difficult decision”. Thus, we identified a certain fear regarding the risk of HIV transmission in a relationship between serodifferent people. Along these lines, a minority took a stand against Rebeca’s decision, emphasizing the risks of transmission – “Dangerous, because she has the risk of being infected”. It is worth mentioning that, even though the majority approved Rebeca’s decision, some arguments in her defense reveal young people’s romanticized



view of sexual relations and their lack of knowledge of different prevention methods in serodifferent relationships. Overall, only the condom was mentioned. This lack of knowledge may also help explain the more fearful and negative stands on the topic.

On youth, HIV and Aids

Data from different research tools were used to better understand how the surveyed youngsters relate to the theme of HIV / Aids. We were surprised to discover the lack of basic information these youngsters had about the virus and the disease. Their comments and responses to the questionnaires as well as questions during the debates (if kissing presents a risk of infection, if the disease is treatable, if there are other forms of prevention besides the use of condoms) show that even with so much information available on the topic the facts are not being appropriated by part of the young population. We also found that the vast majority of participants were unaware of the current global HIV health policies, such as combined prevention, and did not know that subjects with an undetectable condition – having their viral load minimized by treatment – do not transmit the virus. Our data indicate, however, that this information gap is not a result of lack of interest or motivation, quite the contrary. As seen before, the play garnered interest and provided a pleasurable experience for the consulted viewers, corroborating data from other studies, such as those of Freitas and Dias²³, which showed a good reception of sex-ed activities by other youths, especially when they feel they are in a judgment-free environment and can speak freely.

When trying to understand what causes this lack of information, we came upon another important point: the fact that the subject is still a big taboo. Our data corroborate studies and experiments that show how HIV, Aids, and sexuality are still seen as forbidden topics and are seldom discussed in families, schools, and even among couples^{24,25}. In our research, this was reflected in the viewers' reactions to the scenes where sex was mentioned or where a condom was displayed. In those moments, common audience reactions were: embarrassed or ironic giggles, disapproving glances, and whispers between viewers. During the debates, graphic moments were met with laughter – for example, when the proper use of the condom was displayed. This reinforces how this subject was embarrassing to that audience. The couples' difficulty to discuss the subject, especially young ones, may be an important reason behind the adolescents' low adherence to the use of condoms, as is suggested by Alves and Lopes²⁶. Lack of information about HIV / Aids can also reinforce the disease's stigma since all that's unknown tends to generate fear and rejection. Thus, we reinforce the importance of the debates held between actors and the audience after the play. They are an opportunity for young people to ask, listen, and reflect on these issues without feeling judged.

We also identified in our data a romanticized view of the love-sexual relationship, associated with the belief in destiny and emotions as defining forces in the course of human lives, minimizing the power of rational decisions. In our study, when viewers were asked to elaborate on Rebeca's decision to marry João, even though he was HIV positive, a percentage of them, mostly women, deemed her decision correct and brave, and attributed it to love. This is not surprising, considering the central role that love plays in Western societies, being understood as the basis of social interactions and the



key influence on human choices, and identified as a feminine emotion²⁷. However, it is worth noting that this particular view of love as romantic and feminine can lead to an ideal of intimacy that hinders women's sexual freedom, inhibiting their desires, and pleasures²⁷. On the one hand, the play reinforces this view – with a young lady loyally waiting for the return of her beloved while he, in turn, goes off to live sexual adventures. On the other hand, by telling the story of a serodifferent couple with a happy ending, the show can contribute to the deconstruction of the stigma around Aids, as was pointed out by the viewers themselves. Besides, the construction of a decisive, strong, empathic protagonist who is proactive in her regard of STI prevention, can empower young adolescents' view of their health and sexuality.

Final considerations

We can conclude that uniting health and theater in a science communication activity was a successful strategy, eliciting positive responses and strong engagement from the target audience. In this sense, our study reinforces art's potential as an important ally in this field; not as a tool to transmit content, but as a language capable of raising awareness, generating emotions, and building new outlooks and world views.

We also found that the show *O rapaz da rabeça e a moça Rebeca* engaged young people from Rio de Janeiro in the debate on HIV / Aids – following the conceptual model of public engagement in science – by stimulating reflections and a critical attitude toward different aspects of the Aids epidemic. Based on contemporary concepts of science communication^{13,14}, we also believe that the play contributed to the exercise of scientific citizenship. The appropriation of current knowledge about HIV / Aids and the discussion of aspects of the theme that go beyond biomedical and epidemiological issues favor the formation of empowered critical thinking citizens. These would then be prepared to take a stand, make health decisions in their daily lives, and take part in the governance of the sector.

On the other hand, we noticed a lack of information and dialogue about HIV / Aids, which may be linked with lingering stigma and discrimination, undiagnosed cases of HIV infection, and young people's unwillingness to use condoms. It also hinders access to the various prevention strategies integrating the current HIV health policy.

These results reinforce the importance of intensifying communication strategies to cope with the Aids epidemic, especially those targeting teens and youngsters. It is crucial to educate them about safe sex and available medication and promote debate on the theme's socioeconomic, political, and cultural aspects. However, it is necessary to rethink current initiatives, their current methods, language, and content, and adapt them to the targeted audiences, to make them more effective than the official prevention campaigns. The analyzed theatrical activity is an example of this. Furthermore, we echo Monteiro's²⁸ views, when she emphatically states that HIV prevention policies need to have approaches that surpass individual accountability and more tuned in with public health, human rights, and structural social changes.



Finally, it is important to bear in mind the engagement of adolescents, including those living with HIV, in efforts against the referred epidemic. Considering the target audience while designing these initiatives is instrumental both to their relevance and effectiveness. When it comes to Aids, history reveals the vital role of patients, families, and social movements in the production of knowledge about the disease, the monitoring of Aids relief policies, and the defense of HIV-positive individual rights^{29,30}. The actors' articulate work continues to be instrumental in the epidemic control effort and will be indispensable to achieve its longed-for – but still distant – end.

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Authors' contributions

All authors actively participated in all stages of production of the manuscript.

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Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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Apesar dos avanços no enfrentamento à Aids, registra-se, na última década, o aumento de infecções por HIV entre jovens. Isso motivou o Museu da Vida a produzir uma peça sobre HIV/Aids voltada a esse público. Neste artigo, apresentamos resultados de estudo conduzido com o público do espetáculo, com idades de 11 a 19 anos, baseado na observação de nove apresentações, cinco debates pós-peça e 220 questionários. Além de recepção positiva e forte adesão dos espectadores, verificamos que a peça foi capaz de engajá-los no debate sobre HIV/Aids. Contudo, observamos que faltam espaços de diálogo sobre o assunto, o que pode estar associado à manutenção de estigma e discriminação. Concluímos que a estratégia de unir Saúde e Teatro em uma atividade de divulgação científica foi bem-sucedida, mas ainda há muitos desafios relacionados ao enfrentamento do HIV/Aids, sobretudo entre os jovens.

Palavras-chave: Divulgação científica. Ciência e arte. Saúde e teatro. HIV/Aids.

A pesar de los avances en el enfrentamiento del Sida, en la última década se registra un aumento de infecciones por VIH entre los jóvenes. Esto motivó al Museo de la Vida a producir una obra de teatro sobre VIH/Sida dirigida a ese público. En este artículo presentamos resultados del estudio realizado con el público de 11 a 19 años del espectáculo, basado en la observación de nueve presentaciones, cinco debates posfunción y 220 cuestionarios. Además de la recepción positiva y de la fuerte adhesión de los espectadores, verificamos que la obra teatral fue capaz de hacerlos participar en el debate sobre VIH/Sida. No obstante, observamos que faltan espacios de diálogo sobre la cuestión, lo que puede estar asociado al mantenimiento del estigma y de la discriminación. Concluimos que la estrategia de unir salud y teatro en una actividad de divulgación científica fue exitosa, pero que hay todavía muchos desafíos relacionados al enfrentamiento de VIH/Sida entre los jóvenes.

Palabras clave: Divulgación científica. Ciencia y arte. Salud y teatro. VIH/Sida