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“Man of Glass”, or Art Therapy through Theatre in a Group of Underprivileged Children

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Abstract

This article presents influencing with art¹ and influencing through art² aiming at the creation of situations which support the potential of individuals, especially in the case of children from backgrounds with ineffective parenting. Children from such backgrounds participated in an arts therapy project which aimed to facilitate creative activity through the preparation of a theatre show. Children’s cognitive, psychological and emotional needs are important, which is why the satisfaction of these needs was also an aim, as it was found that these needs were not being satisfied in the children’s culturally deprived environment. Influencing through art (in this case – a performing art) can very well serve the satisfaction of individual needs related to self-identification and self-definition (Bauman, 2010). From this point on, it is a straight road to influencing individuals’ self-esteem.

Key words: *theatre, therapy, artistic research*

¹ This is a process understood in perceptive categories. It occurs when the perceiving subject creates a relationship between art and their own needs, the contact with art bringing them benefits which enable discovery of a sense of one’s own, in hermeneutics’ understanding of such discovery.

² In this dimension, a creative aspect appears, where the participant undertakes expressive activity based on raw material taken from art, composing movement or music or designing a work of visual arts (Krasoń, 2013).

Introduction: Emotions in Influencing with Theatre as an Experience of Art

There are two ways in which a human being deals with difficult experiences – rumination and expression. To define the former, let us assume it to be passive and recurring, focusing on symptoms of one's own suffering and on the circumstances accompanying such symptoms (Nolen–Hoeksema, McBride & Larson 1997). Nolen–Hoeksema, McBride and Larson (1997) define *rumination* as a specific and undesirable way of dealing with stress, which adds to and often generates an amplification and lengthening of a depressed mood state. The contrary happens when one *reveals* one's emotional traumas. Their expression in the form of verbalization, in writing or in artistic activity (in our case in theatre) helps eliminate adverse results of negative emotions, alleviating symptoms, (even somatic ones), and leads to more positively marked feelings being experienced. Discussing emotions revealed in expressive theatrical activity becomes an important step in introducing order to an individual's understanding of their own emotions. Such a process of revealing an individual's feelings, especially unfortunate feelings, is a process of restructuring (Salovey, Bedell, Detweiler & Mayer, 1999). Conversations about the show and conversations we have throughout the show's preparation help us deal with the difficulty and the feelings it determines (Salovey, Bedell, Detweiler & Mayer, 2000).

Theatrical expression might occur in two forms. In this context, there are about two types of projection – classical and attributive. The former has a defensive dimension and means an individual perceiving their unfavourable or unpleasant traits as not belonging to themselves. The traits are ascribed to the character the person is portraying in the play. Such projection on others frees the person from discomfort. Attributive projection focuses on externalization – ascribing one's own motives for action, feelings or actions to others. Each of these modes of existence brings closer to the surface those traits which are dominant in the actor's personality.

According to the psychoanalyst Gilbert J. Rose, an aesthetic utterance, taking an artistic-theatrical form as the medium for its content, brings harmonious reconciliation between thoughts and feelings. This happens much more easily than in a process which is based purely on intellectual operations in their everyday manifestations (Rose, 1980). The aesthetic form of a show is a reflection of discrepancy and tension in the mind (e.g. between impulses of logical and emotional nature, or between the past and the present), but its significance is not limited to such a reflection. At the same time, it harmonizes the discrepancies and serves an

adaptive function. Moreover, the structure of the aesthetic form is an invitation to participate in identification and recognition of subjective experience and its significance is rooted in biology (Rose, 1980).

The structure of a show enables participants to take part in the expressive task which is to be fulfilled and results from an attitude based on "feeling into" the psychological states of another person. Thus, an individual suspends their own experiencing and switches to another person's situation, as if they actually were the other person. What happens then is somehow a penetration of a different existence. Such an experience of empathy generates a bond of its own kind, a community of feelings – an *isophor*. What is more, such empathising enables an interpretation of the world from the point of view of the actor's psychological acts. Empathically realized understanding of another human being prevents us from rejecting the motives which direct their actions (socio-emphatic competences). Such an approach allows the participant to take part in corrective emotional experiences, to gain social skills and experience situations which amplify their feeling of self-worth and improve their self-esteem. And this was the primary aim.

"Man of Glass" – an Arts and Research Project

This section presents a therapeutic project run by the author in a sociotherapy day centre in Katowice. The project³ was a form of support for children from deprived backgrounds and, at the same time, an opportunity for art-based research, in which, by their qualitative and simultaneously idiographic evaluation of their own artistic activity, the participants became researchers themselves.

Artistic research has not been the subject of any comprehensive study so far. English-language sources use various terms to describe this type of research: *artistic research*, *art(s)-based research*, *performative research*, *practice-led research* (Borgdorff, 2013, p. 146). However, Teikmanis (2013, p. 164) proposes a differentiation based on the involvement and character of the researcher. *Artistic research* seeks opportunity to transfer the content of the aesthetic experience through a creative process crowned with a work of art (Borgdorff, 2011, p. 45). In this type of research, artistic practice is the subject of the study, its context, research method and result.

³ Preparation of the "Man of Glass" theatre show based on Beata Krupska's fairy tale was funded with a grant from the POWR.03.01.00-IP.08-00-UMO/17. The show premiered on 5th March 2019.

Participants – The Initial State of the Project

The participants of the project were 9 children aged 8–15, six girls and three boys. All participants are members of a sociotherapy day Centre – 6 children from the younger group and 3 children from the older group.

Members of the day Centre⁴ are in a difficult emotional, social and economic situation. The most common problems in their families are: long-term unemployment, alcoholism and lack of an adequate material basis for existence. This causes the children to experience anxiety, tension and insecurity. To release emotions and tension, they often accost others, start conflicts, provoke rejection in relationships, or destroy things in acts of anger. Two further traits characteristic of the members are also a lack of faith in themselves and a distrust of adults. Thus, the children are exposed to the long-term negative influence of their environment.

In many cases, the children's problems are rooted in unprocessed problems of adults. There are no boundaries and rules in the children's homes. During theatre workshops, the children often sought to break previously established rules.

As soon as the first meeting either very low or inadequately high self-esteem could be observed in the children. They think very badly of themselves and their image of reality and the surrounding world is distorted. They perceive their surroundings as something negative. Equally often, they think that everyone lies and that they cannot be trusted. Lack of faith in their own power also leads to a fear of public appearances and a feeling of shame related to public speaking, speaking in a group and sharing their feelings. This often results in withdrawal and strong shame in creative activities. During an initial conversation, one of the participants admitted:

When I recite a poem in class, I do not speak to the class, but I whisper into the teacher's ear. I'm really stressed cause everybody's staring at me when I'm speaking. It pisses me off and stresses me a lot⁵.

⁴ The Centre provides daytime care for children from families requiring psychological and material aid. The character of the aid is multidimensional as it might be directed both at the children and at the parents. The Centre runs sociotherapy and sports classes, which help the children to unwind from emotional tensions, bring them corrective experiences and help them to learn new psychological skills. Moreover, the Centre provides meals and the constant support of psychologists and educators, but does not operate artistic activities.

⁵ All participants' utterances are written in italics.

Members of the day Centre rarely undertake constructive tasks, they quickly give up when faced with obstacles. They abandon activities saying: *I won't do that, that's stupid, that's pointless*. Such utterances also arise from low self-esteem. During the workshops, one could observe that when the participants failed in a task, they tended to throw objects and materials, damaging their earlier work. They also find it difficult to control their emotions. When they begin to feel anger or strong frustration, they do not know what to do or how to deal with the emotion.

They experience difficulties in establishing constructive relations with their peers. Such relations are often filled with envy, jealousy and competitiveness. They demand the attention of adults and want as much of it as possible for themselves. They exhibit little empathy or kindness. They rarely appreciate the fact that they might share something with others or do something for others.

For the above reasons, the following pedagogical objectives of the therapeutic project were identified:

- To provide the children with an opportunity for creative theatrical activity and an opportunity to observe such activity as they are capable of;
- To enable the children to experience the power of agency and self-development, which correlates with a feeling of self-worth
- To achieve group integration, through a strengthening of bonds, and to create the experience of cooperation and a sense of responsibility for joint work.

The Theatrical Conception – Visualisation⁶. A Staging Perspective

WORKSHOP 1 PREPARATION PHASE

The first phase was dedicated to body and space awareness and the creation of gesture-based messages. Three workshops offered exercises preparing the body for movement. They included improvisation with music and motoric warm-ups. There were also a few theatrical exercises, in which the children designed short scenes on chosen topics and presented them to the group. Except for a few participants, the group was willing to engage in the proposed motoric activities, the main purpose of which was learning one's own body. One of the participants recalls:

⁶ For a complete description of the visualization theatre work strategy see Krasoń, 2013. See also: Krasoń, 2011.

The warm-ups with running, storytelling and the fun with the parachute, that was great. I had great fun.

In the 4th meeting, after the motoric exercises, the group read Beata Krupska's "Man of Glass", which was introduced as an inspiration for the show. Then a conversation about the text began. The children shared their interpretations, spoke of their first associations and ideas on how to use the story in a show. Each participant expressed their ideas for scenes and transformed the words into gestures and movement. During the exercise, it could be seen that some of the participants had a strong need for their contributions to be highly individual and to add something of their own. In a few cases this even caused arguments, as some children did not abstain from making spiteful, and sometimes even foul-mouthed, comments and found it easy to subject their classmates' activity to ruthless criticism. Sometimes everybody wanted to say something, shouting to drown out the others' voices. After everybody was heard, however, the main message of the future presentation could be constructed.

WORKSHOP 2 IMPROVISATION – THE PHASE OF CREATIVE NEGOTIATION

During this workshop, with the aim of further inspiration and stimulation of the participants' imagination, a score was added⁷, its additional aim being to help order scenes in the show. Many children found the pieces difficult to process, as they were pieces of cinematic music, but classically orchestrated. This might have resulted from lack of prior acquaintance with such music. Another difficult aspect was simply focused and selective listening. Then, an improvisation was proposed, in which the participants were supposed to present gestures illustrating the music and the text they had previously read. Thus, the children found living contact not only with their own bodies, but also with the bodies of the other participants. It could be observed that not everyone found the proposed structure easy. Some children needed more time to engage in the exercise, sometimes even asking for help. They were saying that they did not know what to do. It was clear that it was something completely new for them. In the proposed structure, it was important that movement carried a particular message.

After a presentation of conceived gestures, interpretations and ideas accepted by the majority of participants were chosen. The group used material that had been gathered to create a set of movement-based scenes which helped build a first out-

⁷ Jan A.P. Kaczmarek's score from the *Quo vadis* motion picture.

line of the show and distribute parts among the participants. It was noticeable how involved the children became. It seemed that the youngsters cared, and wanted to bring the show into existence and have an influence on the shaping of particular scenes. Many of them were vocal in offering their remarks about the plot. Some exhibited a proclivity for directing, which could be seen in the particular planning of where and when each event should take place. Sometimes it was difficult to reach a compromise, but this was felt to be a most valuable and important part of the process. Children whose opinion rarely matters at home, where they are unable to express what they feel, could finally feel causative power, even if only for a moment. It was moving to see three of the lads listening to the music attentively so that their stage entrance would match the change of musical phrase perfectly. Looking at their concentration juxtaposed with their previous behaviour during the motorial workshop, when they had run in disorderly fashion around the room and ignored the teacher's instructions, a significant change was observed. A care about their common show was being born.

WORKSHOP 3 THE PHASE OF FORMULATING REPETITIVE GESTURE. SHAPING THE PART

It was during that workshop that the show found its final plot.

Scene 1. The narrator standing in the Centre. He begins telling the story of the *Man of Glass*. The other actors one by one run up to him and, leaning out from behind him, say consecutive lines of the text. The scene is performed without music. After the presentation of the text, everybody exits the stage. This part of the show aimed to present the idea of the plot to the audience as the dominant activity in the following part would be kinaesthetic.

Scene 2. The set – created by the actors – appears. Mountains are built – the actors enter with red sheets of cloth. They initially dance with the sheets for a moment and then wrap themselves in them or cover themselves with them, freezing onstage in a position of their own design.

Scene 3. Little stars appear on stage, performing an improvised dance to the music. After a while they are joined by the moon, made of a large golden sheet of cloth and carried by two actresses. The moon performs three motions (each time the sheet is raised and falls down freely), at the front, at the rear and on the side. Then, the moon exits the stage.

Scene 4. This is when the *Man of Glass* first appears, consecutively touching each of the stars thus causing them to freeze. The stars remain motionless. The *Man of Glass* exits the stage.

Scene 5. The moon enters again. The mountains come alive and start moving their sheets, standing in a row in the center of the stage. The stars hide behind the moon, which, in this scene as well consists of a golden sheet held by two actresses.

Scene 6. The stars exit the stage. The mountains transform into humans, the humans fall down. Each of the falling humans lies on a red sheet. The *Man of Glass* appears and, following the moon, consecutively rescues each of the humans. The music changes. The piece being played is of majestic nature, lending the scene grandiloquence.

Scene 7. The actors create a city. The mountains stand in a row and, covering themselves with their sheets, create houses. The moon stretches behind the town. The stars twinkle, moving their arms and their whole bodies. Everybody freezes when the music stops.

Scene 8. The scene opens with music playing. Another piece is played. The mountains spread their red sheets and stand in a square, thus creating a screen. The *Man of Glass* enters the square and exits it after a while.

Scene 9. The actors throw stones (balls made of aluminium foil) at the *Man of Glass*. Next, they tie him up with the red sheets and pull him toward them. The narrator reads a text about how people got bored and started throwing stones at the *Man of Glass*, because of how good and glassy he was. And then someone throws a bad word at him and the *Man of Glass* breaks and falls apart into pieces.

Scene 10. The actors pick up the pieces of the *Man of Glass*. They throw the pieces on the moon, which is lying on the stage, the core of the moon becoming a platform on which to lay the pieces. Everybody runs and performs chaotic moves. The dynamism and the mood of the music playing lends drama to the whole scene.

Scene 11. The *Man of Glass* pulled by the two actresses playing the moon enters the stage wrapped in the golden sheet. He begins to rise slowly, being somehow reborn.

Scene 12. Narrator's text. The music changes. All actors grasp each other's hands and come to the center of the stage. The *Man of Glass* utters the final sentence, "We should never say a bad word to anyone, because we never know which of us is made of glass."

WORKSHOP 4 THE PHASE OF REHEARSALS, REVISION AND CONFIGURATION

This phase was divided into three meetings. One of these took place in the Soci-therapeutic Day Centre, in the same room which hosted the workshops. The two remaining meetings took place in the theatre of The City Culture Centre, where, in

addition to a professional stage, the show gained proper lighting and stage moves could be practised with greater precision. It was the first rehearsal after a longer period. The children were very lively. It could be seen that they were nervous and worried. One participant's mistake caused untamed anger and frustration in the others. The participants were pointing out one another's mistakes. The children had forgotten their parts. They did not know when to come on stage, how to move, or where to stand. Nor did they remember the ending of the show. The finale of the tale was almost entirely built afresh. However, the children were positive about wanting to bring the show to a premiere.

The second meeting was different from the previous one. It took place at The City Culture Centre, the planned venue of the show. The interior of the place is a professional theatre. The children's reaction indicated that some of them were in such a place for the first time. The children were amazed by the curtains. They were touching the black panelling, and playing the backstage piano. Their attention was drawn by everything. This fascination probably resulted from poverty in the primary habitus. After they came on stage, it could be seen that the children were doing it for real. They were focused and concentrated.

Before the show itself, a short dress rehearsal took place. The children were very nervous. Their nervousness increased as the curtain-up drew closer. When they peeped from behind the curtain, and saw their friends, parents and carers sitting in the audience, this was a trigger for another outburst of panic and stress. Then, many of them were heard to say: *I won't go on, I'm not performing, I'm afraid*. Talking to the children before the show, it was observed that they represented two different positions. Some of them were stressed as they feared their parents would not come, others feared that they would come but would not like the show, and some feared that their nearest and dearest would see them and that their reaction was unpredictable.

WORKSHOP 5 ONSTAGE PRESENTATION OF THE SHOW FOR AN AUDIENCE

The show went well and received loud applause. The children were in character. After a few minutes, the stress began to wane. It was clear that the actors were paying attention and focusing on the action.

After the public presentation of the show finished, the children gave idiographic interviews (which were recorded on camera⁸). It was considered important to

⁸ The utterances were recorded by Agnieszka Gabryś as part of her research seminar. The children liked the situation very much – they felt like stars being interviewed after a premiere.

document all of the children's emotions as well as their observations, which would help assess whether the show and the whole project had been fruitful and achieved the aims set at the outset.

Utterances concerning the score and the music-related activities.

Karol: In my first part, I have to listen to the music carefully. You need to have the musical feeling. There is that one short piece of music repeated three times, you need to know when to enter. If I entered in the middle, that wouldn't make sense. I listen, and only when it's the third time do I enter.

Kamila: The best thing is when the music gets quieter and Nikola speaks and you can hear the music a little. The music in the show is great. If there's badly chosen music it's much more difficult. We count to 5 and enter.

The utterances suggest that the actors understood the importance of using music in the show. The music provided the show with a certain framework and helped the participants recognize their entry points and make their movements fit the action.

EVALUATION OF THE PRESENTATION PHASE

Utterances from the younger group:

The greatest stress was when you saw all those people. But then, after going onstage I had a sense of a relief. I felt very well and the acting was going great already. It was nice. When I was coming onstage, I fell down. But I acted around it and it looked as if it had been planned. I would like to repeat it.

When I went onstage and my costume started shining, I felt like a real star. I made a mistake, but it was cool that a friend noticed that and said my line. I was really very afraid. I could feel the stress as late as halfway through, but I am happy that I managed to overcome it at the end. I liked the costume a lot. I felt great in it. I could be somebody else for a moment.

The most difficult thing was that we had to keep looking at the audience while dancing and saying our lines. That was stressful.

All the eyes were looking at me. I was in the centre of attention. Normally I don't like it, but on stage then, when I did well, it was cool.

The greatest joy was just being able to perform on a stage like that. It was very important and new to me. The whole show gave me lots of joy. For me the show was like the cherry on top of a cake.

Utterances from the older group:

I am happy I could perform. That was something amazing. Those gloves, those decorations, that glitter. I liked that I could say something. I just enjoyed everything. A difficulty and a challenge for me was learning the text cause it was a bit hard. For example “The Man of Glass was walking across the country”, it is difficult. A theatre show makes you think. Maybe after seeing this one someone will change something in their life. I wanted the audience to understand what we meant in the show. I hope we succeeded.

My friends came to watch. When I was talking to them after the show, they said they liked it very much and understood what it was about. It was very important and nice for me. I am proud of myself. I am happy I didn't make a mistake and everything was all right.

I am happy and I feel great relief that I could perform in front of an audience. I love such things. I had a cool part, there was nothing difficult in the show for me. A great pleasure. The most important thing for me was that people understood the message. What we mean, that you can't hurt others and that words might hurt. I am proud to be “saving the world from evil”.

The participants' idiographic utterances collected after the show indicate the success of the activities and might suggest that the workshops were effective.

It is significant that after the performance this was no longer a group of children of different ages, but a team of empathizing persons. Their communication with one another had also slightly changed – it showed less aggression and invective. However, for such changes to become permanent the theatre work would need to be continued, that is, added to the activities routinely organized at the day centre.

Instead of a conclusion. Recommendations for theatre activities as a component of support for children from underprivileged backgrounds

The performance in the show gave the children an opportunity for transcendence – to step beyond their possibilities. What is important is that they overcame their fears and started believing in themselves. The participants gained recognition among their peers and other members of the audience, which had a positive effect on their self-esteem, self-perception and feelings of self-worth. This finds confirmation in a report from the deputy chairperson of the Foundation a few days after the show:

The children were still living the show a few days after the premiere. They recalled it much later. They wanted to look at the photos. They were happy that the photos had also been posted on Facebook, which further boosted their self-appreciation and was important for them.

The theatre show proved to be an excellent form of work with a group of young people with decreased self-esteem. The show enabled all the children, even those without theatrical experience from school, to appear on stage. They could perform on a professional stage, with lighting, a sound system and music, which enabled them to feel like real actors.

The workshops and the exercises in them gave the participants a chance of learning something completely new. The children worked with their bodies, learning their bodies, and rediscovering them.

The experience of the performance was significant not only for the children, but also for their peers, teachers and parents. One reflection is the positive effect the show had on the performers' families, for whom it was a great experience. One of the mothers explained after the show that she perceived it had an immense therapeutic potential for herself. The woman had come to the show with her younger son who very much wanted to see his brother on stage. For her, the outing was also a way to break away from home. She is a single mother of three children. She had not thought she would feel so good. The fact that her son Wiktor had performed was immensely important for her and she was very proud of him. Just the opportunity to sit in the audience and watch a show, and feel like a member of the audience, was extraordinary for her.

It seems that activities of this type should continue. It is important that after the project ended, the staff had a meeting with the children, in which they discussed the psychological issues related to the story of the Man of Glass. It was a contin-

uation of playing with the metaphor outside of the project cycle, which not only showed the supportive value of the topic of the project, but was also a positive valorization of theatre-based activities.

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