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## **Personal and social dimensions of the theatrical activity of people with autism spectrum disorder – the case study of the ‘Authentic Artists’ theatre group**

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### **Editorial preface**

One of many books popularising the theory of transactional analysis, written by Muriel James and Dorothy Jongeward is entitled *Born to Win*. It is, at the same time, one of key elements of the transactional analysis theory, saying that we can “win our life” in the sense of supporting our personal development and realizing our own potential. Unfortunately, sometimes this process can be made much more difficult due to one’s disability. The author describes an example of a specific activity, namely theatrical activity of people with autism spectrum disorder. She shows the specificity of self-expression, development, getting to know oneself and undertaking actions for oneself, becoming victorious in this disorder and despite difficult relations with one’s environment. In the aforesaid activity, there are specific transactions that have to be “explained” in both ways. The recipient cannot be passive, they have to concentrate on the uniqueness and originality of a message. From the point of view of transactional analysis, it is a specific way of communication, transactions go there beyond a classic framework, one cannot use simple diagrams and classifications. At the same time, the experiences of the actors and the audience show that it is an experience that allows for developing the right attitudes and that leads to being victorious, not by playing a given role but by talking about oneself through that role.

Zbigniew Wieczorek

## Abstract

The theatre, in which the actors are people with autism spectrum disorder (I use the term “autism spectrum disorder” as the development of a person suffering from autism is not always linked with disorders that significantly make their functioning difficult or make them suffer), has not been researched extensively yet. Most of the texts consider the therapeutic contexts of theatrical activity performed by people with autism spectrum disorder, or even interventions against them using theatrical techniques. In this article, the author looks for a different perspective on the phenomenon of theatrical activities performed by people with autism spectrum disorder. The presented research aimed at showing the activities of “Authentic Artists” theatre in two dimensions: personal and social. The research method used was a qualitative study of an individual case, which was the theatre group of people with autism spectrum disorder, “Authentic Artists” from Łódź. The research showed that theatrical activity can be a source of personal satisfaction and fulfillment for people with autism spectrum disorder. The theatre also turned out to be a place to establish relationships and make friends. It was shown that the activity of “Authentic Artists” also has an emancipatory potential, being a space for searching for one’s own forms of identity and creativity.

**Keywords:** autism spectrum disorder, creativity, theatre, emancipation.

## Introduction

Till the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the approach to people with disabilities was shaped by a medical model of disability, which negatively influenced social attitudes towards them. People with disabilities were not perceived as society members actively creating the public sphere. Jolanta Rzeźnicka-Krupa remarks that even nowadays people with disabilities “[...] are located on the margin in the world of social relations, which [...] creates, strengthens and maintains the phenomenon of auto-marginalisation and socio-cultural exclusion” (Rzeźnicka-Krupa, 2009, p. 9). Putting disabilities in the area of medical discourse, not only made “non-medical” opinions on people with disabilities void, but above all deprived these people of their voice, making them socially non-existent. Nowadays, there are attempts to break the monopoly of healthy people’s opinions on disabilities, to get away from traditional, medical, rehabilitation and individual discourse, and to focus on humanistic discourse, where a lot of attention is given to reflection on freedom, subjectivity and autonomy of people with disabilities.

In the volume devoted to theatrical activity of disabled people, *Therapy and Theatre. On the Issue of the Theatre of Disabled People (Terapia i teatr. Wokół problematyki teatru ludzi niepełnosprawnych)*, Rafał Zięba notices that silence understood as voice deprivation of people with disabilities, being a consequence of traditional discourse, has been broken in the theatre area (Zięba, 1999, p. 30). It offers people with disabilities “an opportunity to combat well-rooted psycho-social attitudes isolating disabled people, an opportunity to break free from the feeling of alienation, loneliness and helplessness” (Jajte-Lewkowicz, 1999, p. 7). Thanks to the theatre, people with disabilities have an opportunity to speak in

their name. The theatre makes them treated with respect, perceived as individuals able to make independent, responsible decisions. Of course, on the condition that they are given a chance to transform their own experiences into the matter of a given play, and their unique way of speaking is taken into account (Zięba, 1999, p. 30). In her concept of “The Theatre Conditioned by a Person” Anita Stefańska promotes the theatre of people with disabilities as “an exceptional place of meeting another person who offers (a spectator, another participant) their original, unique way of feeling and comprehending the world, suggests other means of expression deriving from their different sensitivity” (Stefańska, 2011, p. 422). Similar thoughts can be found in the reflections of Lech Śliwonik on “the theatre for life” as he warns against imposing one’s own visions on an actor with a disability, sticking to one role, previously chosen for them and trying to make a play “like in an ordinary theatre,” subject to the director’s vision, not taking into account the actor’s sensitivity and their way of functioning (Śliwonik, 2006). Toon Baro, a therapist and director of Belgian *Tartaar* theatre remarks that “Apart from the right to develop, the theatre provides disabled actors with something else: an opportunity to express themselves, to show their discoveries to the whole world – their audience [...] The Theatre allows them to show their feelings on stage, in their own pace, based on their own intuition, using their own symbolism, gestures and words, which they have chosen for this very part, at this very moment” (Baro, 2006, p. 77).

At the theatre of people with disabilities the most important thing is to discover and comprehend their world, to concentrate on their personality and uniqueness and to give them the right to be equal partners and to co-create an artistic event such as a theatre play. Otherwise, such a person is deprived of their identity, logic and truth (Zięba, 1999, p. 31). Andrzej Wojciechowski notices that „We also deal with falsification when a work of culture called a work of the disabled is not like that at all – it is a work of a therapist made by the disabled hands, bodies or voices – hence the necessity to tell the truth about this work” (Wojciechowski, 1999, p. 19). The theatre which follows a disabled person, letting them speak “with their own voice,” in their name, letting them interpret the world differently, use their personal means of expression offers a space for an act of communication and understanding between “normality” and disability, creating a space of reciprocity and meeting (Godlewska-Byliniak, Lipko-Konieczna, 2017, p. 9). “I am convinced that a theatre play [...] should [...] be art, beautiful and engaged in a dialogue with the audience – and at the same time, it should support cultural emancipation of disabled people,” writes Baro (2006, p. 75).

### **The theatre of people with autism spectrum disorder**

The theatre, in which the actors are people with autism spectrum disorder, has not been researched extensively yet. Most of the texts consider the therapeutic

contexts of theatrical activity performed by people with autism spectrum disorder (cf. Corbett, 2011) or even interventions against them using theatrical or drama techniques (Corbett et al., 2016).

It might seem that autism spectrum disorder and theatre are poles apart. If, as a point of reference, we take the model of autism focused on deficits, the model that describes its essence in terms of “lacks” and “delays,” according to which it is something undesirable and worse than non-autism that we identify as a “norm” (Platos, 2018), there arises a question how a person with communication deficits, with no social reciprocity, excessively attached to routine and with limited interests (APA, 2013) can stand in front of the audience as a rightful actor equipped with the ability of artistic expression. Social and cultural frameworks of autism perception turn out to be very important. Mateusz Platos (2018) notices that “in the short history of autism its affiliation to known concept categories (illness, disorder, disability) has changed dynamically with time.” The introduction mentioned that the medical and rehabilitation discourse concerning disability, including autism spectrum disorder, is gradually giving way to a different approach. An example of re-defining autism can be the concept of ASC (Autism Spectrum Condition) proposed by Simon Baron-Cohen, where the word “disorder” is replaced with “condition.” In the author’s opinion, this suggestion takes into account reservations of people with autism, who consider the term “disorder” as stigmatizing, whereas “condition” covers both their strengths and difficulties they experience (Rynkiewicz et al., 2019).

Another way of talking about autism is the concept of neurodiversity coming from the movement of autism self-spokesmen. Simplifying, it assumes that autism is another neurological version, a different, equally good way of being a human creature. Although there is no place in this article for a detailed description of the neurodiversity concept and scientific discussion about it, it is worth quoting social and ethical consequences of this approach. According to this concept, it is essential that people with autism spectrum disorder receive support that respects genuine forms of human diversity, expression and ways of being. It is not without a reason that one of few texts on the theatre of people with autism spectrum disorder is entitled *Neurodiversity on the Stage: The Effects of Inclusive Theatre on Youth with Autism* (Kim, 2015). Although it is not completely free from therapeutic discourse, a special emphasis is placed on issues concerning participation, participation of people with autism in theatre, and on the inclusive dimension of this activity (Kim, 2015). According to the authors, theatre as performative art creates social space where pre-established norms and values might be suspended and changed, offering an opportunity for personal and social change (Kim, 2015). In the article *Autism and comedy: using theatre workshops to explore humour with adolescents on the spectrum* (May, 2017) the author notices that actors with autism are not artists despite their condition but this condition opens a new door of artistic expression to them. Michał Borczuch, the director of

*Paradiso* play, performed by actors with autism and based on their improvisation with professional actors, in an interview with Agata Dąbek (2017) remarks that thanks to cooperation with people with autism spectrum disorder, the authors (healthy) had an opportunity to reject the categories based on traditional dichotomy *normative – non-normative*. What is usually treated as an exception to the rule, in theatre could be perceived as subjective and unique (Dąbek, 2017, p. 414). Theatre work with people with autism spectrum disorder convinced the authors that autism is not that far from the way the non-autistic majority functions. They also appreciated exceptional imagination of actors with autism spectrum disorder and unique sense of their utterances guided by subjective, internal logic (Dąbek, 2017, p. 413). In conclusion, theatre where actors are people with autism might become a way to explain and to celebrate this autistic difference.

### Methodological framework of the research

The research focuses on theatre performance of teenagers with autism spectrum disorder. It aimed to present the activity of “Authentic Artists” theatre in two dimensions: personal and social. The main research question concerned the personal and social importance of the activity of the “Authentic Artists” theatre group. It was interesting to see how those teenagers with autism spectrum disorder perceived their own theatrical activity and in what way theatre can develop social awareness of autism.

The method of the research was a qualitative case study. It was an *instrumental* case study (Stake, 2009, p.628), where a particular case, i.e. the “Authentic Artists” theatre group served to broaden knowledge about a bigger phenomenon, i.e. theatre of people with disability, and in this particular case theatre of people with autism spectrum disorder. The qualitative case study showed the following elements:

1. Activity and functioning of “Authentic Artists” theatre
2. Historical background of the activity
3. Personal and social dimension of theatrical activity of people with autism spectrum disorder
4. Informants: the group leader, an actor with autism spectrum disorder and his parent.

The data was collected by means of an interview with Janek<sup>1</sup> – an actor with autism spectrum disorder and his parent, the analysis of documents provided by the group leader and posts in social media. The interview with the actor was run online. At the beginning of the interview, in the presence of his parent, the aim

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<sup>1</sup> The name was not changed. Permission was given to use his real name. Janek is a self-spokesman, a public person, an actor.

of the research was explained to Janek and I asked for consent to record the interview. During the whole interview, the parent was nearby. Once the conversation with the Actor was finished, they joined the meeting to talk freely about their experience related to their son's theatrical activity.

The documents were provided by the group leader. These were notes on the theatre group created for the media, a record of an interview with co-creators of the group and a fragment of a book on "Authentic Artists."

### Activity of "Authentic Artists" theatre

The theatre map of Poland does not contain many theatrical activities engaging people with autism spectrum disorder. The "Authentic Artists" theatre group is one example. I learned about the group thanks to my cooperation with the Foundation *Autism Team* from Łódź. One of the Foundation's field of activity is the Club of Aware Youth, which "gathers various, young people, who act together for issues that are important for them and their environment." The Club's author and organizer is Janek Gawroński, a self-spokesman with autism spectrum disorder. And it is his person that joins the club and the theatre. Janek says that many of his friends are active both in the Club and in the theatre. These two forms of activity merge and have a common goal. "In this aspect, there is a possibility to change people's attitude towards autism. Joining the forces of "Authentic Artists" and the Club of Aware Youth to make the world better," says Janek.

The "Authentic Artists" group has been active since 2014 and was established in the same year in Primary School No 128 in Łódź. It was the idea of two teachers and therapists from that school, Agnieszka Sylwia Pisula and Wioletta Jadczyk. Currently, the team is led by: Agnieszka Sylwia Pisula, Marcin Nowak, Anna Zielińska and Monika Pakuła-Żelazo. The group's activities are supported by Maria Pielas – the school's principal. The first two shows were performed in a culture centre. In 2014, it was *The Little Prince – a great story about learning (Mały książę – wielka opowieść o poznawaniu)*, in 2015, *A Week in Blue (Tydzień w kolorze blue)*. The next two shows were: *We are talented – a beautiful and wise story about worries (Mamy talenty czyli piękna i mądra bajka o troskach)* (2016), *Four Cultures – One World (Cztery Kultury – Jeden Świat)*. The last performances showed in the Grand Theatre, on the cameral stage, were *Dreams in the Backpack (Marzenia w plecaku)* and *Tales (out) of This World (Bajki (nie) z tego świata)*. In 2020, the group was working on the show *About Us Diversely (Różnorodnie o sobie)*. It was supposed to be a special event, as it was to be performed for the first time on the main stage of the Grand Theatre in Łódź. Unfortunately, like Janek said, "The pandemic called off the show." The group's Facebook profile had the following post uploaded:

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,  
 All Small and Big People, thanks to whom our Theatre develops and reaches for new projects,  
 Dear Fantastic Actors of the Grand Theatre in Łódź,  
 Dear Fans,  
 Dear Friends,  
 Always Reliable – Head, Colleagues, Parents, Pupils of Special Needs Primary School No 128  
 Today we were supposed to enjoy the first night of our new play. We were waiting so much for this moment. It would have been our first performance on the main stage of the Grand Theatre.  
 We do not want to write about emotions that inhabit us today. We would like to tell you that we miss our rehearsals, the unique atmosphere of the theatre, contact with other people, play and real adventure. In our thoughts and in our hearts, we are with you.  
 We remember about every person met on our path. We would like to tell you that we will come back... We are just saying see you later.

### ***Participation in theatre gives me joy and freedom in spectrum***

According to Władysław Dykcik, artistic activity, including theatre performance, has got a self-realisation, anti-depression and anti-frustration sense (Dykcik, 1999, p. 35). While participating in theatrical activities, an actor discovers their own potential to change, strives to go beyond their boundaries, reaches a higher level of their development. In fact, it is the same in the case of our interlocutor. His words illustrate it best: “I have got a feeling of pleasure and strength after a performance. I feel mentally strong after a performance, I go home happily and, for example, wait with my friends for Facebook comments. Mental strength that we have made it. This is what I and my friends usually enjoy. That people applauded us and it gave me the feeling of strength and pleasure.”

For Janek, being on stage is a source of personal satisfaction and fulfillment. It meets one of the most important human needs, i.e. the need of respect and recognition. In her book *People with autism spectrum disorder. A Manual of Empathetic Pedagogy (Człowiek w spektrum autyzmu. Podręcznik pedagogiki empatycznej)* (2018) Joanna Ławicka remarks how important it is to give people touched with autism “a sense of empowerment” and success by modeling social situations they participate in so that they have an opportunity to do their best and win other people’s approval. Theatrical activities create such an opportunity. One person cooperating with the “Authentic Artists” group recalls: “[...] he threw himself in my arms and cried euphorically, ‘We’ve made it! We’ve really made it!’ This boy’s gesture was the most precious sign of appreciation among all nice words and congratulations received that day as I realized what kind of struggle this young actor had had to go through, how many weaknesses he had had to combat.”

In their lives, people with autism rarely get a message that they are extraordinary. Theatre can become a place where they have an opportunity to experience

success. One of theatre co-founders remarks: “We can see how these artists become more and more open, combat their weaknesses and anxieties, integrate with other people, and achieve a great success at the end.”

Another important need that theatrical activity can satisfy is self-fulfilment. Janek illustrates it very vividly: “Participation in theatre gives me joy and freedom in spectrum.” When I asked him to be more precise about freedom in spectrum, he responded that “Freedom in spectrum means I can use my free time for free time and not for therapy and education, I can cherish my passions. And this is the most important thing. I am against objects of therapy-making. Theatre is a bit of therapy and a bit of passion, but first and foremost, passion.”

Theatre meets the need of self-fulfilment by giving actors with autism spectrum disorder an opportunity to realise their passions and potential. They need it even more as their only everyday experience of “appreciated” potential is “progress in therapy” (ibidem, p.68). This is what Janek rebels against, saying that he is “against objects of therapy-making.” For him, theatre is a “space of freedom,” free expression and joy deriving from it.

### *I teach my audience how to applaud quietly*

„Making some people meet other people that they would normally not meet, arranging situations, confrontations, exchange, co-existence and cooperation is in this perspective not only a process of achieving a certain result, but the result in itself” (Ogrodzka, 2016, p. 189) – this is an essence of relational art, where the emphasis is switched from creating works of art to creating relations. Artistic activity, including theatre, can act as de-alienation as an individual addresses the world. In the interview, Janek repeats more than once that relations that he develops within the framework of his theatrical activity are very important for him. When asked for reasons why he considered one of the shows the most important one, he answered, “Because I had a friend, unfortunately he’s already graduated from my school, who played a hyena and stole the hearts of the whole audience.” In his theatre manifesto, he regarded relations as the foundation of his activity. “I make friends with mates,” he wrote.

The relational, communal nature of artistic activity lies not only in the opportunity to build direct relations, but is also created with the help of signs, symbols or codes attributed to the language of theatre. The authors, Katarzyna Krasoń and Beata Mazepa-Domagala remark that, „The act of creating a work of art is a communion with oneself, but one accepts the thought of letting the third party – the recipients – participate in this specific intimacy. It meets the need of contact, communication, expressing oneself” (Krasoń, Mazepa-Domagala, 2003, p. 13). Marian Golka (2008, p. 210) notices that „A work of art is a certain ‘letter’ written to anonymous addressees, and though it expresses individual experiences, they might be, even if not read carefully, important to many recipients, for whom there is only one thing which is always important, namely that a particular individual

is a sender.” “The audience is essential. Thanks to it, our work makes sense. Our actors reflect in it. Thanks to it, they can see how much work they put in. Our audience is getting bigger and bigger. Initially, these were the actors’ nearest and dearest and their school friends, next there were invited guests and finally a bigger audience– children from kindergartens and primary schools – joined in. Soon there will also be teenagers and adults,” notices one co-founder of “Authentic Artists.”

Janek emphasises that in his opinion performances can shape the audience and make society more sensitive to the needs of people with autism spectrum disorder: “I would like to mention this show as we were supposed to play peas, difficult smells were to be played, an egg maybe, ketchup and chocolate and coffee, but the pandemics called it off. The play talks about the whole diversity of people with autism and food selectivity in its different aspects. The play was to teach about autism and the power of diversity.” Answering my question on the aforementioned power of diversity, the actor explains that “this person does something else, this one something else and this one as well. And that is how it looks. The power of diversity... I can refer to the last-year play and I can say not differently but with diversity.” In the aforementioned manifesto and more than once during the interview Janek emphasises, “I teach my audience how to applaud quietly.”

For him, theatrical activity complements his self-spokesperson activity that he has been running for a few years, “In this aspect, there is also a possibility to change people’s attitude towards people with autism spectrum disorder. Joining the forces of “Authentic Artists” and the Club of Aware Youth to make the world better.” The actor thinks that his both activities often overlap, “And I have some friends at the club of aware youth [...] The media saw [the performance – S.P.]. Once, for example, the third channel of Łódź Television visited us before a rehearsal and during the performance, during the general rehearsal, and later on, on the opening night, the media asked me about my letter about Community Self-Help Homes, to the former minister of Family, Work and Social Policy, Ms Rafalska, so I also talked about that.”

In fact, the theatrical activity of “Authentic Artists” has the hallmarks of self-theatre, where actors (authors) speak from the stage from themselves and about themselves, refer to their own experiences, test their own limits, expose weaknesses (Krakowska, 2016). The essence of self-theatre is formed by the Actors of Theatre 21 (Teatr 21)<sup>2</sup> and expressed in this remark: “In this theatre actors talk about themselves” (*21 myśli o teatrze*, 2016). Its ideal is expressed in the following way: “Why do people need theatre? To be open to other people.” On the other hand, the rule of self-theatre is formed by this remark: “An actor can see a spec-

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<sup>2</sup> Teatr 21 is a theatre group whose actors are mainly people suffering from Down’s syndrome and autism. During 15 years of its activity, it has created several performances presented in theatres and cultural institutions all over Poland.

tator, and the spectator can see the actor.” “These three points guarantee that theatre can be a place of empowerment, and not playing and watching,” notices Krakowska (2016).

## Conclusion

The research presented in the article shows that theatrical activity can be a source of personal satisfaction and fulfillment for people with autism spectrum disorder. It offers them an opportunity to realise their passion, satisfying the need of fulfillment. Theatre also turned out to be a place of co-existence and cooperation – supporting relation development and making new friends.

The activity of “Authentic Artists” has also an emancipatory, empowering potential, it is a place where people with autism spectrum disorder can be seen and heard, bringing benefits not only to themselves but to the whole community (cf. J. Rzeźnicka-Krupa, 2018). Justyna Sobczyk and Magdalena Hasiuk, the curators of the Project “More than Theatre” („Więcej niż teatr”) wrote: “Quite often it turns out that theatre (art) of people with disabilities becomes a centre for articulating issues important not only for this environment [...] (Sobczyk, Hasiuk, 2016). And it is the case of „Authentic Artists” theatre. Looking at their activity, one can see how art strengthens emancipatory aspirations of “excluded” individuals, defending their right to freedom and expression. It constitutes a space of looking for one’s own form of life, identity, artistic work, play, a certain asylum for people who are described by oppressive society as misfits” (ibidem); saying it in Janek’s words, “This play was to teach about autism and the power of diversity.”

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## **Osobiste i społeczne wymiary działalności teatralnej osób ze spektrum autyzmu na przykładzie grupy teatralnej „Autentyczni Artyści”**

### **Streszczenie**

Teatr, w którym aktorami są osoby ze spektrum autyzmu nie doczekał się jeszcze wielu opracowań. Większość tekstów rozpatruje terapeutyczne konteksty aktywności teatralnej osób ze spektrum autyzmu lub wręcz działania interwencyjne wobec nich przy użyciu technik teatralnych. W artykule autorka poszukuje innego spojrzenia na zjawisko teatru osób ze spektrum autyzmu. Przedstawione badania miały na celu ukazanie działalności teatru „Autentyczni artyści” w dwóch wymiarach: osobistym i społecznym. Zastosowaną metodą badawczą było jakościowe studium indywidualnego przypadku, którym był teatr osób ze spektrum autyzmu „Autentyczni Artyści” z Łodzi. Badania ukazały, że działalność teatralna może być dla osób ze spektrum autyzmu źródłem osobistej satysfakcji i spełnienia. Teatr okazał się również miejscem nawiązywania relacji i zawierania przyjaźni. Zostało ukazane, że działalność „Autentycznych Artystów” posiada również potencjał emancypacyjny, stanowiąc przestrzeń poszukiwania własnych form tożsamości oraz twórczości.

**Słowa kluczowe:** spektrum autyzmu, twórczość, teatr, emancypacja.