

From the Prison Cell to the Stage



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Efforts to stimulate creativity have been found to successfully aid individuals undergoing resocialization, and various forms of art therapy are now being increasingly practiced – even in seemingly unlikely places. One such case is the "prison theatre" movement

A theatrical play staged by prisoners represents both art and at the same time a process of communication, which meant to restore health (mainly in psychological terms) and to improve the participants' quality of life. Polish prison theatre can be classified into several types, which might be described as follows: workshop theatre, playwright theatre, audience/community theatre, director theatre, and art therapy theatre par excellence. I have proposed this classification based on which factor of theatrical communication plays the dominant role in the creation/reception process, with the art therapeutic objective always being overt to a greater or lesser degree. However, we should stress that the dominance of one specific element of theatrical communication, or of the intended therapeutic impact itself, never entails that other elements are excluded or limited. As a result, the borderlines in this proposed classification are somewhat blurred and different types can certainly overlap.

Seeing an exit from the maze

Among the types of prison theatre listed, here I will mainly focus on what I have called the "art therapy theatre" type, in view of its particularly deep impact on the performers. Art therapy work with inmates may include months, or in some regions of Poland years, of efforts by professionally-trained and experienced individuals conscious of the therapeutic objective and knowledgeable about the theatrical craft. Each of the stages of work on a performance, and

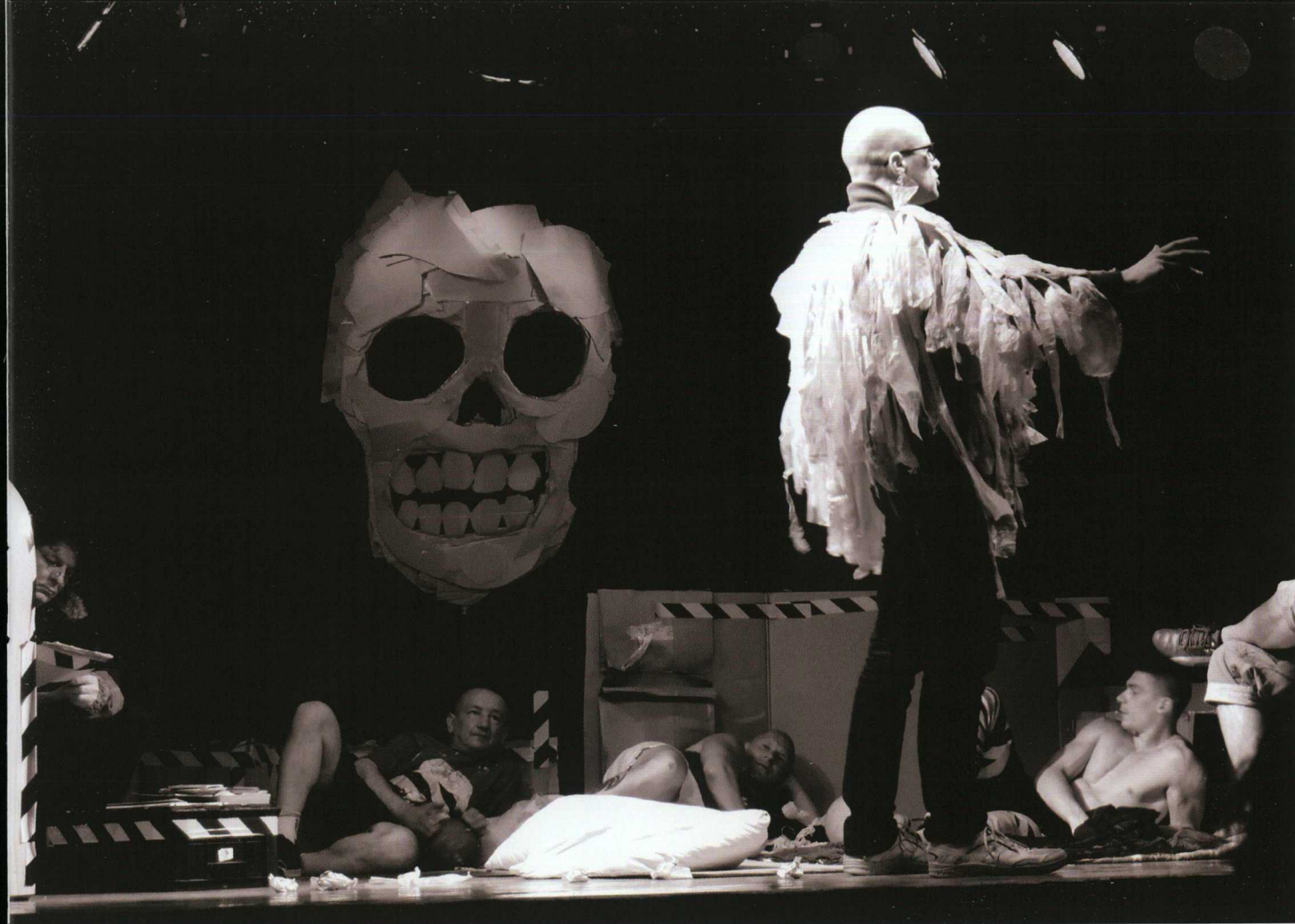
each phase of its presentation, here serve very specific therapeutic goals. At the same time, the artistic level is treated with great care. Creating a theatrically engaging performance of esthetic value and earning a positive reception from an audience are of course important elements of therapy. The main objective of working on a performance is to bolster the inmates' creative powers in an atmosphere of acceptance and mutual trust, thus fostering positive values in them.

A prison theatre can be perceived, at least in its art therapy aspect, as a kind of laboratory theatre. Whereas the work of a theatre "lab" focuses on seeking new ways of acting, in prison theatre groups, made up of amateurs with special needs (the actors include individuals struggling with various types of addictions) who live in a specific situation of isolation, the ability to work on acting techniques is naturally quite limited. The basic focus of work in prison theatre is the human being: our individuality, our attitude towards ourselves and others, and also the possibility for the gradual transformation of our identity. Theatre, an art form where the human being is at the same time both the artist and the medium, is particularly conducive to this type of activity.

Art therapy theatre is frequently perceived by therapist-directors as "the only means of getting at the essence of a person," a tool useful in building a sense of closeness with inmates. It is sometimes likened to a kind of "Ariadne's thread, possibly aiding inmates to find a way out of the maze of their own habitual means of behavior, full of aggression and destruction." It not only draws out the untapped potential that lies inherent in prisoner-actors and shows it to the audience, but also enables the inmates themselves to discover, despite their traumatic experiences, that "not everything inside of them has been destroyed," that they still represent something of value as human beings.

The corrective experience is very important in the actor's relations with the director. If the director demonstrates a profound acceptance of the performers and reacts to them (by word, gesture, deed) in a completely different way than the main individuals in the performers' lives, he or she can give the inmates a chance to tap into suppressed emotions and gain some insight into them.

In art therapy, adult participants often find it a transformative experience to encounter (frequently for the first times in their lives) someone who is authentically interested in their creative potential. Many inmates are positively affected by theatrical exercises, or in connection with them



Dominik Rudasz

"In the Name of the Father of Hamlet" directed by Magdalena Zelent, performed in 2013 with prisoners from the therapeutic section of the prison in Gdańsk-Przeróbka

make important discoveries about themselves, about who they are and what is important to them. The women in Elżbieta Golińska's theatrical troupe at the Wrocław penitentiary, after a successful performance, regained a belief in their own value. One told her: "I am worth something; perhaps not everything is lost. If I have managed to win applause here, even a standing ovation, maybe I will manage in life." As the director herself explains: "Theatre gives them the strength to fight."

A liberating abstraction

The greatest turning-point in prison theatre work frequently comes at the moment when they start rehearsals. In Polish prisons there are still not only many prisoners, but also many prison personnel who treat theatrical activity with skepticism, even hostility. The inmates who take up this sort of challenge frequently have to take a stand against the apathy that prevails in many penitentiaries and inure themselves to mockery. The decision to embark on a theatrical endeavor is also not easy in that for most prisoners the word "theatre" is nothing more than an abstraction. Most of them have never even been in any theatre, with only a few able to remember school performances. The future actors frequently do not have any theatre-related memories at all. Such a situation demands great responsibility on the part of the therapist-director, who is leading them into a completely new and unknown domain.

The first mentions of prison theatre activity in Poland date back to the 1930s. There were theatrical and cabaret groups operating at a few theatres in communist times (1945-89), aside from the Stalinist period. Penitentiary No. 1 in Strzelce Opolskie organized prison theatre festivals of a local scope back in the 1960s (!). Since the mid-1990s there has been steady growth in art therapy activity and the number of active prison groups has surged (from 26 in 2010 to 42 in 2013). Slowly, but with greater and greater distinctiveness, this form of art is making inroads in the social space outside the prison walls: at schools, social welfare facilities, and even professional theatres. The "Brygada" troupe from the penitentiary in Białystok has already several times staged plays at the Aleksander Węgierka Theatre. Inmates from the Bydgoszcz-Fordon prison have four times performed "Cell of Freedom" on the stage of the local Polish Theatre. "A Midsummer Night's Dream" involving prisoners from Opole Lubelski has been presented on several stages, including in Lublin, Warsaw, and Łódź. Performances by prisoners are sometimes included in the program of international theatrical festivals (such as "Dialog" in Wrocław or "Confrontations" in Lublin), during conferences and symposia. For several years now, the international Prison Art Review in Sztum features both live theatrical performances and recorded plays. This April, the first several-day Polish National Prison Theatre Competition was organized in Poznań, with performances hosted at the city's top stages (Polish Theatre and T&D).

On prison theatre in Poland

At the same time, however, in the absence of any past points of reference, the inmates can feel free of self-restricting clichés and social pressure. Theatre, until recently an unknown domain, for many becomes a space for “recovering” their own human richness.

In my research I have interacted with many, although not all, of the teams and individuals doing this type of work in Poland, and as such it is fitting to give at least a partial list of those who generously shared their knowledge and experience. Some of them are now still engaged with prison groups, others are no longer active in the field. In my view, Krzysztof Papis's long years of work at the penitentiary in Kłodzko make for one of the most interesting examples (not only on the scale of Poland) in view of the methods used and the artistic effects achieved.

at the prison in Opole, and teams in Turawa, Kwidzyn, Poznań, Strzelce Opolskie, Lubliniec, and also Zielona Góra and Sieradz.

No statistical research has yet been done in Poland on how successfully prison theatre activity contributes to prisoner resocialization efforts. I therefore asked four art-therapist theatrical directors working with 100 individuals all told (both women and men) at various penitentiaries. In the case of two of the theatre groups, not a single past prisoner-actor has ever returned to prison (a few individuals are still serving out their sentences). The two other groups each saw one past participant return to prison, including one who did not follow the recommended anti-addiction therapy when outside. This offers evidence that when done right, theatrical activity can be an effective

means of supporting support resocialization, but whether it makes a decisive contribution is hard to judge. Armand Gatti, a French artist who is a well-known playwright and director, shunned official stages and opted instead to work with prisoners and young people from the fringes of society, never succumbed to the naïve belief that theatre or art in general has some kind of unconditional power to make things happen. Neither did he claim that theatre could change someone's life (although such situations probably also do occur). He stressed that “life is as it is” and that prisoners can take nothing more away from theatrical work in prison than broadened awareness. He nevertheless added: “The fact that they can see that things can be otherwise, that the possibility of liberation lies within them, is the most important thing.” ■



Director's archives

A performance of “Tale of a Crazy World” directed by Krzysztof Papis, prepared in 2004 by the “Along the Way” Prison Theatre Group from the prison in Kłodzko

Other individuals and groups that deserve mention include: Sister Grażyna and the “Hope” Theatre at Warsaw's Grochów prison, Adam Szymura at the remand facility in Gliwice, Monika Wirzajtys at the prison in Bydgoszcz-Fordon, Magdalena Zelent in Gdańsk-Przeróbka, Elżbieta Golińska and Marek Tybur at the prison in Wrocław, Łukasz Witt-Michałowski, Joanna Lewicka, and Zapaleni.org in Lublin, Dariusz Szada-Borzyszkowski in Białystok, Patrycja Piwowarczyk and Agata Nowak at the “Captives” Theatre in Wronki, Przemysław Pałasz and Andrzej Kurek

Further reading:

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