



THEATRE WITHIN THE CONTEXT... and not just theatre
POZORIŠTE U KONTEKSTU... i ne samo pozorište

Irena Ristić
Vlatko Ilić

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THEATRE WITHIN THE CONTEXT
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...i ne samo pozorište



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Dear colleagues,

“Theatre within the Context... and Not Just Theatre” is a name that does not belong to this edition alone. The international symposium that took place from 23rd until 25th September 2015 in Belgrade, as a part of 16th Bitef Polyphony, was also named thus. The symposium was dedicated to analysis, contextualization and critical interpretations of contemporary theories and performing practices, as well as understanding principles, mechanisms and value system that are merging different forms of their implementation. The intention was to acquire and exchange views about multitude of the contemporary theatrical theories, methods and techniques, directed to social changes and community culture development. Thirty experts in scientific or cultural fields were invited and took part in the six dialogue sessions in the course of three days. Interludes between sessions were also held and included workshops and presentation of works that aimed at raising new questions about the disciplinary boundaries of contemporary cultural practices. The symposium was a departure point and an incentive for further deliberation of performativity and its social roles, resulting in papers gathered within this publication.

We are looking forward to the future that unfolds from here; the one we make together.

Yours,
Irena Ristić and Vlatko Ilić,
Editors

In Belgrade
January 1, 2016

Poštovane kolegice i kolege,

„Pozorište u kontekstu... i ne samo pozorište“ nije samo naslov ovog izdanja već i međunarodnog simpozijuma koji je održan 23, 24. i 25. septembra 2015. godine u okviru 16. Bitef Polifonije. Simpozijum je bio posvećen analizi, kontekstualizaciji i kritičkoj interpretaciji savremenih teorija i izvođačkih praksi, kao i razumevanju principa, mehanizama i vrednosnog sistema koji objedinjuju različite vidove njihove primene. Namera je bila sticanje i razmena uvida o mnogostrukosti pozorišnih i izvođačkih teorija, metoda i tehnika, usmerenih na društvenu promenu i razvoj kulture zajedništva. Trideset pozvanih eksperata naučne ili aktivističko-umetničke orijentacije prikazalo je svoje radove u okviru šest dijaloških sesija tokom tri dana, dok su međugre uključivale radionice i prezentacije radova koji otvaraju nova pitanja o disciplinarnim granicama savremenih umetničkih praksi. Simpozijum je bio polazište i neka vrsta provokacije za dalje promišljanje performativnosti i njenih socijalnih uloga, a radovi u ovom zborniku su tek jedan od mogućih ishoda.

Radujemo se sledećim koracima, koje možemo učiniti zajedno.

Irena Ristić i Vlatko Ilić,
urednici

U Beogradu,
1. januara 2016.

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PERFORMING CREATIVE DIVERSITIES – LEARNING FOR DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Zdravo da ste's approach to vulnerable groups, which was initiated during a collective disaster, has been transformed in the course of many years during the process of working alternatively with youth. Creative and open-ended activities involved many thousands of participants in joint process of building constructive response to crisis, poverty, alienation and lack of opportunities. Transformation of play is regarded as crucial for the overall revitalization of human capabilities to create social environments.

Culture is seen as a joint project, and a part of social and historical context. The mixed groups of people engage and to different creative activities together bring their multi-leveled diversities based on social status, vulnerability, age-span, ethnicity, cultural background, etc. That way, diversities become invaluable sources of learning for development, while creative activities are seen as drivers of future development. Through improvisation and art performance, participants build shared psychological and/or social space – the zone of proximate development, and present not only who they are, but also who they are becoming.

Keywords: *diversity, learning, development, play, improvisation*

Creative response to crisis

Negative social aspects such as instability, the increase of poverty and social exclusion, could be understood not only as limiting statements, but rather as invitations for creation of new social tools for development. In a similar way, individual crisis, usually understood as source of stress, can be seen as open invitation for change. Instable social and psychological situation has visible and destructive level, but also less visible potentials for change and transformation. Often, confusion and lack of order in personal and interpersonal environments clears the space for psychological intervention and personal/group growth. From psychological point of view, combined with the negative, this situation has its hidden positive potentials. In work with refugee children, youth and school teachers in remote communities, we define the aim of restoring play and playfulness, and construct new forms of social environments, where diversities become generators for creative processes. Observations of children playing and creative activities during war crisis showed that loss of play or simplified, depleted play activities appeared as one of serious negative effects.

In the first moments of personal crisis, playing scenes, if they had previously existed, lost their imaginative characteristics and became replicas of reality. Armed people, violence, moving families, broken buildings, air attacks appeared and replaced more subtle contents. What appeared on children's drawings, instead of typical drawing objects such as house, sun, flower, butterfly, rainbow, heart, children, animals and other, were drawings that represented realistic life events such as dead people, bombardment, bullets in the air, broken homes, arms, airplanes and other. Instead of imagination and creative elaboration, play and drawings began representing the every-day life.

In this situation, it was necessary to organize new and healing social field, which was responsive, inclusive and able to involve children/ participants in play-like activities based on their life experiences, in order to give them opportunity to elaborate it and construct response

to stressful events. That task was not individual; it was social. In the interactive joint activity of play, socially constructed roles become far less important than our enormous human capacities to build space for individual, group and/or social development. Loss of play, depleted and simplified play, along with reduced interactive skills clearly emerged as characteristics of our post-war society (Ognjenović, 2003; Škorc, 2012). Transformation of play and interactive capacities are regarded as crucial for the overall revitalization of human capabilities to create and recreate social environments and life practices. Group capacity to cope with crisis and develop strategies for overcoming the said crisis seemed to be the tool for new and creative possibilities, not only on individual and group level, but it provided us with a chance for social change.

Diversities – mixed groups

Natural groups we live in are not coherent nor equalized, but changeable and dynamic; so is the reality we live in. Traditional way of organizing groups for work in the field of psychology is based on a defined mutual problem or similar social positions (groups of addicts, neurotics, victims of tragedy, single parents, loss sufferers, etc.). During last decades, under the influence of humanistic psychology and socially engaged art, the concept of group support changed and group participants are not treated in regards to their problems, but are seen as powerful human beings who contribute their totality to group work. Experiences of social therapy and improvisational arts show that mixed groups of participants bring many more benefits to participants (Newman, 1994, 2003; Sawyer, 2003). Mixed groups have much more potential for play, creative activities, improvisation and exchange. In our experience, mixed groups composed of individuals with multi-levelled diversities (such as social status, age-span, vulnerability, culture, profession, etc.) are invaluable resources for development in terms of creativity, social change and learning. Average contexts children live in involve rich social field, including peers, adults, natural and cultural

elements of environment. From the point of view of group development, diversity between group members is not restriction, but rather opportunity to engage different approaches in the creative process.

Building of culture

Culture building is seen as process, it is a joint project of children and/or youth and adults within a certain social context. This is a process inseparable from its environment and everyday practice. This unity and totality have enormous developmental potential that goes far beyond tolerance, respect of diversities and acquisition of local cultural patterns or rituals. It is in fact a joint creative process, during which participants transform themselves and by doing that, build the culture. This process is regarded as a process of learning for the future; learning for development.

In our approach, the interactive process is seen as an endless source for development by bridging the gap between being and becoming (who we are and who are we going to become). The most sustainable, life-enhancing learning and transformation occur when the whole person of the learner together with their social environment is engaged in the process. Learning becomes the creation, and in return, creation brings the change about.

Culture as a totality is a joint mission of many participants, visible and invisible individuals. It has its main stream – the dominant achievements, and less visible, subtle parallel processes, borderline fields in which space for the new things is open. It is rooted in particular social moment, historical context, in which it exists. In the very moment of authentic encounter, social stigma, position, externally defined identity, all become less important than play-like activity of joint creation. Regardless of the outcome, or observable effect, the *process* of creating together is crucial because it gives voices to the voiceless; visibility to the invisible; active role to the marginalized.

Play, improvisation and performance – forms of exploration

Improvisation and play start when we do something new or unknown with the old and known things. Exploration starts with seeing known things with the fresh pair of eyes. One of methods to achieve so is to do something we never do, using the existing things and situations. Social tools such as personal names, self-portraits, the way we address others, the way we move, things we like or dislike, our personal spaces, expectations and relations we build; all became tools for play activities. Doing something that we never do, telling things we do not know how to tell, being who we are not, pretending, drawing the sound, coloring the thought, are just some of the games from the list which is open-ended. The storytelling, drawing, creating associations to some material, proved effective in fostering creativity. They were associated with elaborated role play, and were nested in the children's ability to improvise, pretend, perform, sing or dance. Vygotsky describes activity of play as explorative activity in which person in cooperation with a social partner – other persons, play-mate, parent or any other cultural agent that has interactive potentials i.e. performs more than what the child could do alone. In short, in interaction and play, we actualize not only what we are, but what we are becoming and will potentially become in the future. This dynamic position is obtainable through play, improvisation and performing activities.

Art and creative activities in *Zdravo da ste* methodology are based on group process during which each participant adds new inputs and suggestions, and forms a response according to their own life experience. Other participants accept input, react to it and exchange their own ideas and products with others. Individual contributions are integrated in the main process, the outcome of which is a game they construct together. At first sight, stream of inputs seems arbitrary, but workshop steps are designed in such a way to allow participants to create common ground for their improvisational play. Methodology developed for that purpose is based on twenty-year long practice in

work with vulnerable groups. Being authentically involved in the activity, even if we do not know where it takes us, what is going to happen next and why is it happening, is crucial for the process of group creativity. Our joint action goes beyond our individual ideas and creativity, and adds new value to the group product, creatively completing the process. This is well summed up in the statement made by one of the workshop participants: *I told you what I did not know I know*. Using this methodology, psychological space for joint expression and creation is open, and new steps in group development become possible. In addition, some basic ideas of approach will be discussed further in the text.

Zone of proximate development and group creativity

Vygotsky, in his theory of higher mental functions, introduces the idea of zone of proximate development. This is the functional mental space with dynamic structure in which the already existing ideas, knowledge and meanings transform from what they are into something new under influence and in interaction with social environment. In line with his theory, we are multi-levelled beings; we are not only who we are, but who we are becoming for the future, as well. This principle has been applied in our approach to group work. Child learns something it does not know how to do by doing it in interaction with an adult. This activity is not quite clear and defined for both sides involved in interaction. When a baby talks to their mother, in the beginning they use sounds like words; mimicking but not saying the actual words. In that activity both mother and baby perform the game of dialogue, which will become real dialogue in the future. From position of developmental psychology, this is what we do when we are involved in creative activities. Like a child, in the beginning we pretend we are the one that knows and by practicing some activity together with others, we become the one that knows. What is already existing in our psychological space is by no means stable, but dynamic and is always in process of transformation. That transformation,

in terms of psychology of Vygotsky, happens in the *new zone of proximate development*, which is providing a chance for new creations to appear (Vygotsky, 1987; Connery, John-Steiner & Marjanović-Shane, 2010).

Process and outcome

In education, as well as in our everyday lives, we are engaged in processes in real time. In formal systems, the value of those processes is usually measured by their outcomes. At the end of the process, participant, student, employee or disciple has to demonstrate the impact, new product, skill or some other form of achievement. That way, development is understood instrumentally, while the end or result of the process becomes more important than the process itself. Education, our job or even our personal relations become outcome-oriented; oriented towards the final point. In formal systems like education, that practically means outcome defines the process, it is a reason for process to appear. It is regarded as desirable to reach outcomes in the shortest time possible with as little effort as possible, or even without the preceding process. This is a model of instrumental behaviour, where things happen because of their clear purpose, e.g. we go to school because we need a certificate, work because we need salary etc. This model assumes that every phenomenon could be quantified and expressed in terms of its utility. It is efficient in affairs such as economy, but what do we do with creativity or emotional life? In our experience, this model is problematic when we try to apply it in art, creative processes, children's development, play and open-ended tasks. Open-ended process is crucial for art, education or creative thinking, and it takes time. In order to nurture creativity, process needs to be developed and encouraged, regardless of the outcomes and our expectations regarding a final benefit.

When we talk about this with teachers, typically they show negative reactions and identify open-ended situation with chaos or lack of structure. However, giving process a chance to appear, to last, to develop

in many simultaneous streams with unpredicted outcomes is not lack of method, it is a method in itself. In our methodology, creative process is in the focus and it is more important than clear and measurable outcome. Work with group creativity is not a simple application of successful method, it looks more like an exploration of group capacities for play; it is unpredictable, fluctuating, and there are no guarantees it will bring anything. Sometimes mutually created miracle happens, sometimes not. This is the magic of creation. This is the risk of working with creative processes, but is in the same time precondition for them.

The matters of time and structure

Creative processes, as it has been shown by researches, take time. Strict time schedule and pressure to follow it could hinder creative process. It is known that less creative and more creative products differ in time needed for them to appear and develop. This is related to the feelings of uncertainty and uneasiness, which workshop facilitators are aware of. In spite of open-ended concept, there must be some forms of structure and expectation in this type of work. A workshop facilitator develops a concept of work in advance but it is not strict, it is more like a sketch, draft of possible activities, than a list of tasks to take place in due time.

Tensions between being more or less structured, being more or less limited by time, become clearly visible in our work with teachers of civic education. New teachers are usually stressed for results and tend to control the processes. There is a way to decrease the risk of failure and feeling of uncertainty. As time passes, they master their teaching skill and become less dependent on manuals and supervisors; they design and test new methods, evaluate each activity, improvise and become more sensitive to process and its complexity. In our experience, time schedule and structure of workshop serve better as tools for new teachers than for facilitating a creative process. The level of freedom in creative process is, of course, limited, yet flexible enough to allow creativity to appear.

Creative dissonance

Cognitive dissonance is a well-known psychological term that describes situation in which a person experiences inconsistency between attitudes, emotions, motives, or other elements of psychological life (Festinger, 1957). Dissonance, according to social and cognitive theories induces unpleasantness and feelings of discomfort, and the individual has the inclination to reduce it. This is dynamic, unstable position, which the individual is motivated to change.

However unpleasant in everyday experience, dissonance and incongruence are crucial for creative exploration. From our point of view, creative achievement is a result of dynamic, simultaneous processes in and out of person unfolding in the zone of proximate development and social environment around us.

The moment of being and becoming – integration of personal experience in group creative process

In 2003, *The moment of being and becoming* drama play was created as a part of programme for refugee youth. For few months, refugees participated in group creative activities in and out of collective centres, where they resided. During weekend meetings, they gathered and described how they felt and exchanged their impressions. Responses were so significant and valuable to them that they decided to put them into a written form. At that point, the group had 50 members, most of which living in very difficult circumstances with limited access to education and employment. Half of them resided in collective centres for refugees. Group power and exchange encouraged them to feel supported and dig deeper into their emotions, experience, hopes, and activate their capacities. The selection of their writings was later published as a book, titled *The moment of being and becoming*.

In order to promote their book, group members decided to present their work in a creative way. They chose their texts and decided to make

a play. In that moment, drama director, a volunteer, joined and help them integrate their performance in a drama piece. Each participant created a performance and integrated it in the joint presentation. They were invited to improvise and change things both during preparations and public presentations. Final drama piece included 40 participants. It was structured and directed, yet contained improvisational elements. It varied in content and number of actors, but throughout kept the basic structure. It has been performed many times at different venues, and has been very well received by audiences.

In 2003, the group decided to do something new, and so they created dancing performance in an attempt to transform their life experiences into movement. *The Moment of Being and Becoming* book and drama play were the initial material for their work. In that moment, the core group of 12 members has been formed out of a larger group. Their work has been organized through workshops, where they collectively designed their movements in order to upgrade drama piece and translate it into dance. Real-life experiences and their artistic elaboration were starting points. The group decided to elaborate their personal experiences of being refugees, young, confused, frightened and involved in a collective disaster. Through movement, they tended to express feelings of being lost, scared, but also full of hope and bonded. They symbolically elaborated the process during which their experience of fear (expressed by dance on the storm using tree-legged chairs), was transformed in hope (rain after the thunder) and building their old/new identities (by dancing in a circle and rowing together in one boat). They have chosen small wooden chairs, part of traditional folk hand-made furniture, to present their continuity with ethnicity and painful history; the chairs were integrated in choreography. Performance was named *The Moving Equilibrium* and participated in the UNESCO's World Dance Festival, Belgrade dance festival and other public events, including the opening ceremony of the BITEF Polyphony.

In 2004, this group featuring young performers decided to involve children and adults in their performance, as well. Group of 40 children

from collective centres participated in various creative activities and made their own dancing performance. Professional choreographer and director, a volunteer, joined them. Through one-month long process of elaboration, she coordinated the inclusion of movements of children, responses and costume designs in the final performance. The dancing performance integrated few mixed groups, who showcased how they played together. At the beginning, participants exchanged games they preferred and played as if they were children. Original children games were transformed in choreography that symbolized a playing activity. Music by Meredith Monk has been chosen for the last phase of performance creation. Children who participated named it *Lively play*, and in 2005 these performances were performed at the opening ceremony of the BITEF Polyphony, Joy of Europe and other festivals.

The importance of this dynamic aspect of approach to youth and children becomes more visible today, when many social indicators reflect the need for social transformation. For instance, the number of young people who drop out of school is growing, many children show low achievement and lack of motivation in education.

Alternatives in culture – tools for change

Recent researches of negative aspects of education and social status of children and youth in Serbia show that there is a need for change. For example, 40-50% of children graduate primary school functional in alphabet (Prosvetni pregled, 2010). In our community 72% of the poorest obtain the lowest levels of education. It seems that the link between social exclusion (lack of access to education and cultural media) and poverty increase is not fully recognized. In addition, traditional learning atmosphere in schools discourages initiative, creativity and self-expression (Amabile, 1996; Maksić, 2006). In this context, giving the voice to youngsters, marginalized and “invisible” individuals could help us all in moving a step ahead in social development.

Activation of implicit potentials within individuals, groups, institutions and cultural tools is the precondition for social development. In order to develop as a community or individual, we have to recognize, activate and integrate enormous

human potentials buried in social interaction, or as one of our young participants referred to it - *hidden treasure*.

And more than that; our capacity to change and live actively in ever-changing, unpredictable social field needs to be recognized and nurtured. In our practice, this is achieved by giving a chance to all to become participants in creation of interactive field in their everyday life practice. Alternative theatre becomes the new chance, social tool for development. Interactive processes, creative and playful activities, art, freedom and initiative, can bridge the gap between being and becoming, and help keep the list of potential activities open and endless.

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Igra kreativnih različitosti – učenje za razvoj

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Zdravo da ste pristup ranjivim grupama i ljudima pogođenim ratom, koji je započeo 1994. godine tokom društvenih tragedija, danas je transformisan u alternativni oblik rada sa ranjivim grupama, decom i nastavnicima u srpskom obrazovnom sistemu. Stvaralačke i otvorene aktivnosti uključile su do sada mnogo hiljada učesnika u zajednički proces građenja konstruktivnog odgovora na krizu, siromaštvo, otuđenje i nedostatak mogućnosti. Primena igre, performans aktivnosti i interaktivnih kapaciteta učesnika se vide kao ključne za očuvanje ljudskih kapaciteta da stvaraju i rekonstruišu okruženje i svoju životnu praksu – postaju to „skrivena blaga“, nova oruđa promene, kako reče jedan mladi učesnik.

Alternativno obrazovanje se posmatra kao zajednički projekat dece/ mladih i odraslih, kao deo društvenog, istorijskog i kulturnog okruženja u kome postoji. To je kontekstualno postavljen proces čija celovitost nudi ogromne razvojne mogućnosti. U taj proces ljudi unose svoje mnogostruke raznolikosti u pogledu društvenog statusa, ranjivosti, starosti, porekla, kulturnog miljea, profesije – unose ih u različite igrovne i kreativne aktivnosti. Na taj način, različitost postaje osnov učenja za razvoj. Blisko idejama Lava Vigotskog, kreativne aktivnosti postaju pokretači budućeg razvojnog toka. Kroz improvizaciju, umetnički performans i igru, učesnici grade zajednički psihološki prostor, zonu narednog razvoja, u kome odigravaju sebe – ne samo ono što aktuelno jesu, nego i ono što postaju.

Ključne reči: *različitost, učenje, razvoj, igra, improvizacija, zona narednog razvoja*

**THEATRE WITHIN THE CONTEXT...
AND NOT JUST THEATRE**

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I NE SAMO POZORIŠTE**

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'Theatre Within the Context... and Not Just Theatre' is a thematic publication, which examines the multiple opportunities of the contemporary, theatrical theories and methods, whilst focusing on social change and development of community culture.

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Extremely important initiative, which deserves the attention of the academic and professional community.

Silvija Jestrović, PhD
University of Warwick, Great Britain

The experts from Serbia, Montenegro, Great Britain, Greece and Croatia have approached the topic from their unique perspectives, putting forward relevant issues about contextualization of contemporary theatre practices. They looked into correlation between performing arts and context; the role of art in the context, as well as the role of context in art.

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