

The Role of Drama Therapy in Fostering the Creativity of Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities: An Overview of the Lublin *Teatroterapia* Workshops

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Abstract

This paper aims to show how drama therapy workshops, the Lublin *teatroterapia*, can be used as a method of rehabilitation for the mentally handicapped. It serves the crucial purpose of social participation, giving people who are often rejected and misunderstood by society an opportunity to be involved in creative activities. The idea nurtured by these workshops is reflected in the so called “theatre manifesto” of mentally handicapped individuals, which underlines equal rights for people with intellectual disabilities regarding their creativity and participation both in culture and art. Theatre therapy also facilitates their social and emotional development. The participants are intellectually disabled persons over 15 years old, who agree to be engaged. Lublin's *teatroterapia* workshops collaborate with many public institutions such as health centers, schools, day care facilities, cultural centers, local authorities and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). We include excerpts from the disabled actors' personal narratives. Through success in theatre therapy, learned helplessness can be prevented.

Keywords: Art; theatre; creativity; special education; intellectually handicapped; drama/theatre therapy; occupational therapy; disability theatre; social participation; inclusion; children; adolescents; adults.

Introduction

Both art and disability involve a social and a psychological dimension. Given this link between art and disability, it makes sense for researchers to direct greater attention to the social and psychological contexts in the lives of disabled persons. Traditionally and historically, focusing our attention on biological dysfunctions and physical barriers, (which cannot be overcome by the disabled), may have a negative impact on their full participation in the world of culture and art. It can even make their creative or artistic involvement impossible. Furthermore, we are convinced that, through the positive experiences which can be gained from encounters with art, the disabled may enjoy full inclusion in the wider society.

Undoubtedly, in trying to participate in art, the disabled may face major difficulties in choosing an appropriate way to communicate. For instance, people with visual impairment, or who are deaf or hard of hearing, have in the past enjoyed a variety of aids to communication. Such specific channels of communication may indeed influence the aesthetic feelings of people with sensory handicaps in particular ways. However, visual and auditory disabilities will not necessarily diminish art's therapeutic potential. Nor will such disabilities reduce some of the other positive experiences associated with participation in art. Participation in artistic projects enables handicapped persons to enrich their existing view of the world and to bring their own personality and varied life experiences into play. Similarly, over-emphasis on the biological functioning of disabled persons can have negative effects on their participation in the process of creating valuable products or remarkable

works of art. Their doubts or hesitations may be compounded if they experience educational and rehabilitation practices that are still widespread, but perhaps becoming increasingly out-dated. As a consequence of this state of confusion, disabled persons may respond negatively to artistic activity and may strive for a perfect performance instead of gaining a fuller understanding of the outcomes of their own actions (Śliwonik, 2006).

Despite Chudy's claim (2006, p. 22) that disabled persons' self-actualization is hindered by limitations in mobility, expressive language or intellectual deficits, we suggest that these barriers can be overcome. We cannot exclude the possibility that these very differences in perception, interpretation and self-expression may enable disabled persons to respond creatively when they are given a chance to do so. A noteworthy example of such a creative activity might be participation in one of Lublin's "drama/theatre therapy workshops" (Polish *teatroterapia*).

Our workshops' theatrical repertoire is chosen with a view to gaining insight into some of the complex problems facing people with intellectual disability. What really matters is honesty of artistic expression. In order to achieve these goals, emphasis should be placed on those activities which enhance self-awareness, emotional expression and self-determination. When all the participants in a theatre workshop become aware of their own actions, their responsibilities and their partnership in a team, it becomes possible for them to discover the personal meaning of the role they are playing. An Appendix to this paper lists the plays that have been performed in our *teatroterapia* workshops.

Some historical facts

The person who initially set up disability theatre in Lublin was Maria Pietrusza – Budzyńska. In Poland, the idea of a theatre employing intellectually disabled actors was unique at the time, but as DAN (2009) has indicated, many similar groups have now been established, their common goal being to encourage the rehabilitation and social inclusion of disabled persons through participation in art.

Additional accounts of Maria Pietrusza–Budzyńska's successful endeavours are given by Józefczuk (2010), and by K. Babicki, the artistic manager of *J. Osterwa's Theatre* in Lublin, who describes the transformative potential of theatre therapy workshops (MG, 2007).

In November, 1995, the professional institution – *J. Osterwa's Theatre* in Lublin – took over a whole group of 20 individuals with intellectual disability who attended a special school (No 26) in this city. Among the students were actors from the *Theatre of the Little Plant*. All the performances by these exceptional artists received a warm reception. It was obvious that the actors and onlookers were emotionally engaged in the performances. The plays were prepared by mature artists and competent actors, and the main means of expression was through pantomime merged with dance. Subsequently the following plays were performed: *Masks*; *How to Make This Broken Heart Unbroken*; *Searching for a Human*; *Clown in Love*; and *Awakening*. This marks the beginning of the theatre therapy special workshop.

It must be stressed that after the co-operation between *J. Osterwa's Theatre* and the troupe of disabled actors was initiated, Lublin's *teatroterapia* workshops began to engage students who graduated from a greater variety of schools. Initially, only a special school, No 26, which catered for the needs of individuals with mild intellectual disability, was involved in the workshops. Workshop participation was subsequently extended to include schools which were designed to educate students with a greater degree of disability ("trainable mental retardation").

It should be noted that even today special education in Poland may be based on pedagogical assumptions and practices that were current from the 1920s onwards. Special schools were then regarded as the most suitable settings in which to ensure that children with special needs had an opportunity to realize their full potential. Nowadays, despite the growing popularity of inclusive education or integrated settings, special education schools are still an option that exceptional children and their parents may choose.

The idea that had been nurtured since the time when the Lublin *teatroterapia* workshop was set up could have been expressed as follows:

We have a right to create and to take part in both culture and the art of drama, just as we deserve meaningful living in our city, in our country and finally in the whole wide world...undoubtedly, we ought to be regarded as people who feel the same way as all normal people (*Theatre manifesto of the mentally handicapped actors*, on-line access www.lublin.teatroterapia.lublin.pl).

Special education professionals and researchers have claimed that, in past centuries, theatre (both as a cultural facility and drama therapy) was inaccessible to the disabled. Thus, theatre's therapeutic role in special education, along with other potential benefits, were ignored. Such benefits might include social integration and inclusion, as well as a reduction in social stereotyping and prejudice. However, as research on pre-literate societies indicates, group participation as an actor or spectator has played a time-honored role in education. Nevertheless, drama therapy, considered as a special education method for the mentally disabled, may be regarded as a new approach. In addition, it is still not common for such people to be engaged by a professional theatre.

In Poland, theatre/drama therapy was introduced into an occupational therapy workshop which had existed since the early 1980s. Theatre therapy, which is still regarded as an innovative form of rehabilitation, is very beneficial for the disabled because it combines art with skill development. It fosters not only intellectual and physical abilities but also personal development.

Currently, over 20 individuals, both females and males, who are between 20-36 years old, can participate in the Lublin *teatroterapia* workshops every day (see MGB, 2006). Some of them began to act in several performances in the 1990s. Interestingly enough, M. Pietrusza-Budzyńska has not called them "actors" but "artists" (Adamaszek, 2013). These performing artists suffer from intellectual disabilities, sometimes combined with other difficulties (e.g., attention and sensory integration deficits;

communication difficulties: memory, reasoning and motor problems). They work in accordance with special programs which are usually prepared by therapists who are actors, educators, musicians or other specialists. It is this team effort that gives the disabled many opportunities to be successful. Social approval, a standing ovation, and a favorable reception by the spectators are highly positive and valuable experiences for both the actors and their families. As long as the intellectually disabled actors, (who are often rejected and misunderstood by society), are able to communicate everything they feel through art, the crucial goal of theatre therapy (rehabilitation through social participation) can be reached.

In June 2009, a theatre therapy workshop was replaced by a foundation called *Teatroterapia Lubelska (Lublin Theatre Therapy)*. In the participants' opinion, this constituted a milestone in social and vocational development; it enabled the workshop to be an independent and self-governing body in the artistic circles of professional theatres. M. Pietrusza - Budzyńska – a founder of Lublin *teatroterapia* – said that all actions fostering a sense of independence were indispensable. This structural transformation of the workshops enriched the artistic lives of the participants and confirmed theatre therapy's role as an innovative rehabilitation method, which supported not only the mentally handicapped but their families and local communities as well. (www.teatroterapia.lublin.pl, on-line access on 6.06.2014).

While reading the local press we have sometimes come across accounts describing the Lublin *teatroterapia* workshop on *Jastrzębia Street*. The workshop venue itself is a friendly and welcoming place, its artistic decor created by the disabled artists themselves. It is difficult for these artists to overcome their traumatic experiences of rejection and humiliation, and to "...find the internal strength for performing on the stage...Maria and her collaborators know the secret of this incredible transformation." (MG, 2007).

The goal of the Lublin *teatroterapia* workshops, and professional collaboration

As stated earlier, the most important goal of the Lublin *teatroterapia* workshops is to enable mentally handicapped persons to reach as high a level of social participation as possible. Attitude change is a complex as well as a time-consuming process. Thus, the positive outcomes that we expect

from the program are mainly of an individual/personal nature. The *teatroterapia* team cooperates with as many as 20 specialists, including actors, dance and theatre instructors, trainers, educators, musicians, other artists and professionals. This collaboration ensures a high quality of enrichment activities, comprising music, literature, dance, psychology, art, rehabilitation, speech therapy, oratory, computer technology, mathematics and craft (tailor-made clothes). Occupational therapy workshops called *teatroterapia* collaborate with health centers, schools, day care facilities, cultural centers and certain local authorities. They are particularly closely involved with those non-governmental organizations (NGOs) which serve one crucial purpose – social participation and the maximization of disabled persons' vocational potential. (www.teatroterapia.lublin.pl, on-line access on 6.06.2014). It is only through this kind of collaboration that one can go beyond the common pattern of either medical or psychological rehabilitation. The activities of the theatre therapy workshops intend not only to teach somebody how to button or unbutton a coat, tie or untie shoelaces, comb hair or even go shopping. They also concentrate on art itself, that is, participating in a special kind of drama, the disabled theatre (Józefczuk, 2010).

The intellectually disabled actors: Some theoretical issues

According to Jajte-Lewkowicz and Piasecka (2006, p. 141), we may conceptualize disabled theatre using two essential models:

1. A model that assumes that the theatre of the disabled involves both therapy and rehabilitation (drama therapy which concentrates on the instrumental aspects of special education).
2. A model that underlines the aesthetic dimension of a show; this model focuses on the performance at a theatre itself, as well as on its artistic value.

The first conceptualization appears to be linked to a medical model, since the participants of drama therapy workshops might be labeled "retarded" or "mentally defective". The second conceptualization leans more towards a social model, in that it is focused on detecting and eliminating various barriers to full social participation, including such barriers as social discrimination, negative attitudes towards disability, stereotyped images and stigmatization.

Role-playing by an actor with intellectual disability is a fairly unusual example of using both models concurrently, so that they balance each other (Jajte-Lewkowicz & Piasecka, 2006; p. 146). As we watch the intellectually disabled artists during their performance, we may notice a special way of interpreting a role, a new pattern of role-playing. Such features of disability might be treated as "value added to a theatre performance". We could cite, as examples, the following drama therapy groups: *Tartaar Theatre* from Belgium, *Maatwerk Theatre* in the Netherlands, and *La Compagnie de L'Oiseau-Mouche* from France.

How does it work? The steps involved in theatre therapy

In essence, there are three key stages or steps in setting up theatre therapy for the disabled:

1. Discovering the human potential of the disabled actors (unlimited human opportunities).
2. Theatre therapy (preparations for a performance, play).
3. The actual performance (role-playing).

Step 1 exists regardless of the other two. Although it focuses on discovering the potential of intellectually disabled persons, it also seems to influence all those people who are not intellectually disabled, yet are engaged in this sort of drama therapy. Through such collaborative learning they gain new experience, as well as perhaps undergoing a transformative change in their personal outlook.

At this stage (Step 1) it is important to be familiar with "the convention on theatre". As Pietrusza - Budzyńska (2006, p. 138) claims: "Discovering and enhancing both personal and collective opportunities involves endless experimenting with educational, therapeutic, social and mostly dramatic/theatrical concepts and ideas."

Theatre therapy (also known as drama therapy) is based on the assumptions underlying *commedia dell'arte*. It combines a playful performance climate, stock characters in colorful costumes

and expressive masks, playing roles that are clearly portrayed. In preparing for a performance (Step 2) we might encounter problems. In Śliwionik's (2006) opinion, a real threat to the theatre therapy process is to perceive an intellectually handicapped artist solely as an actor who must play the role that was assigned to her/him by a director. Instead, we should focus our attention on careful preparation. Preparing for a performance should include not only formal rehearsals, but should also require pinpointing possible problems and coming up with appropriate solutions.

The preparations, which have usually lasted for months, foster both the personal and collective development of the participants – the actors. The work is not only focused on mastering role-playing skills, but also on co-operation with others, as well as understanding and accepting the nature of theatrical creation. An intensive training course is recommended so that the participants are prepared for as many as two plays in a year.

According to Pietrusza - Budzyńska (2006, p. 139-140), the last stage (Step 3) needs to support disabled actors by helping them to understand and come to terms with their disability, as well as to appreciate their own and others' humanity. A good drama therapy production should be sensitive to the disabled actors' life experiences. All three stages in preparing for a performance should allow for improvisation, in response to the actors' concerns or suggestions. It is in Step 3 that roles are fine-tuned, on the basis of detailed information, to meet the disabled actors' needs. Typically, Step 3 lasts for about 20 to 25 minutes.

Some notable performances

According to MG (2007), M. Pietrusza-Budzyńska recognized that the reactions of non-disabled audiences to a *teatroterapia* performance make a positive contribution to the actors' self-confidence and personal dignity, particularly when the actors have a chance to make their own decisions and to feel independent. The audience gives the actors a standing ovation not because they are disabled or clumsy, but because their expressiveness adds special value to the performance.

Among the exceptional achievements of the disabled artists was their performance of *Hamlet* which was directed by K. Babicki in 2004. This show was a team effort. Both the disabled and professionals took part in it. Eleven disabled actors from theatre therapy workshops played their parts in the performance at *J. Osterwa's Theatre* in Lublin. According to accounts by Józefczuk (2006, 2010), this was a pioneering attempt. All those involved in producing this play, namely the director, executive producer, costume designer, actors, scriptwriter, choreographer, manager and the light engineer reported on their experience. They described some of the problems they encountered in creating roles for the disabled actors, and how these problems were solved. In a report titled "To be or not to be" they recounted their experience honestly and tactfully; nothing was swept under the carpet. The choreographer stated that it had been necessary to create theatrical roles for the disabled actors. Initially, they came on stage and watched the show silently. Then, "...wearing vividly colored costumes that gave this show unbelievable mystery and power...they performed on the stage as a choir conducted by Ophelia." (Józefczuk, 2010). As Józefczuk concludes, these actors "...paved the way for a new debate about the limits on what was normal, regular and powerful."

The next noteworthy undertaking was the play directed by M. Pietrusza – Budzyńska in 2006 - *Isadora: The Story of a Woman*. The script for this play was based on the life of the famous American dancer – Isadora Duncan. The actors in the theatre therapy workshop told her story in their own words, in a multi-media setting which included classical music by Chopin, Beethoven, Schubert, Wagner, Strauss, Liszt and Bach. Visual resources which turned out to be suitable for this spectacle included Botticelli's and Correggio's paintings, the drawings of Gordon Craig (illustrator and chronicler of Isadora's artistic achievements), genuine photographs as well as frames from the movie based on the dancer's autobiography. (MGb, 2006). M. Pietrusza-Budzyńska writes about this play:

This play is about a woman who has devoted herself to dance. According to her, dancing is some kind of catharsis because it allows us to release our repressed desires, wishes and needs; the

body is the medium for saying something, using internal, covert, secret and ciphered words (MGa, 2006).

One of the most impressive performances of the theatre therapy workshop was Nobel Prize-winner Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. This play was performed at the *J. Osterwa Theatre* in Lublin, on November 7, 2011. Written in 1921, the play portrays six characters who are resisting the authority figures trying to direct their lives, (the play's author and director, as well as the production itself – the plot – that has created them). In their search for autonomy the six characters put on various masks, and thus experience becoming somebody else. As regards this theatrical event Maria Pietrusza-Budzyńska suggests that: "It is the text of their lifetime." If you happen to be lost in a world of convention and deceit, perhaps you do indeed require a mask. (Józefczuk, 2010).

When this play was presented at the 4th International Premiere Festival of The Disabled Theatre (DOMINO), the performance itself confirmed the play's high artistic merit. The team made sure that the theatrical skills of actors were further developed. The disabled artists seemed to gain an insight into common human problems (stormy adolescence, difficulties in adjustment and in social interaction). At the same time, both the high quality of the performance and the original stage design stirred up their aesthetic feelings.

Outcomes: the participants' personal narratives

More than fifty persons with intellectual disability have performed on the Lublin *teatroterapia* scene over sixteen years. M. Pietrusza-Budzyńska recalls how Sylvia, who initially was "...not even able to go downstairs by herself "...became so highly motivated by her theatre experience that "...during a performance of *Hamlet* she could easily find her way in the darkness, walking on a sloping surface." (Burdzanowska, 2008).

Again, M. Pietrusza-Budzyńska comments on how Norbert, a leather worker, turned out to be "...a poor leather worker but he plays his role in *Hamlet* brilliantly and he would like to sculpt too!" (Adamaszek, 2013, p. 8).

The following personal narratives were gathered by Adamaszek (2013). They reveal some of the transformative experiences that the *teatroterapia* actors have derived from their participation.

Norbert's narrative:

When I'm on the stage I can feel that they respect me for what I'm doing. I love the moment when I can finally hear great applause. Then I know that I'm successful. I can step up to my parents and I'm proud of what I've done. In five years I would like to be here as well, in this theatre, but to be completely independent. Just to have my home.

Another participant is **Bożena**, who tells her story:

I attended a vocational school. I specialized in knitting. My schoolmates got married and were pregnant. They went away somewhere. Later, I came to Lublin *teatroterapia* workshops. The job I could do is unlikely to be found. I'm 36 and I can show you that I can do something. Just on the stage. I can reach many different destinations all around the city by bus, on my own. Recently, a female reporter from Wrocław asked me a question about motherhood. I answered that disabled women like me couldn't be mothers, although they strove for it. But my dream has just come true. I attend a Latino dance school and I'm mastering *zumba*. In five years I'd like to live abroad. Maybe I'll be there with a Latino boy? (*Laugh*). Here Adamaszek, p. 8

Dominika was born with autism. She stated that:

The people like me felt isolated, withdrawn and I was such a kind of person, too. Before I was 6 years old, I couldn't speak. I was gradually learning how to be in touch with others. I graduated from a vocational school for gardeners. I like drawing. I'm keen on drawing faces and self-portraits of

people who are familiar to me. Through showing emotions in the faces, I could stay in touch with the outside world. I came over here because I was impressed by theatre. I have no idea about what's going to happen in five years. I dream of leading an ordinary life, just as common people do. And to get a job, too. Adamaszek p. 8

Michał is one of the most experienced artists. . He has participated in Lublin *teatroterapia* workshops for 18 years and he reports:

You know, the thing I'm extremely proud of is that I can find my way to the place and to come back home by myself. I know by heart several bus and trolleybus city lines and the timetables. When I began to attend workshops, my father usually gave me a lift. And some days a few people sat very close to me and started talking but I didn't say a word. At the beginning I was afraid of the stage. And suddenly I could be launched into the air, like a rocket, or something. I felt like an adult, independent person. Now I'm playing with acting. I know what I'm supposed to perform and I add something else which is mine to it, even though a director doesn't need that. What will I be doing in five years? I'm here and I'm very likely to be where I'm now. My dream is to become a bridegroom. But nobody will ever let me do it, you know, because I must face major limitations. Adamaszek p. 8

Agnieszka, who has been engaged in Lublin *teatroterapia* workshops for 10 years, says:

I used to go to a therapeutic high school, but I didn't even try to take the secondary school-leaving exams. I don't know why, but when I'm giving interviews, I usually stumble a bit, I really don't know what to say. On the stage I'm different. I came here, because I was curious to know. Theatre made me feel independent. I go back home by myself, I don't need to be led by anybody. I've got my key to the apartment, nobody needs to wait for me. Mum and grandma, I've lived with them, they could trust me. And when they saw me performing in *The Deep End* they were terribly happy. I feel fine here at the workshops, I don't know if I wish to be somewhere else in five years. I dream of being independent, If I could only cope with real life problems, without the help of my mum and grandma.

Last but not least is **Arthur**. He has participated in the workshops for three years. In the past he used to live with his family in the U.S. Arthur is diagnosed with Down Syndrome. He cannot speak. M. Pietrusza-Budzyńska tells his story with admiration:

He loves posing for his shots and playing his role in the theatre. When he's waiting for cues from a director, he can get them right. He can't speak but it doesn't mean that he can't think... We've discovered that he could be a fantastic actor. At first, he played second fiddle to other artists during performances, but suddenly he could even reconstruct the events that he observed while his colleagues were performing on the stage. We took him on for *The Deep End* show because he could understand theatrical space perfectly. It is easy to see that he has acquired good habits and has learned how to behave properly in everyday settings. When he is in a restaurant he can call for a waiter. (Adamaszek, 2013, p. 9).

In summary, these narratives suggest that during their participation in *teatroterapia*, the disabled actors learn to move freely about the stage, and become increasingly focused on the tasks assigned to them. Furthermore, they are able to transfer some of their theatre experience to their everyday lives. Their success may bring about changes in their attitudes and behavior. The audience learns as well; regular spectators may become more emotionally engaged with the disabled actors, and may change their perspectives on disability, so that they become more supportive of social inclusion and more willing to recognize its true value.

Conclusions and recommendations

The life histories of the participants prove that each of them has experienced positive changes in terms of behavior, personality and social functioning. They have become more independent, socially competent, responsible, courageous and open-minded. Moreover, their involvement with the theatre has made them more goal-oriented. They have learned how to cope with everyday problems and to reach their objectives. It is obvious that they allow themselves to have personal dreams, which are usually connected with Lublin *teatroterapia* workshops.

Hence, it appears that disability theatre is professional by nature. Its high artistic and cultural content make for some memorable performances. If *teatroterapia* draws our attention to this dimension of artistic activity, and if we accept it as a necessary component of culture, we will gradually change our attitudes towards disability. It is certain that this process has not yet been completed. Everything that has been achieved so far needs popularization. The process adopted by the Lublin *teatroterapia* workshops should be explored further, and applied in wider contexts, because it helps individuals with cognitive challenges to participate more fully in society and culture. We are convinced that disability theatre may reach greater recognition as a part of the professional, cultural scene. However, we should remember that theatre is an exclusive branch of art. Therefore, it is unlikely to become accessible to everybody. Nonetheless, as this paper suggests, those disabled who are engaged in theatrical activities encourage us to believe that barriers to fuller social participation can be overcome.

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Appendix

The repertoire of plays in which intellectually handicapped actors have participated, in Lublin *teatroterapia* workshops, is listed below:

- *The World Can't Believe These Tears*, by Maria Pietrusza-Budzyńska (1996).
- *Labyrinth*, by Jacek Kasprzak (1997).
- *A Girl With a Box of Matches*, by Hans Christian Andersen (1997).
- *M Like...*, by Maria Pietrusza-Budzyńska (1998).
- *GO...*, by Edward Gramont (1999).
- *True Confessions in Wood*, by Jan Wilkowski (2000).
- *Dell'arte for...*, by Maria Pietrusza-Budzyńska (2001).
- *Country*, by Maria Pietrusza-Budzyńska and Jolanta Grabowska (2003).
- *Hamlet* (participation in the performance), by William Shakespeare (2004).
- *Isadora. The Story of a Woman*, by Maria Pietrusza-Budzyńska (2006).
- *On the 13th Day You Can Enjoy Spring Even in December*, by Maria Pietrusza-Budzyńska (2008).
- *The Painted Bird*, by Jerzy Kosiński (2010).