



# THE MYTH BEHIND THE COMMUNITY

European Project ERASMUS+, Strategic partnership in Adult Education

R.I.O.T.E. 3 - Rural Inclusive Outdoor Theatre Education: street theatre education methodology and network cooperation model in rural environment 3.

KA2/n°2020-1-HU01-KA204-078826



## THE MYTH BEHIND THE COMMUNITY

*European Project ERASMUS+, Strategic partnership in Adult Education*

*R.I.O.T.E. 3 - Rural Inclusive Outdoor Theatre Education: street theatre education methodology and network cooperation model in rural environment 3.*

*KA2/n°2020-1-HU01-KA204-078826*

*Partner:*

Take Art | Shoshin Theatre Association | Kud Ljud | Cie Une Idée Dans l'Air |  
Sinum Theatre Laboratory | Protagon e.V | Utca-SzAK | Teatro Nucleo

*Graphic design and layout:*

Caterina Martinelli • kchiocciola@gmail.com

\* The illustrations are processed from the photographic material of the workshops.

# THE MYTH BEHIND THE COMMUNITY

# INDEX

<b>Introduction:</b>	
<b>The Myth Behind the Community by Marco Luciano, Teatro Nucleo (IT)</b>	<b>5</b>
 <b>Chapter I:</b>	
<b>Participatory Theatre in Rural Areas</b>	<b>8</b>
Experiences in United Kingdom, by Mark Helyar (Take Art)	10
Experiences in Romania, by Csongor Köllő (Shoshin Theatre Association)	24
 <b>Chapter II:</b>	
<b>Theatre as a Tool for Intercultural Dialogue</b>	<b>34</b>
Experiences in Slovenia, by Vida Cerkenik Bren and Grega Mocivnik (Kud Ljud)	36
Experiences in France, by Cie Une Idée Dans l'Air	50
 <b>Chapter III:</b>	
<b>Interpretation Skills Developement and Street Theatre Techniques</b>	<b>60</b>
Experiences in Hungary, by Pintér-Németh Géza (Sinum Theatre Laboratory)	62
Experiences in Germany, by Lucas Tanajura, Benedikt Müller, Grischa Wiesner (Protagon e.V.)	73
 <b>Chapter IV:</b>	
<b>Karavans as a Main Concept for Rural Touring and Connecting with Communities</b>	<b>86</b>
Experiences in Hungary, by Utca-SzAK	88
Experiences in Italy, by Teatro Nucleo	102
 <b>Closing thoughts by Csongor Köllő</b>	<b>117</b>

# THE MYTH BEHIND THE COMMUNITY

An anthology of theatrical experiences in rural areas  
by Marco Luciano, Teatro Nucleo (IT)

Theatre is based on citizenship, as Stefano Rodotà said, 'theatre is the Polis'. In its main characteristics, it has the function of collecting the legacy of ritual, of celebration, of mythology, through which the community represents itself, narrates itself, and celebrates itself, in its social dramas and ideals.

Theatre and educational processes meet in the relational, social and communitarian dimension: where cognitive, emotional and physical aspects are integrated; where we can recognise the multiple dimensions of the individual's development; and where knowledge is intertwined with feeling, creation and aesthetics.

We do not consider it important to ask whether theatre is educational, nor whether it is an instrument of transformation or not.

However, it is necessary to state that it is precisely in the incorruptible link between the creative and educational process that the many possibilities to cross complex and fragile scenarios, to experience places and languages in which actors and spectators confront 'otherness' and to produce new images, that new visions open, starting from history and memory.

In this statement, which emerged strongly in the eight European organisations that animated the R.I.O.T.E. project in its third edition, one can decisively grasp the social, artistic and

pedagogical value that certain types of theatrical processes, conducted by professionals in territories at the margins of European cultural systems, manage to achieve.

These processes, already strained by the invasion of technology, were further weakened by the two years of pandemic that shook Europe and the world. Two years in which it has been difficult to come together, not only because of the restrictions related to Covid-19, but also because of the inevitable psychological factors that occur in the climate of fear and uncertainty that has been arising. We can well imagine how certain dynamics are more extreme in marginal contexts, in rural areas and small villages crossed by the R.I.O.T.E. project.

We decided to title this book 'THE MYTH BEHIND THE COMMUNITY' because in the word 'myth' we found the common thread of the paths taken in the three years of this project. Some groups, such as Sinum, decided to work on literal mythological themes (Janus Bifrontes), while others worked on community stories in local mythology, such as Shoshin in the village of Mèra in Romania. Kud Ljud develops, through its 'Table Theatre' performances, narratives that only acquire meaning together with those who participate in the play-ritual.

Therefore, the word myth should not be understood simply as 'mythology, epic, fantastic tale', but rather in its purest meaning, that of word, tale, or discourse. The community that precisely narrates, questions and responds, generates the stories that ground and define its 'social system', expressing a precise phase in the historical development of human communication; they allow fears and beliefs, hopes and socio-economic conditions to emerge in the form of symbols. Through narration, be it oral, musical or physical, communities recognise and preserve themselves.

In this publication we intend to provide an anthology of the experiences that eight theatre groups have lived and realised together with the communities that welcomed the project. The pandemic opened up eight very different ways of approaching theatre work and crisis intervention on a social and cultural level; eight distinct ways that put the community at the centre of their theatre work where the cultural system is least present; generating strongly participatory, active and maieutic paths, with the aim of building a living relationship with citizens, and lasting over time. The project was able to intervene at various levels on the problem of identity, decidedly frayed in some contexts, strongly rooted in others. It has generated

'places' where human landscapes and social architecture seemed rather evanescent. Places of the gaze, places of sharing, places of study, places of memory, places of dreams, places of struggle, and places of encounter.

As you will observe, this book is not intended to provide answers or solutions: rather, from the theatrical practice carried out within the project itself and from its narration, emerge the right questions to interpret the society we live in and give the right value to the cultural phenomena that animate the communities that form our Europe.

It also intends to make its readers reflect on the need to implement, and support with greater force, a certain type of cultural action: to reduce the gap that exists between the large cities and the peripheral areas of the continent; to increase the guarantee of accessibility to culture and theatre in the limes' territories; and to enable the social classes less accustomed to cultural enjoyment to artists and artistic products capable of transforming their way of seeing the world.

We would like to point out, however, that this is not a unilateral process: not only communities whether rural or urban, need to meet artists, but also artists need the encounter with these communities, to nurture their art, broaden their visions, and deepen the sense of their own theatrical making.



# PARTICIPATORY THEATRE IN RURAL AREAS 1

TAKE ART / SHOSHIN THEATRE ASSOCIATION





# EXPERIENCES OF PARTICIPATORY THEATRE IN UNITED KINGDOM

by Mark Helyar (Take Art)

## INTRODUCTION

In his book, *A Restless Art: How Participation Won and Why It Matters*, published in 2019, François Matarasso discusses the role and profile of community and participatory art in contemporary society. (<https://arestlessart.com>)

Although the term 'participatory art' is used in the arts, policy, funding and education to signify a wide range of activity, Matarasso's definition, distilled to the simplest of terms, is 'the creation of art by professional artists and non-professional artists' (p. 48). The principles he explores are applicable to our specific area of enquiry, namely, 'participatory theatre'.

In more detail, he asks what is meant when we talk about 'participatory art':

*Participatory art crosses borders that have been well guarded for a very long time. the most obvious one is between who is an artist and who isn't, but there are others too, between professions, disciplines and forms, between intentions, between kinds and degrees of power. Participatory art, by definition, stands in two places at once, and frequently more than two places. that can be uncomfortable. It certainly makes it restless. (p. 33)*



Arguing that the official, funded and public professional culture of participatory art has become normalised over the last 20 years or so. (summary chapter 1), he proposes three intentions that underpin participatory art (p. 63):

- 1 Increasing access to art (cultural democratisation)
- 2 Creating social change
- 3 Advancing cultural democracy

Take Art is an arts organisation that serves the predominantly rural population of Somerset. We also work beyond the county across the South West region, nationally and Europe.

'Participatory art' is a strong and vital element of our programme, with Matarasso's three intentions implicitly informing this work, both in concept and delivery. Our mission is to deliver a transformational, high quality arts programme by providing fantastic, life-changing opportunities for people of all ages, backgrounds and abilities to experience, *participate* and work in the arts.

We work principally through the performing arts, with focused specialisms in rural touring, theatre, dance, early years, music and international (Europe focused). We work with individuals and groups who are underserved by the arts, including under 5s and their carers; children and young people; adults experiencing mental ill health; and rural communities.

All our activities take place in other people's spaces where they live and congregate: village halls; churches; pre-schools; schools; residential homes; and community spaces, inside and outside, that provide excellent access.

This section of Chapter 1 focuses on the experiences of working in a small coastal community in Somerset, UK, to create a participatory theatre project in Summer and Autumn 2021.

## SOMERSET AND LOCAL CONTEXT

### Rural communities' context: Somerset background

Covering 3,452 square kilometres (1,333 square miles), Somerset is a predominantly rural county in South West England. It borders Gloucestershire and Bristol to the North, Wiltshire to the east, Dorset to the south-east and Devon to the south-west. Somerset's landscape is, geographically, extremely diverse.

The Mendips, Blackdown Hills, Cranborne Chase and the Quantock Hills are designated Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), and a large part of West Somerset is occupied by Exmoor National Park.

Long scenic stretches of the county's coastline, facing South East Wales, have been selected for conservation. Around 15% of Somerset is either at, or just above sea-level. Large, flat expanses of land that are susceptible to flooding in the winter months include the Levels and Moors.

An estimated 555,195 people live in Somerset (June 2017).

### Location: Why Highbridge & Burnham on Sea?

Burnham-on-Sea and Highbridge is a coastal parish in the Sedgemoor district of Somerset with a population of around 20,000. The parish contains the towns Burnham-on-Sea and Highbridge which share a town council.

We first worked with people in the two towns in 2014 when, following a community consultation event, we identified Burnham and Highbridge as a place where people had strong views on several issues and wanted a creative project to help them articulate their ideas and opinions. It became clear that there were several themes and divergent groups of people and that one 'participatory community play' would not be able to contain everything that people wanted to express. So we co-developed a project called **What Change?**

Counter-intuitively, rather than asking people to pay a small fee to participate in a community project, we decided to create the '£10 Challenge' through which people were invited to think about what small, but significant, changes they could create to make their towns the

best place to be. We encouraged people to take ownership and explore for themselves the small, positive changes that can be made within a community.

The entire project had several positive outcomes: it strengthened community relationships; encouraged people to think in a positive way about the place they live in; instilled confidence, and feelings of belonging in individuals; helped people to realise their creativity.

Given the opportunity to develop a participatory programme through the R.I.O.T.E.3 project, we wanted to revisit the towns to develop some new work that could build on the legacy of the past as well as explore contemporary stories and issues and, in particular, the impact of the pandemic: a very real, determining factor throughout the life of this project.

## THE PARTICIPATORY EXPERIENCE IN PRACTICE

### Community Aspirations

All of the work Take Art delivers is produced in partnership with other people and organisations; while we may be able to provide the 'arts' expertise, they know their communities best. This synergy is vital.

Through experience, we are mindful of the dangers of 'parachuting' into a community, offering an arts intervention, then leaving. This could be too brief, superficial, patronising or even exploitative. Arts practitioners imposing unsolicited 'help' on a community without effective consultation can often prove counterproductive.

Following our initial, desk-based research, we discovered we have good relationships with other people and partners who were also developing work in the area that we could complement: Selina Keedwell (Youth Theatre); Actiontrack (a leading South West company in participatory arts and community theatre) and SEED Sedgemoor.

Selina Keedwell was born, and grew up, in the area. Although she no longer lives in Highbridge, she is known and trusted by the community, a vital relationship in developing a project such as this.

SEED is a consortium of organisations comprising Homes in Sedgemoor, Community Council for Somerset, Bridgwater Senior Citizens Forum, Young Somerset, Bridgwater Town Council



and Somerset Film. Through community consultation, Seed curates, commissions and plans projects and events throughout the district of Sedgemoor with and for local communities.

The Morland Community Hub is a venue based in the centre of a concentrated area of social and private housing, adjacent to a Children's Centre and Churchfields School. Its mission is to be an accessible focal point of our community, providing a comfortable and welcoming place for all people, young or old, male or female, able-bodied or disabled, to come and enjoy social and stimulating activities.

It hosts a range of activities for community members, including a lunch club which became the focus for gathering stories from people which contributed to the development of the project.

Jane McPherson, Project Development Manager at the Hub, was particularly keen for people in the area to engage with arts activities and encouraged the Hub to be a focal point for the project's community activity.

The Princess Theatre and Arts Centre is the main arts venue for Burnham on Sea and High-bridge. Its mission is to enrich, educate and entertain our community by providing superior theatre and arts experiences.

We enjoyed working in partnership with the venue on delivering the original **What Change?** project in 2014; its strong links with people across the local community attract a diverse range of people through its doors.

### Artistic aspirations

Artistically, we were intrigued to discover what would happen if we brought two disparate live performance genres together – aerial circus and recorded verbatim – in a participatory context. What would be the creative result of this fusion?

'Aerial silk' is a type of performance in which one or more artists perform aerial acrobatics while suspended from fabric. In Somerset, we enjoy the residency of Pirates of the Carabina, a trailblazing circus company of highly experienced artists, riggers and musicians from across the world who specialise in theatrical, highly technical shows with a very strong live music

ethos. Shaena Brandel, one of its producers, worked with us as an artist on the project.

Verbatim Theatre is a form of documentary theatre made from people's real words. It enables theatre-makers to explore stories, events and themes through the actual language of the people they belong to. Selina Keedwell is a very experienced practitioner in the use of verbatim theatre.

### The Practice

#### *How and What we Planned*

We started planning the project in Autumn 2020 in anticipation that, by summer 2021, we would be through the worst of the pandemic.

Ordinarily, we find it is crucial to build sufficient planning into the development of community engagement projects, particularly when working with new people, partners and methodologies.

As we knew that we would have a challenge on our hands with so many prevailing factors out of our control, it was particularly important that we took our time with this.

With our partners, we developed a project outline and description, calling it **Journey Exchange**, inspired by the European bartering model of exchanging stories and issues that are important and relevant to the participants and community:

*Covid-19 may have stopped us going to the places we love, but those places still hold a special place in our hearts and new 'journeys' closer to home have brought us different adventures.*

With our partners we developed one key aim: to bring local people together with Somerset creative practitioners, and European performers, to develop new creative skills, share stories and experiences post Covid-19, culminating in making a community theatre performance.



We planned to achieve this aim through the following objectives:

- Deliver a workshop programme for 8-16 local intergenerational participants (one-third over age of 60), led by professional artists, Shaena Brandel and Selina Keedwell;
- Create an outdoor curtain-raiser performance by the local group;
- Promote a public performance of *Pirate Taxi*, outdoor circus theatre, on Morlands Estate;
- Offer workshop participants the opportunity to use the R.I.O.T.E. life quality toolkit to measure the impact of participation in arts activity on their health and wellbeing;
- Host a residential weekend for outdoor performance artists from Hungary, Romania, Germany, Italy and France;
- Deliver practitioner-led skills exchange workshops for local artists, recruiting 2-3 artists through an open call out expression of interest process, and several European performers, to share their respective creative practices and explore new ways of working;
- Offer 10 places to Somerset creative practitioners to take part in these skills exchange workshops;
- Align with other existing and planned arts activity in the Highbridge and Burnham area, eg through Actiontrack's *Spreading the Work* and through building on the work Selina Keedwell will have delivered in the locality through her Youth Theatre project.

It is worth emphasising that, in our planning, the process would be as important, if not more, than the final performance. And that the integration of R.I.O.T.E. partners and Somerset practitioners to co-create something collaboratively would bring a vital and valuable dynamic to the work.

Prior to the start of the project, we developed a Memorandum of Understanding with our SEED partners to ensure clarity over roles, responsibilities and legislative matters. As an important element of managing any community arts project in the UK, these related to Equality and Diversity; Child Protection and Safeguarding of Vulnerable Adults; Health and Safety; and Confidentiality.

We also developed a Communication Protocol via a blend of 'in person' meetings; telephone;

email; and other online resources (eg Zoom) in compliance with government guidance on social distancing and safe practice.

As a publicly funded organisation, we were very mindful of our responsibilities around managing the impact of Covid-19. We agreed to carefully monitor the latest Government Guidance, carry out the appropriate risk assessments and comply with all health and safety advice in line with the guidelines in place when the activities would take place.

Should Covid-19 restrictions significantly impact on the workshops and/or performance the partners we reserved the right to agree to defer the project or deliver via other means (such as remotely) that complied with any restrictions or social distancing requirements, subject to the agreement of both parties.

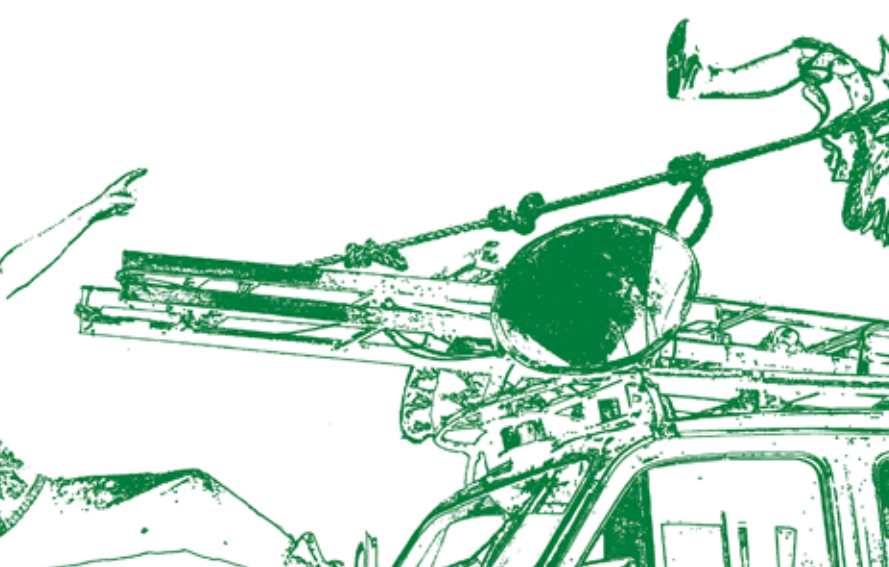
We also held an online meeting with all the practitioners to agree a way of working together and managing expectations:

- process not final product;
- lowering judgement;
- not gone as we may have liked due to covid;
- getting everyone in room together would be a good outcome;
- it's about the people in the room, not those who aren't there;
- remain open-minded and generous, trust the process; we're all in this together.

## What Happened

We planned for Journey Exchange to run from July to October 2021 and promoted it accordingly:

*A new community group will be recruited via a callout to the people of Burnham and Highbridge to share their stories as part of a participatory project and performance opportunity with Shaena Brandel from Pirates of the Carabina, and local theatre maker, Selina Keedwell. The theme will be around journeys and travelling.*



The project will culminate with Take Art hosting a residency weekend for their European partners from R.I.O.T.E.3. This will include offering a skills exchange programme with, and for, local creative practitioners. Prior to the project starting, we wanted to connect with people in spring 2021 to get involved with the project; in the UK we were only just beginning to emerge from another

lockdown. We sensed a palpable wariness among many people to return to cultural and community activities as restrictions eased.

We held several planning meetings, online and in person (when allowed) to identify the best, and safest, way to encourage people to engage with the project.

Jane at the Hub advised that a good way to gather stories would be for Selina to visit the Friday lunch club and record people's stories as they spoke.

Selina structured a series of questions for people to respond to, based on the theme of Journey Exchange:

- 1 If you could take a journey anywhere right now, where would it be?
- 2 Describe one of your favourite places in the world, home or away...
- 3 Where have you travelled, and how have you travelled in the last 18 months?
- 4 Describe the journey inside you...
- 5 What is the best way to travel?
- 6 You have an unlimited budget for you and up to three others to take a journey somewhere. Tell us where, who, why and how?

## Timeframe

On Thursdays and Saturdays throughout September 2021, Selina Keedwell and Shaena Brandel ran workshops at the Princess Theatre. Prior to this, Selina had gathered and recorded 'journey' stories from older people attending the lunch club at the Morland Hub as well as members of the community youth theatre.

Selina worked with participants to develop verbatim techniques to transfer the recorded stories into live performance. These were then used to inspire physical movement that Shaena and the participants explored using the aerial silks (give example).

On the weekend of 2 and 3 October, the community group, local theatre practitioners and the R.I.O.T.E.3 partners came together:

2 & 3 Oct: sharing weekend with community group, local theatre practitioners and the R.I.O.T.E.3 partners visiting from Europe, taking place at Princess Theatre, B-on-Sea:

- Sat 2 Oct: Skills exchange training sessions
- Sun 3 Oct morning: rehearsals
- Sun 3 Oct afternoon: outdoor community performances, the **Journey Exchange** performance, Pirate Taxi public performance, stilts performance from Antagon.

## THE DIFFERENCE THE PROJECT MADE

### Intended Outcomes

In the planning stage of the project we, and our partners, set several desired outcomes:

- Increased confidence and enjoyment for local people to participate in arts activity (workshops and performance);
- Increased opportunity for local people (eg Morlands Estate residents) to experience and enjoy a high-quality outdoor circus theatre performance on their doorstep;
- More local data to inform the R.I.O.T.E.3 life quality measurement assessment;



- Greater awareness of the benefits of participating in arts activity on individual's health and wellbeing;
- An opportunity for bilateral cultural exchange;
- A more connected group of local practitioners with more creative skills developed and a stronger network;
- Potential community legacy for creating future work.

### What worked well

There are several elements that were highly rewarding.

Recruitment of the 'right' artists for this kind of project is key. It requires a specific skillset, flexibility and a good understanding of what this kind of work entails; they need to 'get it'.

We contracted Abby Young as artist liaison to provide the connection between the R.I.O.T.E.3 partners, the Somerset practitioners and local community.

The team at Morland Community Hub, Highbridge, were extremely happy with the impact on the local community. Jane Macpherson, Project Development Manager, wrote:

*'A rare and exhilarating event brought joy and wonder to the crowds in Highbridge. As a Community Hub, in an area of high deprivation, art, music and any creative projects are interests we like to invest time into. After two years of social isolation for many, due to the Covid pandemic, they talk about the hope that these kinds of projects and events may return and be available to them again, in the very near future. Many of our community would not be either able to afford, or travel to venues to see performers of this quality. They are still, to this day, talking about the day 'the circus' came to their estates.'*

The project included several, integrated levels leading up to the final weekend; different workshops (story gathering; verbatim theatre techniques; aerial silks) that were delivered separately but came together at the end.

The final performance event included contributions from several different community groups: Indian dance; rock band; youth theatre; children's theatre; other community members as well as the Journey Exchange piece with Somerset practitioners and R.I.O.T.E.3 partners.

Engaging with many different groups in this way, helped to ensure a good size audience. This was a very UK-typical, integrated way of working: the involvement of children and young people then engages adults and families. Although the focus was adult, participatory theatre, it's all interlinked: the connection between community, participation and professional performance is where the magic comes together.

Corrinne Curtis, one of the project participants, wrote:

*'The project put me in touch with new people and made me feel more involved in my community and proud to see what we can achieve together. Hearing each other's stories and learning aerial silks together was heart-warming and inspiring as it brought together different generations on a level playing field. Everyone was treated equally and everyone was valued. To be able to just play and explore without judgement is such a confidence booster.'*

Certainly in the UK tradition of working, to have the best adult education participatory experience, it is often beneficial to involve their children and families: it makes for a more enriching experience.

We produced a model that could expand and contract, depending on the circumstances.

### What worked less well?

Most of the challenges we faced were covid-related. It cannot be overstated how much this affected the project.

We have previously mentioned the challenges around planning a community project during a pandemic, and the measures we took to ensure we complied with all guidelines. There is no question that the impact of covid, despite our best efforts, was out of our control. A helpful comparison is the previous, **What Change?**, project that we produced in 2014 in which up to 100 people took part in the workshops and events programme.

Covid had a significant impact on the project, in some of the following ways:

the connection between  
community, participation  
and professional  
performance is where the  
magic comes together

- It affected recruitment of community participants; people were reluctant, or unsure, to commit;
- Meeting people face to face to talk to them about the project was a challenge; most had to be done online;
- We spent a disproportionate amount of time on covid safety and contingency planning; at least one of our workshop leaders, Shaena Brandel, tested positive during the workshop programme;
- We were unsure until the final weekend how many people would be able to take part, including our R.I.O.T.E.3 partners.

### What would we have done differently?

When evaluating a project, this is a question we always try to answer. Reflecting on this occasion, this is difficult. With the benefit of hindsight, we would have allowed even longer lead in times and put even more effort into the participant recruitment, if that's possible. But, as the circumstances were so unprecedented, it's difficult to know what else to add.



### Closing Thoughts

To return to Matarasso's contention that 'participatory art, by definition, stands in two places at once, and frequently more than two places', the **Journey Exchange** project stood in many different places simultaneously. At a particular moment in time that can never be replicated, several disparate elements came together – adults, children, families, actors, musicians, circus performers, a housing estate and a pandemic – to create a piece of magic; a unique, life-affirming experience in, and with, a community that needed it.

Although it won't ever happen again (in the same way) the shared joys, challenges, experience and learning will take us on the journey into the next project, whatever that may be.

**Take Art** is a unique, life-changing organisation that doesn't live in a venue, or studio or a whacking great theatre but in the villages, towns and rural communities of Somerset. Every year we work with thousands of people across the county, providing opportunities for all ages and abilities to experience, participate and work within the arts. From our hub in South Petherton we run one of the UK's most celebrated rural touring schemes, along with county-wide projects that focus on supporting artists, children, young people and communities.

**Mark Helyar** is Director of Theatre and has worked for Take Art since 2009. He is also a freelance director, musician, writer and university lecturer. He has been artistic director of two touring companies and worked extensively as a musical director, composing musical scores for ten shows. He has been employed as an arts project manager, facilitator and trainer in the public, corporate and voluntary sectors.

# EXPERIENCES OF PARTICIPATORY THEATRE IN ROMANIA

by Csongor Köllő (Shoshin Theatre Association)

## SUMMARY OF PARTICIPATORY THEATRE TRADITIONS ROMANIA

In Romania it has taken quite a long time for participatory art, especially participatory theatre, to grow roots. In 2016, the Administration of the National Cultural Fund (AFCN – Administrația Fondului Cultural Național) has varied the lines of financing by introducing new categories, such as Cultural Intervention, and Education through Culture (among others). This subsequently widened the palette of projects submitted / financed and contributed immensely to the diversification of the field. The fact that dedicated funding became available to projects that do not fall within the confines of 'theatrical production' (i.e. when professional theatre or dance shows are created by theatre or dance professionals mainly for *professional audiences*, that is, people with the means and habit of going to theatre or dance shows) has meant that many new ideas could finally spring forward. Not all these ideas are connected to the performing arts, though, and of those that are, only a fragment are realised in rural areas. Moreover, not all of them can be said to be participatory. So, in terms of participatory theatre created in rural settlements, despite the definite step forward, it has to be said that even more can – and should – be done.



A further thing to note is that institutionally, participatory theatre as a genre remains a peripheral approach. Despite the aforementioned diversification of lines of funding, the budget of the Administration of National Cultural Fund is quite small, and the vast majority of funds in the cultural area in Romania go to theatre and dance institutions subsidised directly by the state or by local / county councils. Despite a few exceptions, these institutions largely remain within the 'classical' parameters of producing theatre / art and participation is mainly limited to the role of being a spectator, a traditional observer to performances.

A real tradition, in the sense, for instance, of Theatre in Education or TiE, a very precise and specialised form of participatory theatre which was created in the UK, but also took hold in many other countries (including Hungary, a neighbouring country, where it is almost a national movement), is yet to grow its roots in Romania.

## MERA AND THE LOCAL CONTEXT

Ever since its inception, Shoshin Theatre Association has constantly developed actions in rural areas. The roots of this go back to one of the very first workshops organised by Shoshin, which took place in the summer of 2014, in Chidea (Kide), a small village of about 150 inhabitants, 40 km from Cluj-Napoca (Kolozsvár). While the workshop was not meant for active participation of the locals, but was targeted at professionals, students, and those wanting to learn something new, we were mindful, however, right from the start, of our position in the village: we came from the city, from the outside – we were just visitors here. It became important for us not to lose sight of this fact, not to fall into an attitude which would somehow give us the right, as professionals, to go into someone else's home and expect them to mind



their own business while we focus on our art for the sake of it or for the sake of ourselves. While this is something that can be considered 'normal' in a large metropolis, an arrival of a team of 8-10 foreigners does not go unnoticed in such small communities. Therefore, we wished to get in contact with the locals and so (inspired by the decades-long cultural practice developed by Odin Teatret), we organised a barter, a cultural exchange to which we invited the whole village. A barter in this sense is essentially a meeting, a performance which takes place only once; it combines, using a specific dramaturgy (so not in an improvised way, but organised in advance), elements belonging to the local tradition and heritage (a story, a dance, a song, but it can be also objects or professions, in short, the specific forms and appearances of the *local culture*), with elements belonging to the culture of the actors, the visitors (in our case in 2014, fragments from exercises that we worked on during the week).

The occasion proved to be significant for us as well as the locals and, since then, besides our activity of presenting professional performances in villages, we have organised other barter as well. What makes a barter special is that it *activates* and *animates* the groups participating. Even though not all locals participate actively, and there are people who remain only spectators, still, a part of them, a part of their own culture, their own mythology and heritage is shown by their own kind, their neighbours or relatives. It is their own local identity that is expressed not by outsiders but by the locals themselves. This situation generates a very lively atmosphere, and through this act of *self-expression* a sense of pride and belonging are reinforced in them.

In 2019, with the help of actors Kai Bredholt and Donald Kitt from Odin Teatret there was a barter organized in Mera (Mérea), a village 13 km from Cluj-Napoca. The village is very proud of its living tradition of Hungarian folk dance and music, as well as many other local traditions, such as herding buffalos. Nevertheless, the impact of the modern world can also be found here; for every positive development there are many negative developments as well which tear apart the traditional social fabric of the community: traditional methods of self-sustainability, such as working the land and keeping livestock are less and less an option. Most of the inhabitants are forced to work in the city, the TV and internet demand their share of attention, and there are of course, at least for a segment of the community, older, unsolved prob-

lems, such as alcohol consumption. All of these change the way time is experienced (leading to the symptom of the accelerated world and not having enough time, and to the weakening of the social traditions and habits which once bound the inhabitants together and formed the community).

In short, isolation is experienced, which is a symptom, a consequence, of the lessening possibilities for *participation*. Traditional outlets that enable participation and activation are gone, and new ones to replace them are non-existent. Of course, what we described here does not apply only to the village of Mera, but it is the reality of most of the settlements in rural areas in Romania today. In fact, as stated before, Mera to a certain degree is an exception, with many traditions kept alive, and transmission of the tradition from older generations to the new ones being much stronger than in most cases. This was evident in our 2019 barter, where there were contributions from the locals not just from the older or middle generation, but also from the young one: the smallest groups of the local musicians and dancers. The event proved very successful and once again generated the kind of 'buzz' in the community that makes barter so special and such an efficient practice.

The reason for expanding so much on the background history and the local context in the previous two pages was to a) give an X-ray of certain aspects in the current social realities prevalent in the vast majority (almost 100%) of rural settlements in Romania and b) highlight the fact that it is exactly the act of participation and activation that are lost when traditional forms of social and community gathering can no longer function and there is no transmission. So, one of the things that need to be done by practitioners interested in community development is to create structures and actions which enable active participation.

it is exactly the act of participation and activation that are lost when traditional forms of social and community gathering can no longer function and there is no transmission. So, one of the things that need to be done by practitioners interested in community development is to create structures and actions which enable active participation.

## THE PARTICIPATORY EXPERIENCE IN PRACTICE

### Initial stages and putting a group together

While in a large city one can simply put out posters and send some emails and often participants will come, in a village, it is necessary to know the people, to win their trust. For this, one usually needs a central figure: someone like a local organiser, a local priest, a local researcher, storyteller. It is a person (it can be more than one of course) who is well-respected, looked up at, is in touch with many people, knows them, knows the history etc.

Having had the experience of 2019, we decided that Mera would be the appropriate rural community with which to engage in the practice-led and community-engagement part of R.I.O.T.E. 3, as the perfect contact person was in place, and through the barter many relationships were struck. This proved essential once again. In initial stages a 1-page call was sent out through several channels: a local social media page which is followed by many of the locals, as well as two local organisers. One of these organisers enrolled with their whole family. However, there were no other applicants. In parallel with this, we contacted our 'central figure', Mr. Varga György, who is the former principle of the local school, a founder of the local buffalo museum (a testament to the importance to the present day of the tradition of herding buffalos), and is a local historian. Our interest in meeting with him was threefold: firstly, to convince him to participate (which he was thankfully very willing to do); secondly, to interview him on our subject, which was learning about the myths behind the community (the local stories, legends, significant events, traditions, the origin of the village, etc.); and thirdly, for him to recommend us personally people who could potentially participate. We then contacted in person all these people. Besides deepening our knowledge of the village's history, a recurring picture formed: that of the historical tradition of amateur theatre groups which were no longer functioning. Many of the people we interviewed were once active members of a local, self-organising theatre group which was not alive anymore.

In the end, our group consisted of 7 adults and 3 children, with the age range being extremely spread out: from the age of 4 to that of 77. While it had been previously discussed between the project partners to work with mixed-age groups (1/3 of the group to be over 60), we consciously sought the possibility to include families as well.

### Towards group cohesion

With the group now in place, and as per the aims and objectives of R.I.O.T.E. 3, our main aim was to create an outdoor theatre performance together with the participants, based on the stories we uncovered in our quest to find the myth behind the community. What does one look for when establishing a new group? It is to create its cohesion. A collection of people is not yet a group capable of acting together (both literally and figuratively). A process of team building needs to take place, where each individual is integrated into the group. It is important that this process takes into account the capabilities and possibilities of each individual, and does not try to push them towards some universal minimum competences and capabilities; this is the job perhaps of the acting academy (although this statement is also highly debatable), or rather of certain professional companies / milieus where a very precisely pronounced style dominates. It is certainly not of an endeavour which is aimed at creating a revelatory community experience through theatrical tools.

It is essential to find exercises that fit the group. A certain balance needs to be found in the grade of challenge that the different exercises constitute and the capabilities of each individual in rising to the challenge and conquering it. Paying attention to this aspect means aligning to Csíkszentmihályi's FLOW theory. In our case, because we had participants of all ages and very different bodies, it was extremely important to prepare the ingredients as precise as possible for the work to be inclusive, empowering and significant to everyone, for it to make sense to all and to allow for a flow experience to develop.

There are many theatre games and exercises that can be utilised, but what is important is that we find exactly *in which way these games and exercises should be played* by the particular group that we engage with; the same exercise will be different with a group of teenagers, a group of young adults, a group of seniors or mixed group of all ages (or ethnicities, genders, social classes, etc.)



## Towards non-hierarchical structures

Working with an intergenerational group was a deliberate choice on our side. In 2018-2019, Shoshin Theatre Association was lead partner on an Erasmus+ co-funded project called ATIP-IA (Applied Theatre in Practising Integrated Approaches). The project focused on applied / participatory theatre techniques and approaches, with the final main target group being the 60+ generation (<https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/projects/eplus-project-details#project/2018-1-RO01-KA204-049553>) In the framework of the training, the Joint Staff members and other volunteers of the participating organisations (who themselves were already very mixed in terms of age) engaged in a week-long work session in Cluj-Napoca, with a group of local people aged 60 and upwards, thereby creating a group of nearly 30 people between 22 and 80 working together, side-by-side, day by day, towards a common goal.

As life experiences go, this one was extremely deep and enriching not just for us as an organisation, but (as they themselves reported) for all the participants. Each time the gaps between different points in time and differences in age can be bridged in this way, creating *equality* between members of a group, real learning can take place and a different sensitivity is awakened. This word, *to sensitise*, is of primary importance here. We only ever truly learn, understand and become able to empathise when it is not just our intellect that knows about a certain topic (racial abuse should be stopped, gender inequality is a problem, etc.), but we engage in it with our senses as well, thereby connecting to it fully, bodily, holistically, turning our relationship with the given topic into a personal matter. This is what happens, after all, when we go to the theatre: we are sensitised to the topics presented



inside the performance, because we are engaged experientially (through the act of seeing, of witnessing) into processes. A major difference, however, lies in the fact that in participatory theatre this increase in sensitivity is perhaps more inherent and exponential in the participating group, than it is in the case of professional companies preparing performances (of course, this depends largely on the approach to rehearsals of different companies) and that to those involved it is as much an individual experience, as a community experience, which is not always the case in professional theatre.

This time, we deliberately expanded the age group even more. Besides the fact that we had been searching for a longer time to initiate working with families (even families with small children), our other reason for doing this, was that a village community is frequently based on a certain hierarchical structure regarding children, adults and elderly. Our desire was to build up a non-hierarchical atmosphere, where the voice of the children can be heard in their individuality, expressing themselves. The fact that what they have to say or express on a certain experience or topic is of equal importance as what their 20-year-old counterparts, their parents or the elderly have to say gives them legitimacy. And strangely, in a paradoxical way, this result is obtained by giving each participating group the same level of legitimacy, not by lowering

the authority of certain groups (of the parents, of the elderly), to raise that of another. Nothing is taken away from anyone, and yet everyone receives; this is the beauty of horizontal structures, as Mary Overlie so beautifully frames it.

## Towards the building of a performance

In the process of the work with the group from Mera, we applied a phased approach, in the sense that the actual building of the performance with the actor-participants did not start until the final period. As was stated before, our first task was to create group cohesion, and without too much pressure to get them ready to build the performance. Through different exercises, we worked on aspects,



such as trust, joy, attention to each other, being in the moment, reacting, expressing bodily, etc. The outcomes of some exercises were fixed as scenic material later to be used in building the performance. At the same time, we were still gathering stories from the participants, listening to what they have to say. Besides the local myths, legends, historical facts, we also asked them to share personal stories connected to where they live, or what Mera and the community means to them. In this sense, the work was based on collecting the stories intertwined with a gradual 'tuning' of the participants, and then in the final week putting the building blocks together and creating the performance. By this time we had chosen the stories we were going to use (progressing from the local to the personal), we had several pieces of fixed material lined up, and some exercises that we had done and that we thought could be used as scenic material as well.

One important aspect to mention here is that participants were not working from a fixed text (a play, be it comedy or drama), but from local mythologies and history, their own stories (extremely important), and elements that grew out from working together. In this way, this method of work somehow sets itself apart in a way from normal 'amateur theatre', as participants do not attempt to play someone else (a fictive character from a play), but they are mostly a mixture of themselves and a performer, lending a very personal aspect to the work. This of course takes us back to keywords mentioned and contextualised in the beginning, such as local culture, activation, self-expression and active participation.

### Closing thoughts

Throughout the previous pages, we tried to place the question of participation and participatory theatre within a social and community context, explaining and exploring our process. We tried to paint the picture of participatory theatre, as we practiced and experienced it. Naturally, participatory (or applied) theatre is a very complex approach, with many branches, possibilities for action, and our experience is just one way of going about it, but hopefully the aspects we tried to cover and explain are of help to those who wish to engage in community development practices with the use of theatrical means.

The writings of the other R.I.O.T.E. 3 partners which can be found in the present publication

offer many other interesting aspects, strategies, and questions to ponder when planning a participatory experience in rural environments (and not just). In our part of the present chapter we have chosen to focus on intergenerational and age-related aspects, as well as aspects related perhaps to communities as a larger whole, as the work discussed above concentrated more on this aspect. However, a vital part of our approach is the spatial context (the importance of site-specific and open space actions), which we have not covered at this time, although it was an organic part of our work. The reason for this is that Chapter IV of the present publication deals more extensively with this aspect.

**Shoshin Theatre Association** is an organisation based on the three pillars contained in its name. *Shoshin*, meaning 'beginner's mind' in Zen Buddhism, is the frame of mind with which we wish to approach all our endeavours. *Theatre* is the discipline that we choose as the form of our work and our study. *Breaking away from the thought that theatre means purely representation*, we wish to examine the ways in which it can have a concrete impact on the quality of life. And finally, the third pillar, *association*, the notion and the act of associating, of progressing towards oneness.

**Csongor Köllő** is Actor, director, acting trainer and Co-founder and co-director of Shoshin Theatre Association.



# THEATRE AS A TOOL FOR INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE 2

KUD LJUD / CIE UNE IDÉE DANS L'AIR





# EXPERIENCES IN SLOVENIA

(Kud Ljud)

## INTRODUCTION

by Vida Cerkvenik Bren (Kud Ljud)

In the following chapter you can read about personal experiences, working methods and thoughts on theatre as a tool for intercultural dialogue written by various authors: artists, actors, directors, pedagogues, creative thinkers and theatre practitioners from Slovenia, France and UK (active within the artistic cultural associations *Une Idée* and *KUD Ljud* among others).

Theatre has always been inseparably connected to its audience, rooted in time and space, happening to/within a specific community (unifying and uniting it). From ancient Greece to medieval mystery plays, to Elizabethan era and on, theatre was a place where ideas were formulated and discussed, a place where different social classes met. Even more, according to most represented theory, its origins lie in rituals that were performed to reconnect and reconfirm the common social structures, values and identity among other reasons.

At the turn of the 19th century a Swiss theatre reformer, Adolphe Appia, as well as other teatrologists of his time, tried to re-establish theatre as a "social act in which everyone contributes", hoping that theatres will become "the cathedrals of the fu-

ture". Appia, who was primarily a set and lighting designer, was a great opponent of separation not only within the audience but also between the audience and actor (stage and auditorium). According to him the pit should disappear, and the stage along with the auditorium should be a whole, the proscenium arch (that giant keyhole) should also disappear and allow full interaction between the audience and the actor, and among the spectators themselves. "Theatre should not separate or create hierarchical interpersonal relationships; it should unite."

What is the value of "theatre as a social glue" nowadays? Where does its potential (to create unity and social cohesion, to act as a tool for intercultural dialog) lie?

The idea of our writings is not to search for final answers carved in stone or to state how things are or should be done, but to share examples of good and bad practices, note what we have learned, reflect on our methods, raise new questions and inspire further thinking and creating.

On the following pages you will read about our artistic projects (*The Invasion*, *The Streetwalker - ready made open air gallery*, *Table Theatre*, *Sur la place de Villars*, *Emmaüs et autres lieux*, *Des enfants et des corps en mouvement* etc) and our pedagogical work; about the approaches that we have developed; and the struggles that we have fought in the last decades using theatrical means to build bridges between diverse social groups, polarised political stands, opposing views and belief systems, as well as between the past and the future of the places that we have been involved with.

No matter how diverse our practices are, we have all been doing theatre in a dialogue with our surroundings. As amateur anthropologists, cultural archaeologists, detectives, cleaning ladies who blow dust from dusty lives, we have been digging deeper to discover the forgotten





layers and make old stories shine anew. Or we created new stories from scratch in interaction with our audiences, "live", in real time. Or both.

In our practices, sometimes theatre directly reflected the conflicting/segregating issues of the communities we worked with. By performing refabricated documentary material, we opened taboo topics and created space for a dialogue in a less emotionally charged environment.

Elevated to the level of fiction, those topics became easier to digest and debate among the community members with opposing viewpoints.

In other cases, contents of our theatrical interventions were not at all directly linked to the "burning subjects" yet participating in a common "game"/theatrical event brought people of different backgrounds together and helped them to connect on a deeper human level.

Sometimes dialogue started before and theatre followed, created on the basis of the previous encounters and findings. In other times, dialogue happened right in the middle of theatre: the dialogue was the theatre and vice versa, as in the cases of interactive performances of which the most interesting parts were the audience's reactions. Or, as in the case of Table Theatre, theatre happened before, and a moderated debate followed: a theatrical scene aimed to "break the ice" and open up the participants for an engaged discussion.

Nevertheless, we have found 4 things in common to all of us, otherwise quite diverse working experiences:

- 1 We do theatre in non-theatrical spaces;
- 2 The theatre we do is a process, not result-orientated (theatre as a tool of intercultural dialogue is a constant work in progress);
- 3 Spectators are active not passive (at all stages of the artistic process the "audience" is invited to co-create, their lives serve as a material for a theatrical scene/show/project or in other cases theatre becomes part of their lives/streets/spaces and/or relationships).
- 4 The theatre we do walks the line between art and everyday life: either it takes everyday life and changes it into something else, or it brings something else and places it right in the heart of everyday life or both.

It is obvious why theatre that happens in non-theatrical spaces (on streets, in bars, at home, on public transport, in shopping malls, in schools etc) brings together a heterogenous community by making it possible for all kind of people to see it and become involved. While, on the contrary, classical theatre as well as other cultural institutions usually attract similar audiences in terms of social status, age, language, religion, skin colour etc.

Yet we believe that points 2., 3. and 4. from the above list treasure and, even more importantly, deepen theatre's potential as a tool of social cohesion; theatre done with a wish to cultivate listening, foster honesty and welcome doubt over the desire of always being right; and theatre with the capacity to nurture democratic values and active citizenship, to inspire dialogue and open expression. Based on our own experience, we can argue that an open, long term artistic and social process combining theatrical means with interdisciplinary practices of other arts, social work, anthropology and pedagogy etc can reconnect a heterogenous community where the members are divided by skin colour, religion, social or economic status and open up space in which a community can define its common identity in an intercultural context.

## MY INTERCULTURAL THEATRE ACTIVITIES AND EXCHANGES

by Grega Močivnik (Kud Ljud)

### Learnings, values and experiences in the Ljud culture

As a theatre director, trainer and mentor, Iwan Brioc says, in quoting Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, how philosophy is not about solving problems but reframing them. According to Žižek and Brioc if there is a practical problem, better to ask a scientist and likewise participatory interactive theatre is most effective for reframing problems and rehearsing action within these new frames.

Part of the Ljud group culture is to put quality of experience before monetary gain, community before individual, and beauty and truth are highly valued. There is so much to learn from a worldview like this.

Gaining different techniques (Buto, physical theatre techniques, meditation, yoga) and on another, more subconscious level, engaging with different cultures expanded group horizons



in ways that are difficult to describe, it has been enriching my personal process of learning and enabling me to gain new drives.

Ljud performances and theatre interventions in public space (according to our experiences) a lot of times work as a 'litmus test' on the level of recognising diversity, stereotypes, inclusiveness and openness of the culture, society. Through our activities in public space we are opening a space for framing, and reframing, point of view, forming and reforming opinions, assumptions, values and beliefs; rising and falling of the masks occurs.

In our current climate, it seems especially important to seek opportunities to embrace cross-cultural dialogue and exchange, explore the relationship between the universal / generally human, and the specific / cultural, and represent unheard voices and a variety of global experiences and perspectives on stage: both at home and abroad.

I believe that theatre as a tool for Intercultural dialogue is not a cure for all evils and an answer to all questions, and one must recognise that its

scope can be limited. It is often pointed out, rightly, that *'dialogue with those who refuse dialogue is impossible, although this does not relieve open and democratic societies of their obligation to constantly offer opportunities for dialogue'*.

On the other hand, dialogue with those who are ready to take part in dialogue but do not – or do not fully – share "our" values may be the starting point of a longer process of interaction.

### Objectives of doing theatre workshops and interactive theatre performances in different contexts, countries outside of Slovenia, different cultures:

- to raise debates and confrontations about the subject matter
- to introduce working methods using different experiences
- to share experiences and knowledge with organisations from other European countries
- to create an atmosphere of mutual understanding between people from different cultures
- to develop innovative activities at a local level
- to educate people to understand others
- to cope with cultural encounters, to consider all aspects of personal identity

Engaging participants, spectators and by-passers in the process of non-formal learning and peer education involving participants from different countries who work with young people.

I will try to describe Ljud's ongoing projects and performances, personal experiences and (un)successful attempts of bringing the performers to the audience, bringing people more together and trying to give different significance to the use of public space with an aim of bringing communities together.

### THE INVASION

(premiered in 2008), an interactive physical performance in public space where each performer has his/her own stylized alien (non-human) character that communicates with people in a non-verbal way; by using universal sounds and character-like stylized body movement.

#### *A plot and a story behind*

An interplanetary expedition of immigrants from outer space has landed on our planet. Members of the expedition belong to different alien species, but as a reaction to the Earth atmosphere they all gained a protective colour: they are pink (so that people would not take them

too seriously). One of the goals of the performance is to establish an "interplanetary" dialogue. To confront the audience and the bypassers with surprising creatures from outer space, giving them opportunity to observe and react to the unusual way of behaviours in public space; giving the audience the possibility to re-think their own (mechanical) ways of behaviour and to re-connect people through bringing to them the theatre social event/ritual.

Since 2008, more than 120 performances/social events/rituals have happened in more than 90 festivals in 30 different countries across the globe: Austria, South Korea, Belarus, Russia, England, Australia, Finland, Italy, Germany, Portugal, Spain, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia, Hungary, Romania, Sweden, Norway, Netherlands, Belgium, Czech Republic, Poland, Israel, Ireland, Scotland, France, and Slovenia.

I (performer in the Invasion performance) have felt that the main message of the performance is to bring together the richness of different encounters, with the variety of different characters we are addressing the audience with their own prejudices, examining and questioning the borders of every individual that comes across the aliens.

In our still ongoing alien journey I would like to highlight some situations (scenes) that I remember and made me think about the different perspectives, personal stories, different cities, cultures, nations and how a theatre dialogue can sometimes (for a few minutes or for an hour) bring people with different experiences and personal views together.

**Koper, Slovenia (2008):** when the final scene ('stealing of the car') happened in front of the big store market, a security guard put out his gun and seriously threatened me (my alien character) with the gun. At the end, it ended well.)

**Zagreb, Croatia (2009):** dialogue with a homeless person on a friendship bench, beer in hand, cheers, dialogue with eye contact, all is ok, all is well. He was talking to me in Croatian language, the alien responded in his alien language; we understood each other perfectly.

**Brest, Belarus (2010):** at the beginning of the public rehearsal in the main square (we always rehearse in the same public space a day before the performance) the police arrived, finished the rehearsal and ordered us to go back to the hotel.

**Krakow, Poland (2012):** a group of pink aliens singing a lullaby to a homeless person who was napping at the fountain. Around 100 people (audience) observing the scene.

**Szeged, Hungary (2009):** a ride with a public bus through Szeged; a security guard chasing two aliens; people calling the police at the outskirts of the city, two police officers coming, laughing, taking a picture of pink creatures

**Acco, Israel (2010):** coming to the Palestinian neighbourhood, getting a gift from a young girl – a small bracelet – and when departing, getting attacked by a group of youngsters who were hitting the aliens with eggs.

**Bihač, Bosnia and Herzegovina (2011):** giving an interview for the local television and communicating with the local caveman; a 1-minute theatre dialogue on the stage in the main square.

**Perm, Russia (2014):** dancing in the fountain with the woman.

**Arkhangelsk, Russia (2013):** police coming in front of the theatre (just before the beginning of the performance) with dogs saying that the performance is too challenging for the public space and the city municipality; just before the beginning of the performance, the director of the festival was convincing the police and advocating for us. In the end he succeeded. The performance was not cancelled; outside there was a huge audience waiting to meet and interact with the aliens.

**Haderslev, Norway (2016):** coming to the main square, a caregiver coming with a group of preschool children, leading them, having them together through a rope; when she saw the pink alien she decided to trust him a group of preschool children and giving him (me) the lead (the rope). The alien became a caregiver for a minute.

#### CITY METAMORPHOSIS

Is a project which started in 2018, where the performers (with the help of digital tools) aim to play artistically with the 'here and now!' of urban space, its means are efficient visual images,



sharp accentuated rhythms, choral and surreal scenes, unexpected humour, and the main actor of this new form is the urban space itself.

Some highlights from our encounters with diverse urban spaces, situations and people:

**Gadna, Szikso, ghetto Numbered Street in Miškolc (Hungary):** Roma kids having fun, not knowing what this is or who we are; after the performers gave a proposal of gently spilling the water, they started to 'water us' heavily from the bottle. The way of being playful and showing affection.

First time for them to experience theatre intervention of that kind (perhaps any kind of theatre) and the very first time for me (and the performing group) to be part of the theatre event in a such degraded, poor neighbourhood/ghetto with no access to (in outer world and to an average citizen everyday accessible) cultural goods. The intervention developed in the crazy playground where we expressed affection to each other without any restraints in the most sincere way.

#### LJUD'S LABORATORY THEATRE WORKHOPS

Is an ongoing process (since 2008) of organising and mentoring workshops on physical interactive theatre (with the help of Municipality of Ljubljana) for theatre workers, students and theatre enthusiasts regardless of their cultural, economic, ethnic, age, sex or theatre background.

We have been establishing Ljud's laboratory as a safe environment for creative theatre expression, developing new theatre ideas, exchanging knowledge with colleagues from the field of contemporary arts, trying out and testing new ideas for theatre interventions in public space.

We believe that (through mentoring theatre workshops) we have been successful in establishing higher level of bringing non-formal and free theatre education and counselling to people with less opportunities (mentoring workshops in smaller villages outside of Ljubljana and in rural neighbourhoods of Ljubljana where people have less opportunities to daily come in touch with cultural assets).



We have been noticing (through engaging them in a variety of rehearsals and theatre games) that the participants are gaining higher levels of self-confidence, developing healthier attitudes towards their bodies, expressing their ideas and critical way of thinking more regularly. Some of the participants have been encouraged to continue and develop their theatre education and are now very successful theatre and cultural workers.

We have been spreading our good praxis, methods and theatre learnings through mentoring theatre workshops also outside of Slovenia: Belarus, Russia, Israel, Denmark, South Korea, Italy, Poland, Germany, Austria, Iran, Serbia, Hungary, Romania, Belgium, and Netherlands.

#### CAPTAIN DADA'S PIRATE THEATRE (since 2015).

Interactive children's theatre performance which we performed mostly in Slovenia. But, few times it happened, we were performing also outside of Slovenia. A performance based on non-verbal physical interaction but it also includes short verbal scenes where a character is asking questions and children (audience) are giving answers and expressing their opinion.

#### DARTINGTON DAY, DARTINGTON, ENGLAND

A group of young English pirates shouting the answers on the question 'What do Pirates do?' in their local English dialect which is not understandable to the Slovenian pirate.

A moment of little embarrassment happened, but the game continues and, when the performance moved from inside to the outside space (where we were searching for the treasure), everyone joined in the game of creating the final scene (making a big circle, creating the treasure island, finding and sharing the treasure).

BAKKET CAFFE, BERLIN, GERMANY

Performing on a Sunday morning in a Berlin caffe for 10 people, mostly children and when asking a question 'auf Deutsch' everything was silent. A monologue, running inside the head of the performer (me) was: 'Is my German really that bad?'

At the end of the performance a young father came to me and said that he really enjoyed it and said at the same time that children in Germany though are really not used to such interactive performances: 'they are used to (ordered by the parents) when they come to the performance to sit, observe and be quiet.'

Council of Europe. (2008). *White paper on intercultural dialogue. Living together as equals in dignity*. Retrieved from [http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/intercultural/source/white%20paper\\_final\\_revised\\_en.pdf](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/intercultural/source/white%20paper_final_revised_en.pdf)

## TABLE THEATRE

by Vida Cerkenik Bren (Kud Ljud)

*'I have striven not to laugh at human actions, not to weep at them, not to hate them, but to understand them.'*

Baruch Spinoza, *Tractatus Politicus*, 1679

*'We are indeed all stuck here for a while, so let's at least do what we can to understand why we are so easily divided into hostile groups, each one certain of its righteousness.'*

Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 2012

Table theatre is a form that is still in its early days and is being developed by Kud Ljud in dialogue with its founders, German director Harry Fuhrmann and dramaturge Christiane Wiegand. It is a new model of engaged documentary theatre combining anthropological research with artistic creation which, as the name suggests, takes place around a table in dialogue with the audience.

The director, dramaturge or an entire team of creators including the actors carry out interviews in a specific region focusing on a selected topic. These interviews serve as the basis for a 10–15-minute theatre piece, usually a dialogue that can be performed around the table in a private residence, a bar, a library, a park, a pub or even in the theatre. The piece is normally performed in front of one to ten viewers (possibly also a larger group).

The characters in the piece advocate diametrically opposing views, are representatives of different generations, supporters of different political parties, have different cultural identities, etc. Each performance is followed by a discussion that is discreetly moderated, if necessary, by the director, dramaturge or another member of the creative team. The performed scene serves as a catalyst and provides a basis for the debate, it 'breaks the ice' by emotionally engaging the viewers/participants while also allowing them to enter the discussion by proxy of fictional characters. Because they are not required to immediately reveal their personal views, it is easier for the participants to overcome potential conflicts among themselves. Table theatre allows societal issues to be seen over a broader time horizon, thereby reducing their emotional charge and facilitating a deeper understanding.

We are creating table theatre to be able to better understand the 'different sides of the same story', to nurture a culture of listening, openness and empathy that prevail over one's desire to 'be right at any cost'. This method allows us to tackle contentious issues in a neutralised environment; in a space of dialogue between reality and fiction where art can playfully soft-

We are creating table theatre to be able to better understand the 'different sides of the same story', to nurture a culture of listening, openness and empathy that prevail over one's desire to 'be right at any cost'.



ten and question entrenched opinions. The actors (puppets/dancers) and the audience sit around the same table which creates an informal, more relaxed atmosphere that is conducive to communication. The performed scene is designed as a dialogue between the two actors that escalates into a conflict which the performers (actors/puppets) then resolve with the help of the audience.

The main virtue of table theatre consists in the establishment of an artistic framework and a safe environment which allows a genuine exchange (of views, personal histories and emotions) among "active viewers" to take place. Furthermore, discussions bring to the surface new stories that can be used by the creative team as the basis for new scenes. Performing these scenes generates material for further writing and creation, which is how table theatre evolves. A cyclical artistic process which is also a tool of socially engaged research (and vice-versa) gives rise to ever new theatre pieces which may at some point even come together to form an integral whole (ambiental or stage production).

Cycles of gathering material, artistic transformation, performances and discussions usually culminate in a final production which is a series of scenes of various styles and genres tied together by two joint elements: a common topic and the table as the venue. Final performances are more demanding in terms of production and may last between 2 and 3 hours. Viewers move from scene to scene (i.e. from table to table) while the actors keep repeating the scenes, allowing each member of the audience to see all the scenes.

If deemed more appropriate, all the scenes can also be performed one after the other at the same table, to be followed by a joint discussion. During the performance, the visitors start off as passive observers/voyeurs and gradually become interlocutors until they end up as co-creators of a heterogeneous performance halfway between reality and imagination.

**Vida Cerkvėnik Bren** is a theater director and artistic director and co-founder of Ljud group.

**Grega Močivnik** is an actor, performer, producer and current legal representative of Ljud group.

**Ljud group** has been established in 2007 and since then we believe in theatre as a "living" phenomenon that must be in direct contact with the present times. Playing with the "fourth wall" between the actor and the audience is vital for the group in order to establish theatre performance as a game, a ritual and a social event.



# EXPERIENCES IN FRANCE

(Cie Une idée dans l'air)

## THEATER WITH FREINET, PUPPET AND YOGA

by Marc Petazzoni (Cie Une idée dans l'air)

Over the years, the theatrical experience and the experience of Freinet pedagogy have become inseparable in the actions I have carried out.

Within the ICEM, the association that disseminates Freinet pedagogy in France, a 'Corps sector' was created during the August 2021 congress. This act undoubtedly marks a renewed interest in the body of every child - and every adult - as a place of play and expression. Freinet pedagogy, which is still very active in France, Europe and the world, is based on several principles, including: a 'natural method' that advocates letting the learner - child or adult - use his or her own inner resources as much as possible, an experimental trial and error that gives free rein to trials and room for error, cooperation at all levels, and democratic organisation in the form of children's councils for school matters...

When Freinet pedagogy and theatre are combined, the children's games and spontaneous impulses lead the work. From these moments emerge proposals, desires that are re-explored through creative acts. The adult offers, inside and outside the school, a rich environment: natural space, children's literature, various materials and equipment

(paper, cardboard, pencils, paint, string, fabric, glue, etc.). A wooden rod, a coloured sheet of paper, a projector and a white sheet transform a classroom corner into a shadow theatre. A child's painting is revisited and reinterpreted in a collective dance. A large white paper tablecloth is torn into puppets, each of which tells its own visual and verbal story. The children's silhouettes, drawn on large cardboard, painted with acrylic, cut out and fitted with handles, allow the child, from three years old, to give life and language to a character beyond himself.

In each of these expressions, the adult's intervention is reduced to a minimum. We all know that all it takes is a piece of wood or a pile of earth for a child to create an imaginary world fed by a natural depth, but also nourished by its family culture, itself woven from ethnic, religious, social and linguistic origins. Individual interventions are interwoven so that a common culture emerges, collective creations. The Freinet pedagogy and the 'free' theatrical methods each contribute to the freedom to be and to meet the Other.

The artistic journey of the adult has many similarities with the development of the child: the same source of creativity, the important impact of the emotional experience, and above all the relationship to the game. Play is work and work is play for the adult actor as it is for the child.

The personal journey is made up of encounters, unforeseen events, and deep research within each person. Characters, clowns, puppets, but also a passion for words, their origins, their uses have shaped my path. An Italian grandmother, whose language I have used since childhood, inspired a puppet, the Italian grandfather pushed the romance, a great-grandfather crossed Europe from Romania to Paris, crossing Hungary, whose language - after a sometimes thorough, sometimes superficial study of Latin, Greek, Sanskrit and Hindi - calls me today.

From a clown's undressing, in front of a Hungarian audience mixed with children and adults, to a puppet performance during a crossing of Europe from Reims to Odessa, the oral expression is minimalist or even non-existent. Will it be possible to know this language well enough to make my puppet tell an Italian tale understandable to Hungarian children? This is the challenge of the coming months.

Yoga, even if it sometimes plays tricks on me, has been an integral part of my life for several decades, whether it be to ease tensions in my activities, or to maintain ease and bodily capacities, or to propose to children a way of living their body... Theatre is made of the body of actors and yoga makes proposals to the body of each one. Sessions in a cattle museum in Romania, collective sun salutations in Italy, a training project in Germany. Languages, bodily practices, habits cross and intermingle. Yoga observes the breath, sometimes works on it. Do we breathe in the same way depending on the language we speak? Each person reveals himself with his body, his voice, his breath, all of which are indistinguishable, three intimacies that theatre, yoga and pedagogy constantly play with. The other then appears.

## INVISIBLE THEATRE

by Séverine Bruneton (Cie Une idée dans l'air)

The purpose of Une idée dans l'air is to allow a singular word to be said within the collective. This is why from 2014 to 2018 the company worked on the commemorations of the Great War of 1914-18 around two ideas:

- In nearly 25 communes of the Pays d'Apt Luberon, we invited 10-12-year-old children from the CM classes to take a soldier out of his war memorial by means of a red carnation bearing his name.
- In Apt, we deployed war widows to lead to a march of about fifty women in black on 11 November 2018.

Simple gestures inscribed in the duration of a world war of more than 4 years. A long time, punctuated by carnations worn by the children and workshops to get them moving by measuring the disaster of such a war and by experiencing it in our bodies.

With a class we went to Verdun where we could read its impact in the landscape. It was spring-time, there was green grass with yellow dandelion flowers. Children would run down the slopes formed by the shell holes and fall as if dead for a freeze-frame in the film we were making (<https://vimeo.com/user9562720>).

Our aim was to invest unlikely spaces, in this case the time-space of the commemorations at the war memorials, by involving the population and creating new rituals, such as wearing a red carnation and taking care of the name that was associated with it. Invisible gestures that are nevertheless shared by the act of appropriation of each person.

The 'Solitudes' also propose to invest improbable spaces and to establish correspondences with the whole and the nothing. This is what I implemented in the exchanges of R.I.O.T.E. 3 in Hungary, Romania and Italy. The "Solitudes" are an invitation to leave a trace of one's body on a wall, the outline of the silhouette drawn with chalk and painted with chalk paint. An ephemeral and fragile trace that fades with the rain or the wind.

At the JST in Gagyapàti (Hungary) each partner placed their 'Solitude' on the grass and spaces of the huts and all the vernacular architecture of the fields. They also met the Roma community through a young mother and child under a rusty tin bus shelter. Two 'Solitudes' from a neglected end of the world. In Mera, Romania, a 'Solitude' of our host was placed on the wall of the Buffalo Museum as a red cross nurse, with its animal extension of two large horns. And the day before, during a workshop, we were invited to place a collective solitude of the buffalo in us on the floor of the museum.

At Pontelagoscuro (Italy) - the suburb of Ferrara where Teatro Nucleo has its seats - the 'Solitudes' were placed along a private wall (with a half permission, we thought) for an afternoon, only to be erased the next day in the incomprehension of an expression that was too free for a periphery that already has a theatre all painted with Murales and bearing the name of Julio Cortazar.

'Solitudes' that feel good to be put down but that are also disturbing, marking their presence of invisibility in the face of the well-ordered society that we like to build.

In Villars, on the Place de la Fontaine, where stories are told, we imagine correspondences - letters, affinities - so that a dialogue can be exchanged. A dialogue around a large common

table where the inhabitants and neighbours can meet with those from elsewhere and from the surrounding area.

We start from the land, its culture, with Ceres, goddess of agriculture, fertility and harvest, to gather stories from Provence, a land crossed by Hannibal, occupied by the Romans, visited from the sea with Marseille with its Phoenician origins ... Villars, a land that stretches from 247m to 1184m in altitude.

### **the ladies of the bench**

Villars

one Thursday at the end of the day

the butcheress, she was passing  
where there is the English house  
before Madame Jean  
there was a butcher's shop  
the green shutters was a hotel  
there were Chinese who worked at the ochres  
in this house there was a tailor  
at my grandfather's house  
there was a trade  
in my cellar it was a cobbler  
there was a tile factory  
underneath Molinas  
there were ceramics  
at the town hall it was an oil mill  
I lived in Grands Cléments  
then in Fumerasse  
now we live there  
with our son

...

we used to play bowls  
on the pavement  
before there were strips of small  
stones  
were the pavements

...

### **les dames du banc**

Villars

un jeudi de fin de journée

la bouchère elle passait  
là où il y a la maison des anglais  
avant madame Jean  
il y avait une boucherie  
les volets verts c'était un hôtel  
il y avait des chinois qui travaillaient aux ocre  
dans cette maison c'était un tailleur  
chez mon grand-père  
il y avait un métier  
dans ma cave c'était un cordonnier  
là c'était une usine de carrelage  
en dessous Molinas  
il y avait des céramiques  
à la mairie c'était un moulin à huile  
j'ai habité aux Grands Cléments  
puis à la Fumerasse  
maintenant on est logé  
là chez notre fils

...

avant on jouait aux boules  
sur le dallage  
avant il y avait des bandes de petits  
cailloux  
c'étaient les trottoirs

...

the soup with pistou the feet packages  
it's lamb's belly  
you have to clean the bellies  
I made them for years  
I feel like I'm with my mother  
when I eat them  
I don't like larks

la soupe au pistou les pieds paquets  
c'est du ventre d'agneau  
il faut nettoyer les ventres  
je les ai faits pendant des années  
j'ai l'impression d'être avec ma mère  
quand je les mange  
je n'aime pas les alouette

## **PREPARATION FOR A LONG-TERM, LOCAL PROJECT** by Helen Aldrich

What happens for theatre-makers when life slows down?  
When we stay close to home? When we get to know our  
neighbours? When we work with what is within arm's  
reach? What kind of project, what kind of theatre does  
that make?

### **Listening:**

Firstly, if you make a plan, prepare to throw it away and  
make a new one. Upon starting the project in Villars,  
Luberon, we had a project all planned for the 'good' of  
everyone in the village: edible plants on the square, com-  
munity gardening, stories about the land with the aim of  
opening up dialogue and creativity. The town hall said,  
'thank you but no, thank you.' We couldn't understand  
why.

Then, I sat on the square as my daughter played and  
spoke to the ladies who have spent their lives in this vil-





lage. I asked them, if they remembered the stories their grandmothers had told them, they couldn't remember but they could tell me about how the village once was, they could tell me how they met their husbands, they could tell me how they fell in love. Then it became clear, it wasn't for an artist to come and lead a project or come and teach something, it was necessary just to listen. So we stopped and listened. It was apparent that the stories were there and the inhabitants wanted to tell them. So for a year, I have been sitting on the square with Severine Bruneton, listening to people's stories.

#### Dialogue:

##### *Points of commonality:*

We can start by saying we share the village we live in today. Some of these places are used more by certain people and less by others but the village square is the central space that most people cross to get to the bakery, the school, the bar. It is shared as a place to sit, play, talk, take water from the fountain, for the trees to grow, the cats, dogs, children to run around and once the goats. It's a place for dialogue and equally for conflict.

It all starts around 4pm, beginning with the youngest: the children who ride their bikes in circles, endlessly whilst the mothers rest. The ladies over a certain age sit and comment on how the trees have been pruned too short and there won't be shade come the summer. They re-mapped the whole village telling us how it was 30 years ago, 40 years ago, 50 years ago: bandstand, the grocery shop, the Dutch hippy commune and the smell of weed, the washhouse.

I've been in the village 21/2 years and there are several families here 4 or 5 generations back: great grand parents of children in the school arrived to work in the vines (vendanges), les ocres, candied fruit factories they crossed borders, they fled fascism in Spain and post war



poverty in Italy. When the memories stop then we move to the metaphysical realm of imagination, of myth; the statue on the fountain takes on a real importance. Ceres, the goddess of the harvest stands at the centre of the 'place', the centre of the village holding her ears of wheat in one hand and grapes in the other. Her stories will become an important part of a performance planned for the village in the summer to come.

##### *Points of difference:*

At some point, even if we have four generations based in the village, our roots start to reach further afield. These moments are fascinating because we discover, in a place that is so quintessentially French, that we are a very heterogeneous group.

##### *Theatre outcome: inventing, using, recycling other methods*

With all this preparation and listening where do we go from here? We could of course make a performance with the local school and ask the maire to do an introduction and then see

if the bingo group could serve some drinks but how to really respond to the village? How to incorporate all these stories, all these lives, all these changes and all these dreams? And for that to result in an inter-cultural dialogue.

Let's look at how we might respond to stories from inhabitants in the present, past and distant past.



The present is a question of negotiating and harnessing a 'dynamique' which is already there in the village. How do you use people's habits and break people's habits? How do we bring together all ages, from all the corners of the village: the children on their bikes, the teenagers smoking in the car park, the grandmothers on the square and the guys in the bar? I apologize for the stereotypes because there are also grandmothers on bicycles who smoke in the car parks and teenagers who sit on the square and natter. We are looking at setting up little surprises before the main event: a tandem bicycle planted with edible plants and words of inspiration and treasure hunt maps for children. The event itself:

- 1 Meal: local cuisine
- 2 Music: local musicians
- 3 Public outdoor space: the square
- 4 Sitting around tables
- 5 Involving audience

How to incorporate the stories from the past? We are writing a series of letters that can be read out by inhabitants, during the meal and this will set off small performances that retell, visually, these anecdotes. The architecture around the square will be used to bring these stories to life, with performances from windows and entrances and exits from doors, as well as bicycles and cars being part of it. What

about the distant past? The realm of myth, of Ceres on the fountain? This will be a short performance based around water, using the fountain and a more poetic, visual language.

Essentially, we have put ourselves in the role of an archaeologist, dusting off what is already there and then deciding what to do with it. Is its place in a museum or left in situ? Do we fill in the gaps, reconstruct it or admire it as it is? Do we hint at it and leave the rest to our imaginations?

**Une idée dans l'air :** from street arts to visual arts, from writing to new technologies, with the spoken word as close as possible, it reinterprets the different territories between culture and heritage, with the human and the living at the heart.



# INTERPRETATION SKILLS DEVELOPMENT AND STREET THEATRE TECHNIQUES

3

SINUM THEATRE / PROTAGON





# EXPERIENCES IN HUNGARY AND GERMANY

## INTRODUCTION

by Pintér-Németh Géza (Sinum Theatre Laboratory)

The present article is about interpretation skill development for rural communities. This chapter III. Is made by two main parts: part A, "Applying outdoor theatre technique in rural environment", written by Sinum Theatre Laboratory; and part B, "Interpreting skill development with local communities in a rural environment", written by Protagon e.V.

The two parts are complementary to each other. Within the frame of the R.I.O.T.E. 3 project which has given space to this book, the partnership has selected the theme of local myth which seems as an appropriate option to make a community development project with rural inhabitants. The re-interpretation of a local myth can contribute to the community integration and skill development of individuals regarding a better understanding of local heritages and/or intangible human values empowering local identity and responsibility for the collective progress. The local myth can be interpreted in a wider sense which can include anything that belongs to the collective memory and to local narratives.



**Part A** speaks about the approach when a professional theatre group creates a performance with the intention of touring it in a rural environment and then analyses how it enters in relation with a rural community to bring their show into the village and to facilitate participation for the encounter from the view of the audience members. The process of how a theatre company and its members build relationships as professional actors with village inhabitants and how they make a show happen in the village connected with a final event of encounter or cultural exchange is already an adult educational model.

**Part B** directly speaks about the community development process: the essence of creating an amateur theatre group in a rural environment and instead of creating a performance based on an already written drama, the group is able to develop their own story connected also to a re-interpretation of an actual collective local narrative.

Part A is not necessary to make the part B happen, but it can be a very good preparation for it. It often happens that theatre directors and animators find it difficult to hire participants in an amateur theatre group, therefore the offer of a theatre show can facilitate enthusiasm for future participation, as the example of the Bergenheim project demonstrates the same experience.

## PART A

by Sinum Theatre Laboratory

### APPLYING OUTDOOR SITE-SPECIFIC THEATRE TECHNIQUE IN RURAL ENVIRONMENT

The present article is a summary of experiences about site-specific performing activities from the years 2016 to 2021 in Romania and in Hungary. The case studies at the end are theatre performances all built on the theme of mythological archetypes.

## Glossary for the chapter

First, I would like to summarise some terminologies which are going to be key words in the following text:

*Performance*: here I use the definition from Johann Lothar Schröder. According to him, the performance is a form of art which was developed in the Sixties, and it is carried out by dancers and visual artists working on experimental expressive forms with or without public.

*Site-specific*: it means for us a performance or a theatre presentation indoor or outdoor, which uses the endowments of the environment even if they are natural or constructed endowments: trees, bushes, forest, hill, buildings, square, statue etc. In a way those elements become scenery of the show as a complementary element or even something which can gain a dramaturgical sense inside the narrative.

*Rural environment*: rural means locations outside or sometime on the periphery of cities, mostly small towns or villages where a theatre activity can enter in connection with the local community of inhabitants from a village or quarter under five thousand inhabitants.

*Barter*: it is a cultural exchange between actor and spectator. The term barter was introduced by Eugenio Barba in the Seventies to name those situations when a theatre group travel to visit a rural community where the community members after the performance of the actors shows another performance and they share something about their culture, habits, or rituals. This way, in the frame of a barter, two performances are taking place one after the other: first the professional theatre presentation then the presentation of the local inhabitants. This is an event of exchange often followed by a common feast where the participants eat and drink together.

*Auto-dramaturgy*: this is a term taken from Horacio Czertok. Under the concept of auto-dramaturgy, here the represented approach understands a collective process of theatre making, when the participants are researching their own materials (written or physical) according to guided questions and one or more common theme agreed by the group, but along their own interests.

*Flow-state*: the definition is taken from the Hungarian psychologist Mihály Csíkszentmihályi, the state of flow is a mental state where a person performing some activity is fully immersed in a feeling of energized focus, full involvement, and enjoyment in the process of the activity.

## Picking up the thread

In case of a workshop that Sinum leads, it rather would not start from a written storyboard or from a theatre play. As Teatro Nucleo, for example, interprets the concept of auto-dramaturgy, which is also a way to develop our interpretation skills, the actors or participants come together, and they start from a concrete or from an abstract theme. In our case, the first part of the creation often based on vocal and movement improvisation, which can support the cohesion of a group, or it can also give the base of a common vibration. In this part, the approach that can be considered is maybe not really the work of an actor or director from theatre, but more the prospective of a visual artist, who is sensing the shape and qualities of voices and movements and the intention is to find its own way as the flow of a river. At the beginning, it can be desirable to avoid expectations and focus because such a collective process takes time to initiate and to find its shape. In any case, people become confronted by the fact that free improvisation is very difficult, and we as human beings are blocked by our automatisms while carrying out actions and still trying to remain in a flow state.

## Entering the phase of planning a performance

The length of a creative working time is considered ideal for minimum one year or possibly two years according to an approach that the Polish director, Jerzy Grotowski, suggests as an anthropologically sustainable way of collective creative process carried out by a group of people. This ideally considered creative timeframe is problematic from a financial point of view but this aspect we do not analyse more deeply in the present work. Therefore, after the first phase (maybe a few months) of the work which is dedicated to research, some materials, such as choreographies or vocal partitures the 'actor-poets' can write down. The participants

can also choose techniques to learn and to practice or to develop singing or any special vocal skills, such as throat singing. It is a longer process to repeat some movement partiture then practicing them towards the creation of a technical skill to research the group's way of expression.

### Arriving at the creation

The final creation can be short or longer depending on the theme and aim that the participants intend to create a one-time performance or a show that the group, or company, desires to bring on tour. The first premier can be a test performance to receive feedback from the public and to have more idea about what can work, and what are the more problematic parts. The premiere is also important to test the technical apparatus of the show, to see the quality and effect of the materials that you put on the scene as props. This is also the first time to see how the environment can take part in your dramaturgy and it will help to make decisions for further planning regarding other type of rural contexts.

### Five possible considerations to introduce a performance in rural environment.

- 1 Visiting the location is one of the first and indispensable steps of the preparation phase. When you know the next location of your performance you might start with research, at least one month before the performance about the region, local history, geographical, social political and demographic conditions. It is important to collect information also about the cultural conditions, what language do they speak, and on what level? Depending on your show, if it is language based or not, you start to think about strategies of communication. Then you will select the right outdoor space, and it is recommended to make visual documentation, measurement of the space. You also might take a visit at the local municipality and search for other key people who are active and committed in the village for cultural activities. It is a magic moment; you are present and sensible for all environmental vibration. Take notes and observe your impressions and try to go with it as far as your performance can afford it.

The awareness of the weather forecast is highly recommended, the materials surrounding the planned scenery and the acoustics.

- 2 You think about the dramaturgy to adapt it to your location. See the technical features first and their influence on the movement partiture, sound capabilities etc. Secondly if you can include some cultural characteristics about the location that is really a gift.
- 3 If your performance is an event-creating type show, then probably you make decisions about the introduction and epilogue: having a ceremony master is convenient, and you might create a situation where the people have the chance to meet after the show and maybe to drink and eat together.
- 4 Another important part is the BARTER as a potential cultural exchange that can enrich your show in a rural environment as an event. When you announce the show in written form, there is a first chance to invite people for the barter, but probably some local connections are indispensable to make a real barter happen. For that reason, it is useful to collaborate with a person from the village, who will encourage the people to share something about their culture: songs, stories, amateur theatre performance, folk dances, or interactive games.
- 5 If you can afford it, it is worth interviewing some local inhabitant or with local teachers, cultural professionals etc. to be as much informed about local conditions as possible.

### Towards a show which can become an 'Event' in the village?

- If you made all the preparation and the day of the performance is coming, you might arrive at the place of the performance one or two days earlier with the whole group to taste the atmosphere in the village. It is important that the actors are seen by the villagers already

ANOTHER important part is  
the BARTER as a potential  
CULTURAL eXCHANGE that  
CAN ENRICH YOUR SHOW in  
a RURAL ENVIRONMENT as an  
event



before the show, and communication on the streets or in the bar can be an advantage. They will ask you *What are you doing here? When is the theatre performance?...etc.* and it is a good occasion already to create an interest. Also, good to eat in the village and taste the local food if they have a restaurant.

- Immediately before the show, it can be a good introduction if you make a parade on the streets of the village. Normally some actors with musical instruments and some on stilts can walk through one or two streets not more than one kilometre maximum, singing and playing music and announcing the show for the villagers.
- After the show, if the participation can happen through barter or with other forms it is important to remain and spend some time with the inhabitants, maybe to eat and drink a bit together.

#### About stilts, as a classical outdoor performative tool

There is a wide variety of stilt walking styles in European theatres. The tool can be constructed out of wood or iron, and it can function as a heavy tool or rather something very light.

The street theatre as a new phenomenon was born in 1976 in Belgrade during the BITEF Festival, or something as Italian theatre directors from the third theatre movement call it according to their consensus 'street theatre' as a term which can be adapted now for the present book. Since then, stilts became a very common tool for street theatre actions, and it became a kind of trend in the late 70's. As Beppe Chierichetti said in a Teatro Vivo conference in Bergamo in 2016, organised by Teatro Tascabile di Bergamo, the theatre critics were saying "let's cut off those stilts, we don't want to see them anymore". Therefore, they started to practice it in a different way with different motivation.

There are two basic stilt walking style: 1) connected to the ground, and 2) elevated from the ground as often a very elegant way of staying on stilts. One of the most famous stilt walkers was Peter Schuman in the Bread and Puppet theatre with his six-metre-high stilts from the 70's until the 90's.

Today Jay Ruby in the US from Carpetbag Stilt Brigade is an important person who organises

the Global Stilt Congress. He is a main figure of a stilt walker network, which had grown by the time he made many of those workshops all around Europe for beginners and for advanced classes.

As an example for sure, Antagon Aktion Theatre is representative of a style where the stilt walker is strongly connected to the ground as in their show *Time Out* where the stilt walkers play the role of animals or slaves. Teatro Tascabile di Bergamo is another example for elevated style. For example, the performance *Valse*, which has toured since 1990 until today, where the TTB actors are playing aristocrats dancing in the salon. These are two extreme examples. In the first case the acrobatic skill is something to show and in the second case, it is something to hide.

Walking on stilts is like walking on our heels, which means no equilibrium, but constant struggle for stability. Therefore, it determines a body-technique to develop and to use by the stilt walker. This body-technique makes the actor more interesting on the scene and it guides into a more choreographed way of editing the performance instead of a text-based presentation.

In case stilts are not for showing acrobatic skills, they can obtain a very practical and, at the same time, theatrically meaningful sense, that means stilts are becoming a stage-type with the aim to make the individual actor higher and visible for potentially a larger number of spectators. In this case the aim of the actor is to obtain the most control of his movements while he is on the stilts which is a contradiction as the tool urges the actor to constant imbalance. The control over the movements makes possible for the actor to

IN CASE STILTS ARE NOT FOR SHOWING acrobatic SKILLS, they can obtain a very practical and, at the same time, theatrically MEANINGFUL sense, that means stilts are becoming a stage-type with the aim to make the individual actor higher and visible for potentially a larger number of spectators.

create an own score/movement partiture that is possible to repeat and insert into a more complex choreography of the show. Stilts, as Stage-type, give the opportunity for the actor to play in 360 degrees mostly outdoors, in places where it is not possible to create a stage, and to be mobile as the theatre in streets requires it.

Stilts also have an impact on the spectator in some different ways, as Horacio Czertok says in his book *Theatre in Exile*:

*"The usual functions of places were temporarily expropriated and given over to theatre. People generally don't see things above them and so we concentrated particularly on windows, balconies and terraces. This work, and the actions performed by the actors on stilts, made sure that the audience looked up.*

*When somebody in an audience looks up two things happen simultaneously. The first is physiological: raising the head presses the base of the skull gently against the spinal column. This results in heightened attention and increased muscle tone. The change of state is pleasant and stimulating, and it affects all the members of the audience simultaneously. The second is the rediscovery of your own architectural context. You rediscover your own streets, the place you've been living in perhaps for decades. This too can be pleasant and stimulating.*

*All this generates a flow of sympathy in the audience towards the group of actors. This flow gives extra solidity to the results achieved by the actors' actions and becomes an integral part of them, to the point of making many of the people in the audience the group's hostages, and subsequently its allies. This further increases the solidity and, consequently, the capacity of the impact on the other members of the audience."*

## Case studies for experimental street theatre created to tour in rural environment

### BLACK BULL AND OTHER STORIES

This is a show made by Shoshin Theatre Association in the co-direction of Csongor Köllő and Enikő Györgyjakab in 2017. The show was on tour for three years, from 2017 to 2019 and it



was performed by six actors. The narrative of the performance was created by the montage of two tales, but the stories: Black Bull and Golden hair. The tales were not the leading thread of the creative process. Shoshin has adopted the approach of Teatro Tascabile di Bergamo, from the first encounter in the R.I.O.T.E. project December 2016, in Bergamo. The approach was based on certain skill sharing and technical development.

### CONFERENCE OF THE BIRDS

This is a street theatre show with a text-based narrative taken from the ancient Persian story of Attar. The performance was directed by Balázs Simon, and has been on the repertoire of Utca-SzAK Theatre from 2019 until 2022. This was an experimental theatre show questioning a basic principle of street theatre: how to deal with texts in open air and how to manage intellectual and philosophical information for people who are just stopped at the street. The Commedia dell'Arte figures with masks, talking about philosophical arguments has an absurdity while birds were searching for their God and their home gives an impression of a trauma of climate emergency. The show was represented by seven actors who first created the performance indoors, based on dialogues. Therefore, the main score of the whole show was rooted in the philosophical dialogues of the actors.

### JANUS MYSTERY AND CARNIVAL

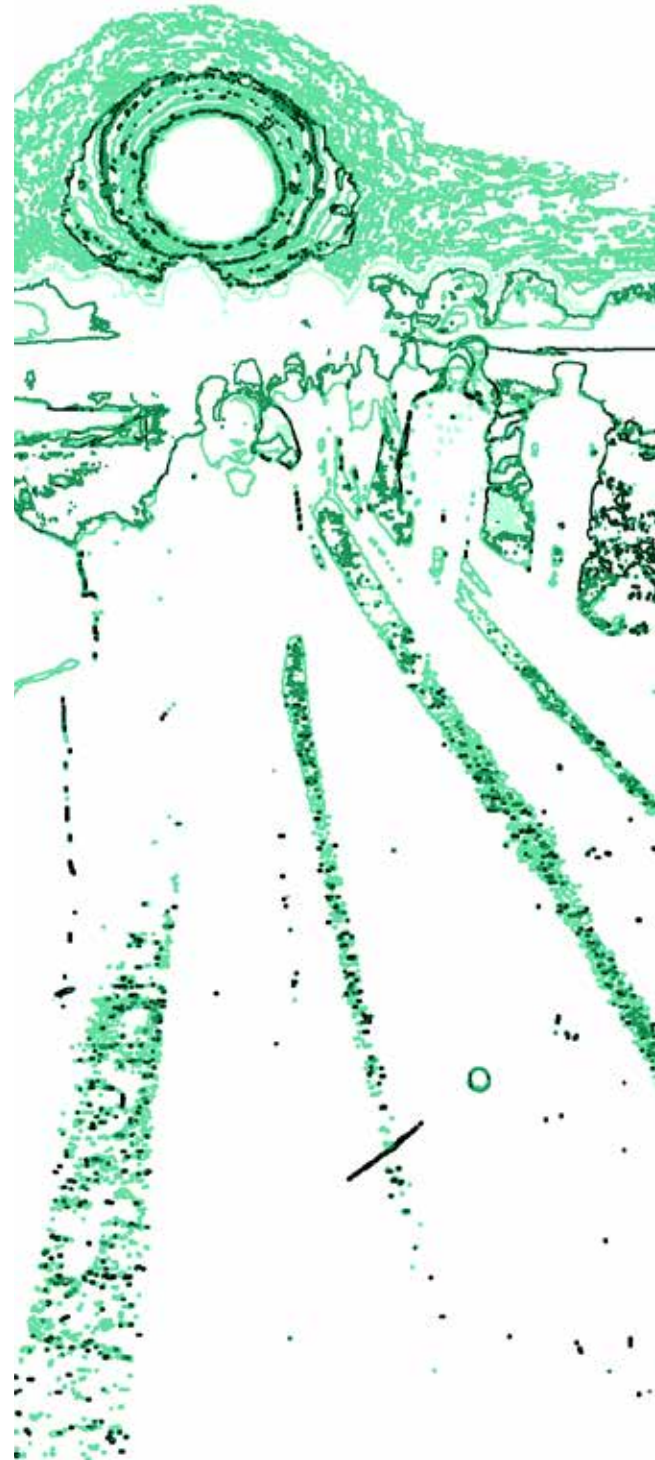
This was a first performance of Sinum Theatre, created for the winter solstice in 2021. The performance was created by six actors who arrived from different fields of performative arts: puppetry theatre, physical theatre, clown, vocal-theatre, and street theatre. The theme of the performance is Janus Pannonius a Renaissance Hungarian Poet, and his life presented through pictures re-evoked by motifs from his poetry. Therefore, also the God, who inspired his artistic name Janus, becomes present as a main motif of the performance, representing the constant returning element of nature which has been lost in modern civilisation; therefore the western individual is living in constant imbalance.

The show was performed in Cserkút (a village 10 kilometre from Pécs) in a barn during the longest night of the winter. Therefore it has also obtained the meaning of celebrating a cycle change. Janus mystery and carnival meant to be a facilitator show, which will be analysed in an annex of the present book.

**Sinum Theatre** is based in Pécs and founded in 2019. The main aims of the organization are to spread, rethink and create cultural and artistic values related to performing arts on a local and European level, in line with the natural environment. We give a special attention to outdoor art forms, focusing on initiating a dialogue with the environment and relate to the values given by nature. We also want to foster intercultural dialogue, such as intercultural theatre, theatre anthropology, creative voice and sound art, dance, movement or other non-verbal performing techniques. Sinum is coordinator of the last edition of the R.I.O.T.E. projects, which have been existing since 2016.

**Nikolett Németh** is 32 years old, was born in Budapest. She is engaged in theatre and vocal research, both practically and theoretically.

**Géza Pintér** is 36 years old, was born in Pécs. He worked with several street theatre companies in Germany and Italy. He researched the outdoor performance in practice and theoretically as well.



## PART B

by Protagon e. V.

*In this chapter we want to show, on the basis of our work with the local community in Bingenheim / Germany, how interpreting skills development in a rural environment with a local community can be conducted. The project with the local community was led by the theatre group 'antagon theaterAKTion' from Frankfurt am Main in cooperation with the local cultural association 'WetterauSicht e.V.' in Bingenheim. It stretched from July until the end of September with a final performance that was presented to approximately 60 people from the village. Video documentation of the performance is available online and in the archives of antagon theaterAKTion.*

## INTRODUCTION

Firstly, some definitions and thoughts:

Interpreting skills development is a vast field and many approaches can be found in the performing arts. In this chapter we describe a simple way to work with unexperienced or amateur participants for short and midterm projects, which is most appropriate in so called 'pioneer circumstances'. Other than a few exceptions, the project organisers and workshop leaders did not know the project participants before the project commenced. As well as this, the participants had little to no experience in physical theatre, which was the proposed content of the workshops.

The rural environment was important to us. Bingenheim is a village in Hessen, Germany. It is surrounded by fields of grazing animals, rolling hills and areas of natural beauty. We wanted to use the participants'



connection to this environment and felt that wild nature, the four elements and working outside were aspects that most participants could relate to, as they are key aspects in our theatre work and aesthetics.

A local community has been defined as a group of interacting people living in a common location. The word is often used to refer to a group that is organised around common values and is attributed with social cohesion within a shared geographical location, generally in social units larger than a household.

A key aspect in the work of protagon e.V. is sustainability. All our activities aim at honest and respectful interactions to give a firm base of trust and mutual appreciation for long lasting, sustainable relationships.

Sustainability in community programmes is the capacity of programmes (services designed to meet the needs of community members) to continuously respond to community issues.

A sustained programme maintains a focus consonant with its original goals and objectives, including the individuals, families, and communities it was originally intended to serve. Programmes change regarding the breadth and depth of their programming. Some become aligned with other organisations and established institutions, whereas others maintain their independence. Understanding the community context in which programmes serving the community function has an important influence on programme sustainability and success.

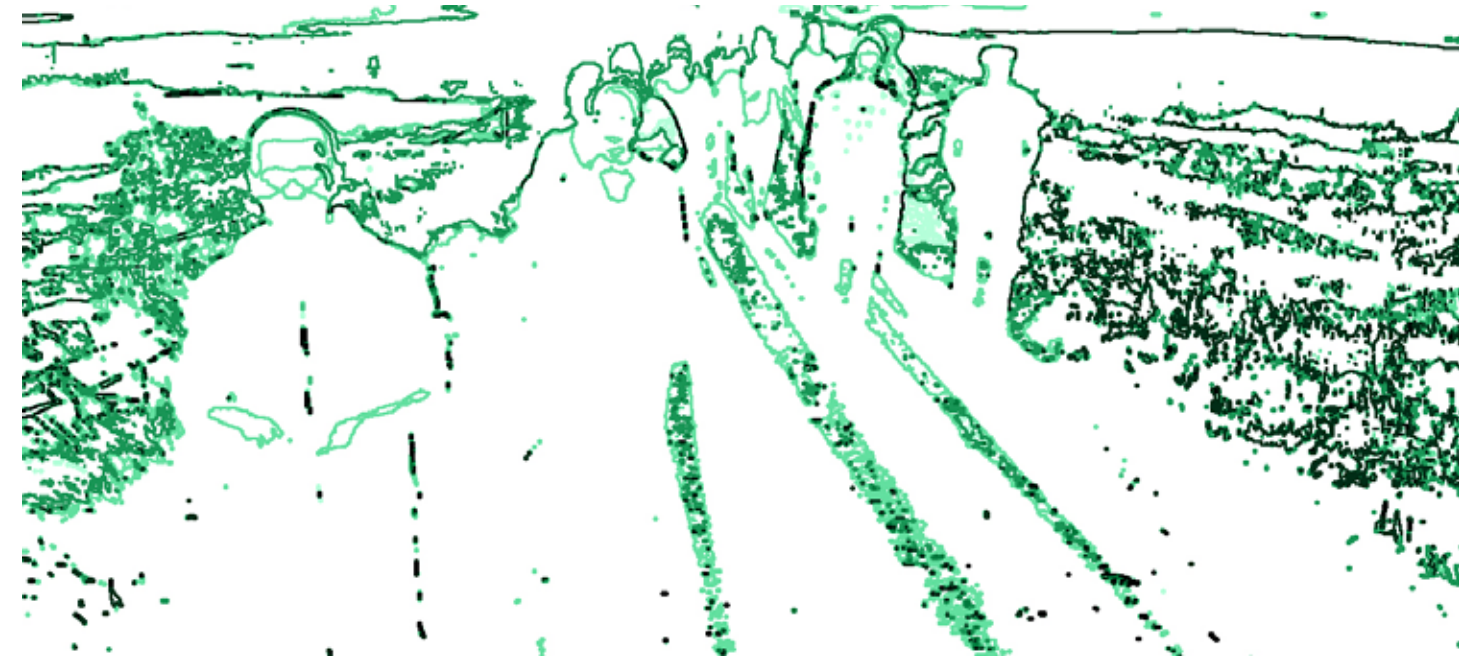
*'Social connectedness matters to our lives in the most profound way.' Robert Putnam*

## HOW DID WE START?

As a first step in developing the programme, we defined our goals, terms and conditions and tools:

The goals, terms and conditions of our programme were partly pre-defined in the conception of the greater project R.I.O.T.E. 3, with several sub-goals. The main ones were:

creating a performance with the local community. The theme should be serving the purpose of social cohesion within the community and a local myth was proposed as a suitable



possibility. We wanted to strive for an inclusive group of participants regarding age, sex and background.

For the implementation of the workshop, we worked with three members of the theatre company 'antagon theaterAKTion' (hereafter referred to as Antagon). Antagon is a physical theatre group based in Frankfurt am Main and, as well as creating their own shows, its members have many years of experience in offering training and workshops to people with little or no background in theatre or performance.

The 'tools' were the skills and experience of these members and the offer of approximately 30 hours of theatre training and rehearsals, ending in the public performance. The 30 hours were divided in 10 theatre classes and consisted of two main phases:

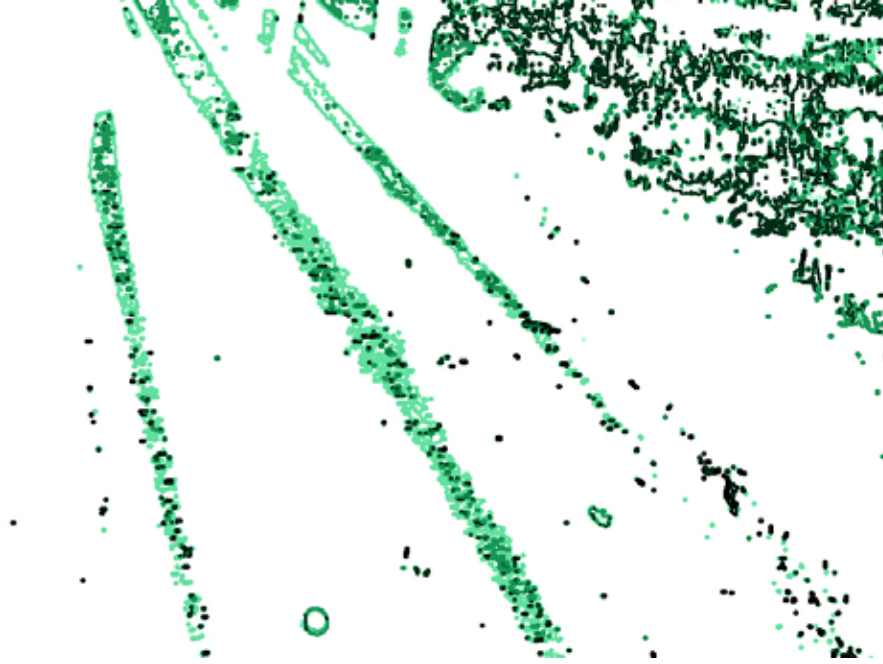
*Training:* exercises and games designed to build skills, explore common themes, and more importantly to create a sense of trust and cohesion between the participants and workshop leaders.

*Direction (creation of the performance):* taking the themes and ideas that came out in the training and helping the participants to convert them into a performance.

## First Contact

To make first contact with the community, we chose to present a free open-air show from the theatre group Antagon. The show took place on a Sunday afternoon in a park close to the center of the village. It was announced before in the local communication channels and additionally - some hours before the show - a little theatrical parade on stilts and with live music through the village helped to let the last people know, that something 'new and exciting' was going to happen. The show gave the community an impression of the theatre work, its style and artistic language and was intended to inspire people to participate in the project. Easy accessibility was the main quality that we looked for in planning, communicating, presenting, and afterwards discussing the show in Bingenheim. After the show, information about the upcoming free workshops was shared and disseminated. Together with the vivid impression of the show, this offer became well known among the local community.

The resulting workshop group of 12 people, ranging from 19 until over 70 years old, was then some weeks later informed about the details of the programme. Dates, place and time were agreed upon and the theatre training could begin. As for the theme of the performance, we chose to search for a concrete theme in the first training sessions and decide on it together. It was very helpful that one of the workshop leaders was a resident of the community itself, reducing the 'stranger-effect' and also giving people an opportunity to talk with someone of their own about what was being offered. Forming a good team for the task of leading the workshops should also be seen as an aspect of connecting to the community. A 'trust person' from the community itself is a big advantage and we recommend to look for such alliances before planning the project. In our case we contacted a little cultural association based in the village (WetterauSicht e.V.) and found an enthusiastic partner that supported us in all logistical matters.



## Everybody can do physical theatre – a method in three phases

The idea behind this method is that everybody is able to do theatre; anyone can go on stage and perform. Importance is given to a personal connection, having fun and enjoying the work, gaining a sense of wellbeing through the connection of working and exploring with one's own body and reducing fears and blockades of people to go on stage and perform. As an introduction, the workshop leaders tell stories from their work lives and experiences, giving examples of very shy and seemingly untalented people who become successful actors. We call this 'Getting stories right': removing the myth of a certain talent that is needed to be an actor and/or perform on stage. In that sense, we emphasise the aspect of training and working with theatre tools to develop our skills.

### *Phase I: Integration and Sensibilisation*

The first phase consisted of three classes with exercises regarding basic elements of physical theatre (e.g. consciousness of the performance space, body coordination and breathing) as well as funny and dynamic games (e.g. ball-name-games with movement).

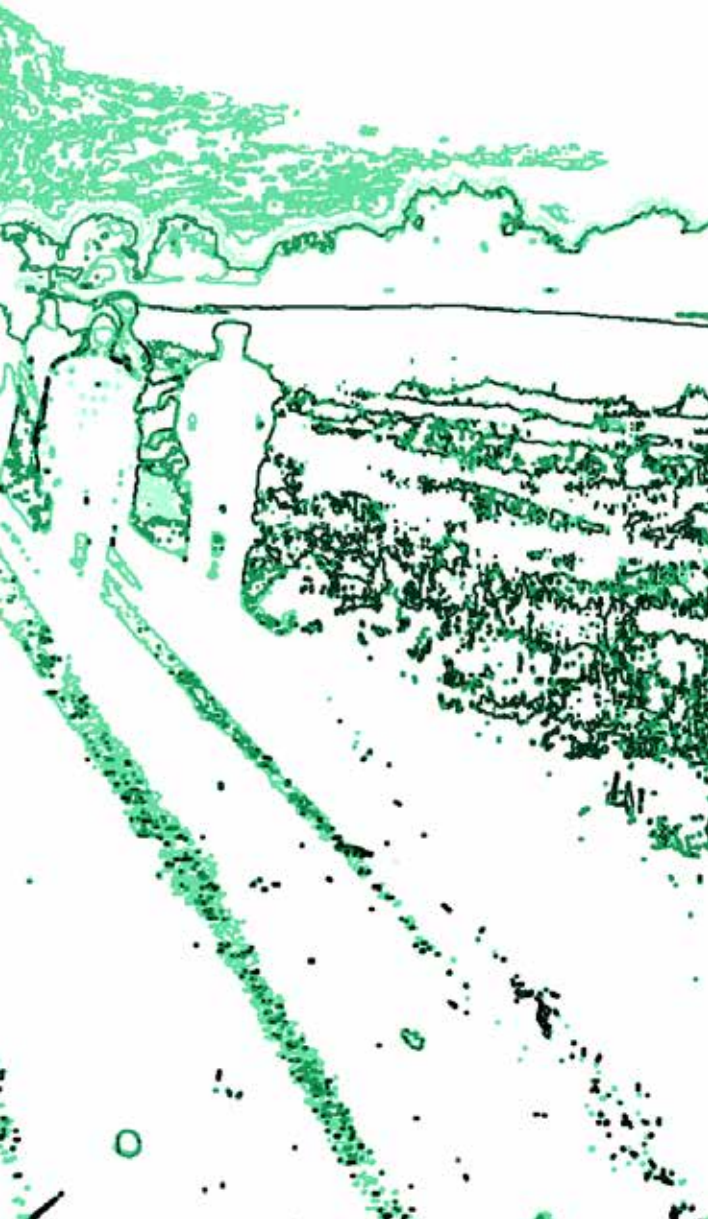
These games and exercises are designed to slowly reduce the distance between the bodies of the participants, with the idea of becoming more comfortable with each other and their physicality.

They are designed to build confidence and trust within the group that will later help the participants to dive deeper into the process of creation.

The following are some examples of exercises employed by the workshop leaders.

Being together in one space, first without touching:

A space is defined wherein the participants can move. We experiment with different movement speeds, movement qualities and different levels in space (e.g. on the ground, mid-level, above the head). Motions can be slow and fast, sudden stops or continuous motion, intense, careful, playful, imitating movements and so on. Once the exercise has been established and the participants are used to moving within the same space, we can introduce the element



of physical contact between participants. For example, in our workshop we asked the participants to give small physical impulses to each other to enhance or change the momentum of another person as they moved through the space.

The quality of the physical contact gradually intensifies through the exercise. If we feel the participants ready, we can continue with partner exercises that might end in deep embraces or strong interactions based on leading and following, mirror exercises or other concrete tasks. It is very important to remind everyone to be careful with the personal limits of oneself and each one. Regular feedback rounds are helpful to become aware of each other's limits. During the exercises we try to keep silent, not communicating verbally at all. An interesting aspect here is that, through these exercises, the participants can define among themselves their 'group scale' of space, speed and time. What does slow mean? what does fast mean? what is high? what is low? The group can find answers between themselves to these questions, which then are a good base for further interaction. Finally, some group exercises and trust exercises are proposed, checking the level of confidence and trust that has been built up between the participants. Examples are 'blindfolded' exercises (we prefer to work only with closed eyes to always have the possibility to open eyes quickly in an emergency).

Additional aspects are:

The workshop leaders should not participate in the exercises to keep the overview and observe and understand the group dynamic.

*Focus:* Through focusing on the exercise, the individual fears and blockades become less. Focus exercises are part of each warm-up through all phases. Our rule of not talking at all during exercises, which happens anyway, helped the participants to focus. We recommend, through such a rule, to find a balance between the need to communicate and the need to focus. This was also paired with moments of talking: for example, individual feedback or discussion rounds.

### *Phase II: Fundamentals of physical theatre*

Balance, rhythm, physical action, distortion, improvisation and interpretation, object manipulation, mime, dance, acrobatics. In this phase the individual abilities, skills and interests of each participant become more important. These exercises dive into the physical qualities of the individual as well as their own perception of the space they are working in.

Two exercises as an example:

Mime:

A classical mime exercise: Explaining things without words, possibly as a competition between two groups or one by one in a big round.

Improvisation Composition Game:

Do what you want and don't do what you don't want. Participants are free to enter and leave the 'stage', interact or not as they want. The leaders stop the game now and then, to show or even discuss the element that has been just seen. e.g. entrance, exit, solo, duos, trios etc., repetition, pauses, voice and singing, cannoning movements etc. After breaking the ice and starting the process of creating a sense of trust between the participants, it is now time to start the first 'personal' exercise which served in our case as the base to work towards our common theme and the performance:



### Central exercise: 'My sculpture'

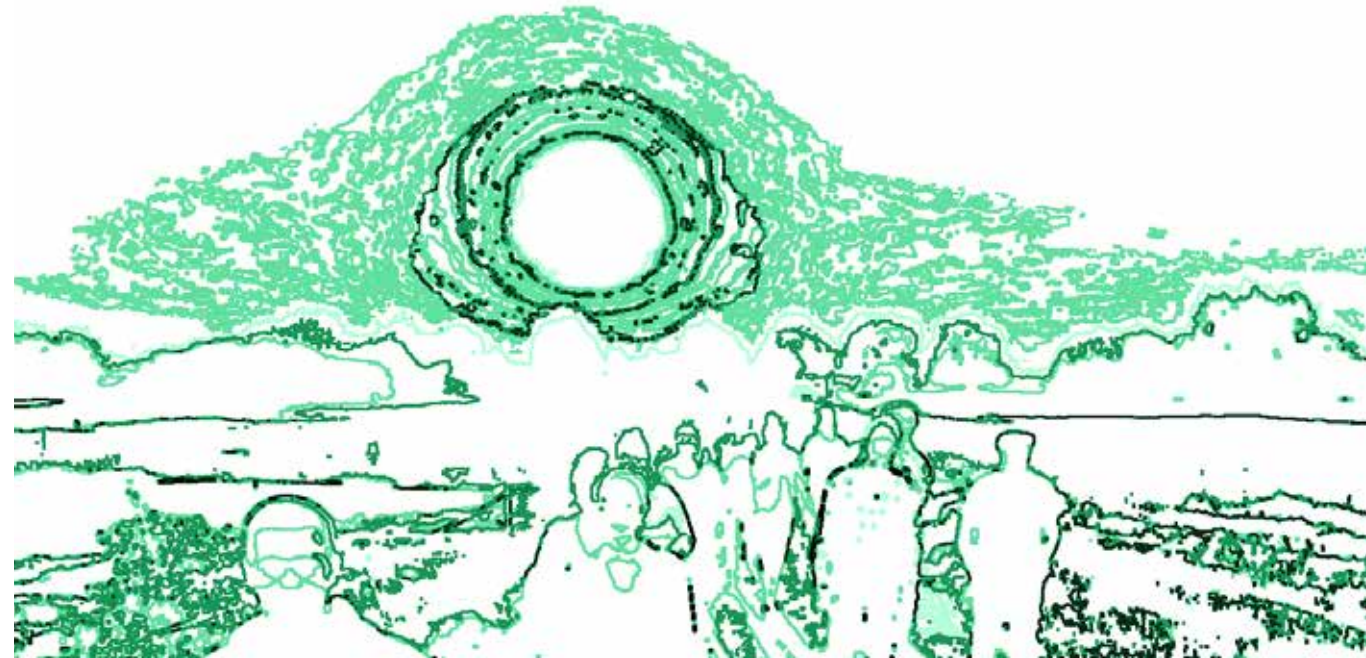
There is a basic question, e.g.: Looking at your life, why are you here now, in this village/area/place?

*Task:* Find a place in the outside area that you feel connected and comfortable with and build, from natural objects that are around this place, a sculpture which represents the 'story' of your answer to the question.

This exercise can be used to connect an individual story with the story of a place, nature and local community. At the end of the task, each participant presents their own sculpture to the group: explaining it, answering questions and listen to feedback from the group. This was a very intimate moment and we had to agree on going on longer than planned that day, to give the time and attention necessary to each participant's sculpture. Having learned about the deeper connection of each participant with their local community, its landscape, nature and history, we started to turn towards the common theme of the performance. Out of the individual sculptures, a reflection and discussion can be moderated, with the goal of identifying the main, common pictures and themes of the participants.

In our case in Bingenheim, the individual sculptures of the participants were vivid and expressive enough to be used as a working base for the final performance. By creating a sequence of these 'sculptures' we could incorporate the main themes of the participants and create something that reflected the individual connections, qualities and ideas of the local community that were most relevant at this moment of their lives.

Between phases 2 and 3 there is a dynamic shift/transition for the workshop leaders, from teaching to directing. This shift is also explained by the teacher/director to the participants.



Up until this point the workshop leaders have been in their 'teacher' role. The focus of this role is to build the individual skills and confidence of the participants, guiding them as the teacher feels necessary, but also allowing them to grow and explore within themselves. The group dynamic and atmosphere are also a main focus of the teacher. The focus of the director is on the general composition of the performance and how the characters can work together to build this.

Here the participants may notice a change in comments and talks about their acting/performing, because now the director shifts the focus away from the individual and looks at the role that each 'character' is playing in the greater performance.

### *Phase III: Preparing the performance or work demonstration*

From the point that the rough dramaturgy, scenes and characters are decided upon, it is time to involve professionals:

Musicians, lighting technicians, sound technicians, costume designers etc. To give the participants the real experience of being part of a performance, the more professional support that can be organised, the better. Nonetheless it should be taken care that the professionals

do not overstep their role as advisers and supporters for the participants. This requires some preparation between the workshop leaders and the professionals to have a common ground how to interact with the participants.

Now is the moment to work on the concrete scenes, using the elements and techniques the participants have learned in the first and second phase. Professional support raises the level of reflection on the different scenes and light, sound, costume and scenery ideas can be exchanged and discussed between the participants and the professionals throughout this process.

Mostly, the professional support is limited by the financial possibilities of the project. In our case we only 'booked' the professionals for the final performance, which was the minimum of pro-

fessional support needed for this method and it still worked out very well. It helped that the support came from the same theatre group and its experienced staff as the workshop leaders themselves. Because of this, the musicians and technicians were able to work very quickly with the workshop leaders to add musical ideas, a lighting design and costumes that enriched the performance and gave it a sense of spectacle for both the audience and participants.

Additional aspects are:

*The outside eye:* a very helpful element in the composition of the performance was having an 'outside eye' in the last rehearsals: a professional who is observing the work for the first time and advising the workshop leaders. With the fresh perspective and advice of someone who has not been involved in the first, more individual and pedagogical part of the process, the final result can be improved.

*A Theatre Performance as a ritual, including performers and audience:* through the final performance we also try to invoke in the participants the idea of sharing and celebrating what they have created with their audience. We think if the participants can see and feel quality in their performance, it gives them the opportunity to enjoy it more. It can often happen that in the moment of a performance, inexperienced performers will be nervous and rush through scenes. But we tried as much as possible to help each of the participants to really enjoy their time on stage, to breath, to feel the connection between each other and the audience and to enjoy the sense of collective consciousness that it creates.

*Performance Basics:* among other 'unwritten' rules that are explained before our performance (according to the style and experiences of the workshop leaders), there is another important issue which should be agreed upon with all participants: to define in which moments of the performance it is possible to improvise, experiment and even introduce spontaneous new ideas. Therefore, also agreeing that we really stick to our 'plan' and value the long rehearsal phase and the work that was put in to reach this result.

## RESUMÉ

How we brought physical theatre into a local community became clear in the previous chapters. To draw a conclusion, the advantages of this work in local communities should be discussed. As already mentioned at the beginning, such work is about addressing sustainability and concrete issues. Theatre work can achieve amazing results in many social issues. A concrete work result (in our case, the performance) is particularly helpful here. It allows the participants to work together towards a goal that they are given, which they could not achieve alone. Theatre is teamwork. This already overcomes communication barriers between the participants. The presentation also has the effect of sharing the result with an even larger group in the local community, thus expanding the scope of the action implied.

Physical theatre also helps to put the talk aside and move on to action. In this way, tiring discussions can be avoided and practical common actions can be found. Another very valuable aspect of theatre work is, that there is no specific profile for the performers. One individual can contribute something valuable that another cannot, there is no better or worse, everyone can make theatre, but we have to work for it. Also, without the use of speech, the barrier of language can be overcome to include groups of people who may not be able to share common experiences together in other ways.

Comparing abilities is difficult, which helps to forget about competition and non-beneficial rivalries. At the same time, a performance requires very specific actions that need to be practiced. Especially people with little or no experience in physical theatre can make quick progress here. This self-efficacy results in a positive self-perception.

A Theatre Performance  
as a ritual, including  
performers and audience:  
through the final  
performance we also  
try to invoke in the  
participants the idea of  
sharing and celebrating  
what they have created  
with their audience.

Finally, the role that physical theatre plays in forming a group should be emphasised. Demarcation and exclusion are often physical phenomena that are encountered here. The intensive joint rehearsal process in which the participants meet in a completely new space and conditions (the stage), enables them to get to know each other again in a different way and melts the group together. Even if the theatre work has a therapeutic effect, it is ultimately not about therapy, but about creating something together that goes beyond the individual. Theatre work also trains the creativity of the participants, a skill that is often needed in everyday life.

It should not be a surprise that this project has had a very positive impact in the local community and the interest and motivation for more theatre projects has been growing ever since. Now we are planning - together with more local institutions and people involved - two further theatre projects: one focusing on young people, the other on people with migration background. Hence, our initial theatre offer did not only have a sustainable outcome but was able to sparkle a process of growing cultural community work. Looking at the difficulties of cultural players and activities and the generally low level of cultural diversity in rural environments, paired with the effect of two years of the Corona Pandemic and the menace of wide spread isolation of marginalised groups within the small communities in rural environments, theatre proves again to be a very strong social transformation tool. It is able to include everyone and strengthen social cohesion as well as to develop interpreting skills and creativity of the participating individuals.

**Protagon – Friends and Supporters of free Theater Action e.V.** organizes large and small cultural events. Such as workshops, educational and social projects for children and adults across all genres and offers training, production and performance rooms as well as residencies for artists. The association is committed to ensuring that free artists, groups and interested people can interact artistically and politically. Its members are encouraged, through awareness and social-engage activities, to offer a platform for research on performing arts in public space and to bring it among diverse audiences. These are the main goals of the Frankfurt association, founded in 1999.



# KARAVAN AS A MAIN CONCEPT FOR RURAL TOURING AND CONNECTING TO COMMUNITIES

4

UTCA-SZAK / TEATRO NUCLEO





# EXPERIENCES IN HUNGARY

by Utca-SzAK

The TeatRom Festival is a Roma cultural festival organised by Utca-SzAK in one of the most disadvantaged north-eastern counties of Hungary, usually in 10-12 venues. Its primary aim is to bring quality culture to isolated small villages that otherwise would not be accessible to the local population.

## THE POLITICAL BACKGROUND

The association has no classical political motive behind the organisation of the festival. Utca-SzAK is a civil organisation of artists and teachers who are concerned with the situation of the Roma in Hungary out of professional conviction and social sensitivity. The situation of Roma in Hungary is very specific. We are talking about a minority of an estimated 800,000 people, representing almost 10% of the total population. However, this minority is very heterogeneous. They are descendants of various Roma tribes of different origins, Beyaks, Oláhs, Knights, Kolompars, etc., that were previously distinguished by their different traditional occupations, their origins, racial characteristics and social customs. Given that these occupations were geared towards the production of products that are now little or barely adequate for the modern econ-

omy, their own livelihoods have lost their meaning and their source of subsistence has dried up.

In addition, the Roma tribes led a mostly nomadic way of life until the end of the 19th century, which also became obsolete in the 20th century, and the political regimes of Central and Eastern Europe encouraged a settled way of life. Because they had previously been socially in low-prestige jobs and were social outsiders through their tribal, itinerant lifestyle, they were often criminalised. Once settled, they were either assimilated or completely excluded from the social order, living on the outskirts of settlements in segregated areas. During the socialist era, attempts were made to integrate them, but these were either unsuccessful or remained nominal.

The period after the regime change also meant an economic restructuring of Hungary, which also disrupted society as a whole. But the Roma can hardly be called the immediate and clear winners of this transformation. The non-assimilated, segregated Roma are typically undereducated, have lost their traditional social structures and cultural roots, do not speak their language, and, due to their under-education, they have difficulty communicating in the majority language, as they have mixed with Hungarians from the more socially disadvantaged strata of society, and call themselves Roma Hungarians.

The way of life and the culture of the assimilated Roma do not differ from that of society's majority. The most prosperous Roma stratum, that can be considered as a subculture, are Roma artists, mainly musicians, who have been preserving their family musical traditions for generations as well as their Roma traditions. There are some commercial and industrial activities, that are mostly carried out by Roma entrepreneurs, such as the trade in second-hand non-ferrous metals, the purchase of second-hand inherited goods, and the second-hand car trade, that sometimes fall into the so-called 'grey economy sector'.



Roma entrepreneurs in the legal economy are mostly involved in the construction sector. In social and socio-political terms, after the change of regime, the non-assimilated Roma were strongly on the losing side, losing even their nominal jobs and drifting into abject poverty. This was exacerbated by the fact that initially governments did not treat the 'Roma issue' as a separate issue, allocating social benefits to families with children as a general demographic growth incentive. This later turned out to be ill-conceived, as it was typically used by families who wanted to solve their short-term financial problems with the money they received after having children, mostly Roma. Thus, in the longer term, such subsidies tended to lead to a social crisis, as they were unable to provide adequately for their children later.

Many difficulties, that sociologists characterise as poverty symptoms, have affected the Roma, since under-educated parents did not encourage their children to study or to get a job. The young, almost childbearing age of the Roma, is the most common in society, so the short

generation change period makes the rapid reproduction of social symptoms striking.

A major social controversy in the early 2000s was the criminalisation of Roma, which social scientists consider a natural symptom of the impoverished strata of society. This, in the majority of society, has translated into ethnic prejudice, failing to facilitate the integration of Roma communities and individuals.

While a series of public programmes for inclusion based on international Community or EU funding have been launched, they have generally failed. They were likely to have used inappropriate methods of reaching out to communities; most funds were spent on the maintenance of the institutions themselves, creating a prejudice among Roma that 'white' people were exploiting their poverty to enrich themselves, and thus shutting out genuinely helpful programmes. In other words, strong prejudice became, so to speak, mutual in the majority and minority communities.



Typically, the civil sector began to address the issue with 'alternative' approaches and methods, such as personal assistance networks and specialised artistic and social projects. Given that the state had left the workers of its own regional social and educational institutions alone with the problems, this resulted in them being unable to meet 'normal' standards and expectations, helpless and resigned to the situation.

It is perhaps only in recent years that we have seen the government launching longer-term, complex public programmes in the spirit of the results of decades of work by NGOs, with the peculiar political implication that it is not so much working with the civil sector as 'against', or displacing, it. While it would be in the interest of society as a whole that there should not be a large number of marginalised communities and groups, society is rather divided on such issues, if only because in Hungary the state has a rather strong, one might say exclusive, share in the ownership of social, educational, health and cultural institutions and institutional systems; the taxes that the state collects for such purposes are quite high in proportion, so that a large part of society feels that it is not its duty or its job to deal with such problems, and expects the state to solve them.

Utca-SzAK encountered Roma communities in Borsod almost a decade and a half ago by pushing traditional, mainstream theatre forms through taking theatre out into the streets and into communities that might not go to the stone theatres themselves. It soon became apparent that this was not just a question of location, but that specific audiences required specific themes and forms of expression. So for almost a decade, attempts were made to find ways of attracting and retaining the attention of such communities, and involving them in performances, even as contributors.

At first, the target audience was Budapest-based, various disadvantaged housing estates and neighbourhoods, then various institutions dealing with disadvantaged people, such as prisons, correctional institutions, drug and alcohol rehabs, where indeed the proportion of clients of Roma origin is extremely high, and later on 'going out' to their places of birth. In these settlements, the company inevitably encountered extremely difficult and complex social conditions, which made it difficult to work exclusively in the theatre, but we also found that theatre-based activities with young people had a positive impact on their social conditions, their integration in school and, indirectly, we assumed at the time, on their future.



Thus, after a while, the balance tipped towards applied theatre in the region, specifically theatre education for young people, and our theoretical interest turned towards applied theatre methods. We have had several international collaborations to learn about and adapt such genres and methods (Forum Theatre, TIE, etc).

In the meantime, of course, we have always insisted that theatre should be our trademark, and the goal should be community well-being. Given that political pluralism in Hungary is not a balanced cooperation of complementary groups with different ideological values, but rather a continuous struggle between political forces that wish to control the state and the exercise of power exclusively, which, except during campaign periods, seems to lose sight of the 'everyday' problems and the search for effective solutions to them, our politics is a demonstration of our abstention from 'politicisation'.

## REACTIONS OF THE INHABITANTS

The communities in Borsod, where Street-SzAK first appeared years ago, had not heard much about theatre. For them, acting meant acting in films, since they all watch television. But since television rarely broadcasts theatre, or if it does, not on the channels and in the time slot that this audience watches, they were initially reluctant, if not to watch the 'strange masked people', then to interact with the performance or even to get on stage themselves.

Schoolchildren regularly attend the theatre and put on school shows, but most Roma children typically have not been to school for a few generations (a trend that has been markedly improving over the last few years). Or, if they have, they have mostly either not been 'selected' for school shows or have not been ambitious enough to participate (a trend that has also been improving since then).

The big breakthrough came with the summer camps, where children and young people really enjoyed the chance to go somewhere and work on unusual things in unusual circumstances. Rural Roma families are mostly distrustful; they don't let their children go out with 'strangers'. As it was very difficult to gain their trust, it took a few years before parents themselves asked for their children to go to camp, or it became an insult if one of the children was 'left out'.

By the end of the camps, the group work had resulted in various small performances, which the children performed for each other at the end of the camps. Later the idea came to perform them in the villages where they came from, so that the parents could see what they had been doing. The young people who came back to the camps formed a 'hard core', who live in different villages (Alsóvadász, Kázsmárk, Abaújszolnok, Léh, Ináncs, etc.), but who kept in touch during the year (even marrying last year), and who later became our young helpers and then our group leaders, with whom we have been working ever since and who we can count on.

It was with these young people and the actors of Utca-SzAK that the production Magic Mirror, based on Roma fairy tales, was created and has been seen by audiences in several towns in Borsod. In recent years, we have introduced young people to many of the tools that we ourselves have learned about through the R.I.O.T.E. programme.

The volume of these year-round collaborations has, unfortunately, always depended on the actual annual subsidies. There was a year when we had 13 groups in 13 villages; years when we were able to support the work of young people in 3 municipalities; and, in the last year or two, we have had 5-6 groups operating more or less regularly. In 2016, we held the first Made in Gypsistan festival, which was held for 3 consecutive years. Initially it was a programme of the output of these summer camps: small performances by children and street performances by our international cooperation partners. Then, three years ago, the programme changed volume because we felt it was important for young people to see an example that would inspire them. The festival also changed its name, TeatRom, and we tried to transform it from a spontaneous fiesta into an organised and promoted series of events as much as we could. The basic idea is still to give young Roma people living in the region, who are active, the opportunity to show the theatre productions they create during the year and to see professional Roma and non-Roma theatre productions that deal with the issue of Roma identity.

The reception of the festival has been positive, although it is precisely because of the unusual tone it strikes in the communities that it is sometimes received with dismay, sometimes with bewilderment.

In recent years, cultural life in rural communities has been exhausted by the institution of the village festival, especially in the Roma settlements that are lagging behind. This is usually

a community event organised by the mayor's office, and the programme usually includes a community cookout, financed by the office, and a concert by well-known performers from popular culture. Although it is undoubtedly important to have locally organised community events, the most common motif is that the community sees them as a 'gift' from the mayor, even if they are aware that the mayor's office (also) uses public money, and they feel that it is a duty to be entertained by the mayor. The mayor is a representative of the power above them in their eyes, even if they know in theory that 'we live in a democracy', but they feel excluded from democracy at a social level.

Unfortunately, they are also used to the idea that all non-Roma people from outside want to carry out some kind of state project of inclusion on them, of which they are the victims and sufferers. They are only slowly beginning to learn that NGOs are not representatives of the state, even if they are organised, but are citizens who are genuinely trying to create opportunities for social coexistence, in the interests of these communities.

## THE STYLE

We will mainly try to include theatre performances that present the life and problems of Roma communities in the TeatRom festival programme. Several young professional Roma theatre companies have been created in Budapest that portray such situations through their own lived experiences. Although they mostly have drama pedagogy workshops for disadvantaged young people, their performances are mostly "counter-intuitive", i.e. they try to present these situations and problems to the majority society, and to our surprise, they are sometimes afraid of what the rural Roma audience will think of performances in the 'white language' and form. These were, for example, the Gypsy-Hungarian production by the Knowledge-Power Group, or the Independent Theatre Hungary's Chameleon Girl, which portray the problems of young people trying to adapt in big cities. The fear proved unfounded, as these were better understood and received by the audience than, for example, the slightly historicised performance of Panna Cinka, a well-known 18th century Roma violinist in Hungarian cultural history, which, despite being about a famous person, was slightly alien. It probably presented a relationship system that the audience did not want, as it is about the unhappy



love affair between a high-ranking Hungarian military officer and the violinist.

Our own production, also an adaptation of a 19th century literary work, Maxim Gorky's *Makar Chudra*, was a notch better received. Although Maxim Gorky is not of Roma origin, he portrays the life of a group of Roma travelers with a poetic romanticism that the audience probably felt closer to. In the production, the actors of the Miskolc National Theatre acted alongside young people of different ages from different settlements, with the youngest of them playing the 'camp elders', framing the romantic, passionate story with an elemental charm that was rewarded by the audience.

We usually try to include in the programme interactive or forum theatre performance or workshop for adults, such as the forum theatre performance on the debt trap last year, which touches quite a few people in those areas. No less serious is the situation of Roma women, who are often even more vulnerable than their husbands, since the Roma commu-

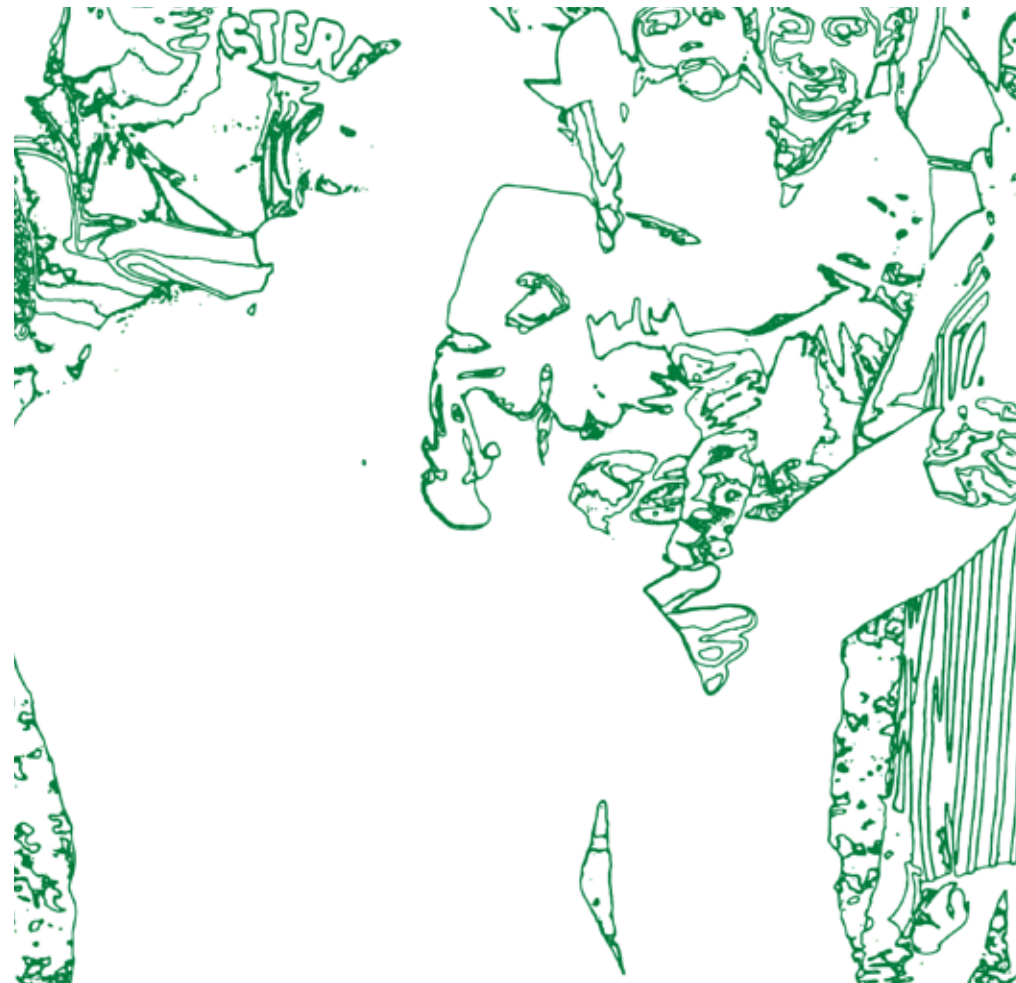
nities, on the one hand, strongly protect their daughters, but this is truer of strangers; from the point of view of the majority society, they tend to prevent them from integrating into society as subjects, often being less educated than men, having children at a very young age, thus becoming vulnerable in their own environment. We are also trying to address this issue in various workshops.

Ethnic identity is not yet a problem for children of this age group, so we offer them 'normal' puppet theatre and children's performances in the mornings, as well as creative activities

that are in some way related to the performing arts. For several years now, we have been partnering with the Hungarian Juggling Association, who run circus handicraft sessions, and the BélaMűhely Group, who use musical instruments made from various everyday objects to explore the joy of sound and making music with the younger children, or make instruments with the older ones. But we also try to bring these arts closer to children and make them more accessible through literary and visual arts workshops.

Music concerts are a very important part of the festival programme, and we also try to offer a range of genres that the public is less likely to encounter, such as ethno-pop, which is basically the most popular genre in the community. We offer concerts of classical music, authentic Roma music, authentic Roma music combined with jazz and rock, and similar formations and fusions that sometimes only come into being for the duration of the festival. Sometimes, we say, we get told that it's good, but you can't 'have fun with it.

In addition to these, we also offer traditional festival street performances, stilt-walking productions such as R.I.O.T.E. partner Shoshin Theatre's production of *The Black Bull and Other Stories*; Ljubljana's Kud Ljud *Metamorphosis* street happening; the Dürer-inspired parade of giant puppets and stilt puppets, a joint event with the Miskolc Miracle Mill Puppet Theatre; or the new circus production *Cyrano's Moon Journey* by the Spotting Fire Circaiser Cruiser Circus Theatre.



In the spirit of artistic integration, there were occasional productions such as a musical fashion show with Romani Design, BélaMűhely Group, Dorco Band and theatre group from Rásonysápberencs, or a reading theatre evening of paintings and texts by the Roma naïve painter Mara Oláh.

And although perhaps less spectacular from a professional point of view, for us the most important performances in the festival programme are the original performances created by the children's groups, which in fact started the whole idea of the festival in the first place. Young people are also regularly involved in the organisation of the summer festival. At local level they have also taken on the role of community organisers in the municipalities, hosting the festival days in their villages. The stories and texts of the performances presented in the festival programme are put together by the members of the group, often leaving a lot of room for improvisation. Let us present some of them in more detail.

**The bad teacher.** The group from Rásonysápberenc, led by Tamás Trézsi, is made up of 9-14 year olds, who have used their school and film experiences to create a moving and lush play about mutual prejudice in schools, both on the part of teachers and students, their dreams and future plans.

**A lying man is caught before a lame dog.** The children's group from Untervadás, led by Lilána Horváth and János Jocek Kótai, consists of children aged 8-12, and they regularly hold theatre and dance classes, their programme usually consisting of a movement and a theatre production. They are becoming famous in the area, not only performing in our programmes, but also organising their own performances and being invited to school events. The genre of *The lying man...* is best described as a surreal crime comedy, the story of a bohemian rich family whose youngest member meets a poor child who is invited to play in their house and is shown the family safe, which is then robbed at night by a nightmare-faced man and the boy dies in the scuffle. Suspicion falls on the foolish deaf-mute grandmother, but at the trial the angels (in medical masks) appear, resurrect the boy, and from under the nightmare mask the real culprit emerges, who is none other than the poor boy, and whose offensive yet touching monologue finally manages to win forgiveness, especially as the accusation becomes unfounded, and of course, a great party begins. Although the masked tomfoolery mitigates the gravity



of the crimes, the children seem to know it, though they trust only in the angels, who do their work with serious sublimity.

**Romazuri.** The Roma Banda of Mera, led by Ketrin Oláh, is a four-member formation of young people aged 15-18, and their performance is accordingly about the problems of big chamas and young adults. Although they mostly add some framework of creative text collection, music and choreography to their performances, they insist on staging some Roma-themed, grotesque or funny video clip or film clip. For some reason, they are not strong in spinning their own stories, but they have a strong understanding of the material, which shows the 'oddities' of the Roma, but also the attitude of the majority society towards them, with grotesque subtlety. This time the protagonist of their play is Zsolti, a young man from kajla, who first gets into trouble and arguments with his 'lejmoló' grandfather over unpaid cheques and unpaid loans, and then, after 'getting out', goes to a disco, where the bouncers naturally won't let him in until he is defended by the owner of the club, who also gets him a job. During the job interview, it turns out that Zsolti is an educated boy and the boss is a racist jerk, but everything changes when he finds out that the state pays an allowance for Roma workers...

**The holy fan.** The Thuvaslo Rom group in Kázsmárk is a true democratic group; it has no leader, all members are 'youth leaders', young people aged 16-22, and their performances are really 'home-made'. They always rehearse at the place one of their members and they do not ask for an institution, although last year they found their way back to their former primary school where they organised the festival day in collaboration with their former headmistress. In terms of genre, The Holy Fan could best be described as a frivolous French farce, which the young people have surprised us with because, given their age, they are unlikely to be theoretically versed in the not very contemporary genre. Exceptionally, there is no mention of romance, they simply want to entertain, and they do so with extraordinary sensitivity to character, humour and improvisation; the play has no pre-written text.

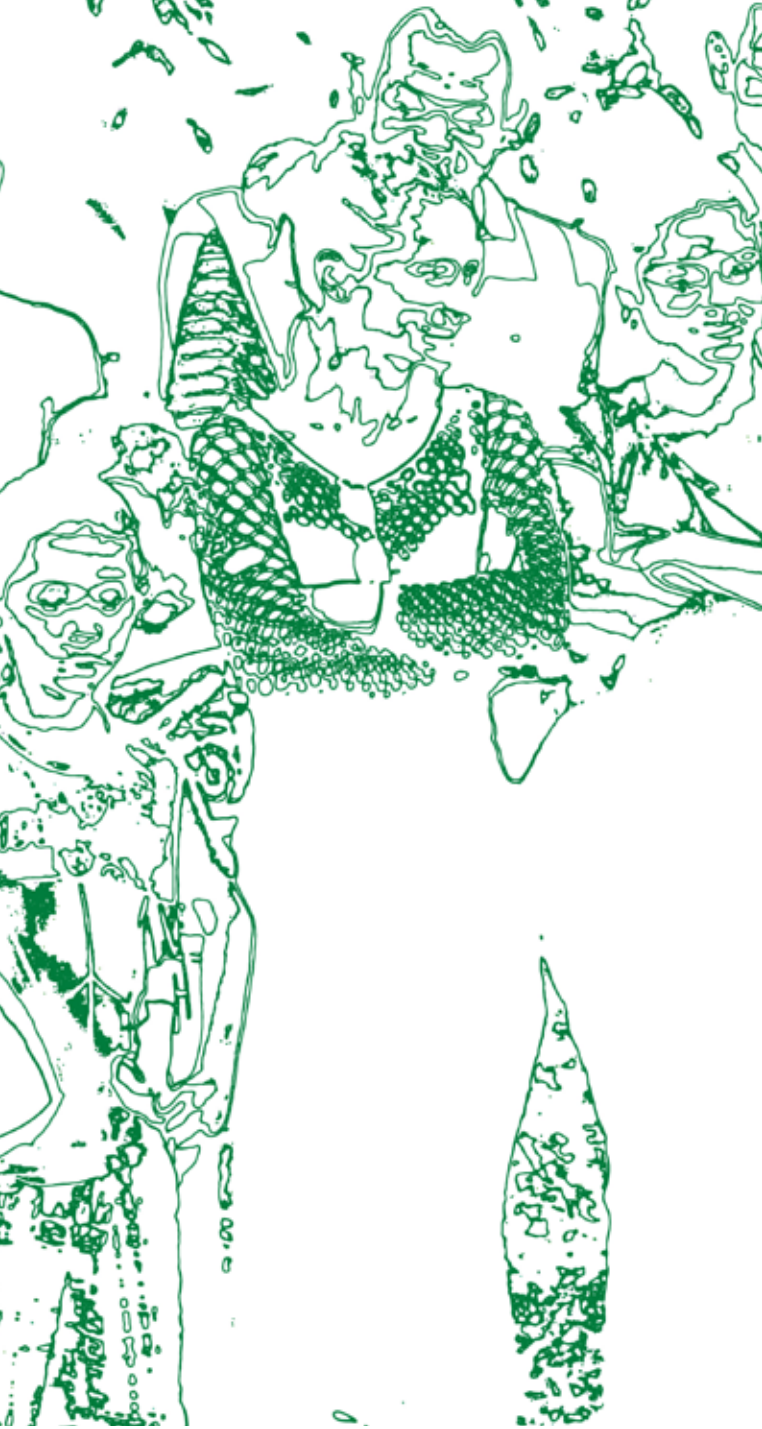
The story goes that the Cardinal lived a great life in his youth, even visiting China, where he was given a sacred fan of great value (and magical power) by monks. Much to the horror of Father Philip (played by a girl, Szimonetta Horváth), the Cardinal suddenly feels ill, feels he is going to die, and confesses to Father Philip his greatest sin and secret: he has a daughter

whom he never took care of and, who, as far as he knows, has turned to sin and become a prostitute. He asks Father Philip to find her, take care of her and bequeath him the precious fan.

He doesn't have to look for her for long as she is already on the spot; in the opening scene the half-notorious house servant, Zserbó, messing with Father Philip's phone, orders a call girl, who arrives in the person of a boy, Peter Horváth. But the rendezvous does not take place, because Father Philip and the Cardinal break up the bargain, she hides on the spot and hears his cardinal's confession. In the chaos that follows the death, somehow the fan falls into Zserbo's hands, and although he doesn't know what it is, he asks Father Philip, who absentmindedly agrees to take what he wants. The girl goes to confession to Father Philip, confesses everything to him, and he wants to give her the fan, but it has disappeared.

The peculiarly mischievous maid turns out to be the call-girl's friend, and they conspire to retrieve the fan. The dancing-legged gardener, on the other hand, is Zserbó's brother and sees the object in his possession; the enclosed letter tells him that it is a valuable piece of art, which Zserbó, who cannot read, has not been informed of before. He tries to get it from him but he refuses to return it. They all chase after Zserbo to be the first to get the fan back, but he is outraged that they want the gift back, and whimsically 'chases' them. This causes a big fight, the fan is 'activated', and then it is revealed what its magic power is: Father Philip finds himself dressed in a frock and in the body of the call-girl, the prostitute in Father Philip's, and the gardener and the maid change bodies. Zserbó doesn't even notice the change, leaving them to their fate, and retires with his beloved fan, which he now must retrieve even more.

A spiritual séance is also held to find out how to undo the body swap. They sneak in at night to retrieve it, hypnotise it into harmlessness and get the stubborn Zserbo to take the necessary steps. Their plan succeeds, but while they rejoice in their success, the now revived and enraged Zserbo rips the precious object to shreds so that no one can have it. By the time the others notice, it's too late. Left to his own devices, Zserbó, with his angry ranting and raving, while not really noticing anything that has happened, once again taunts the audience. The production has several inventive theatrical gestures and great acting moments. We were delighted with the young people's work and the audience was not disappointed.



## PERSPECTIVES

Every year, the festival is created with great difficulty and on a very low budget. We still haven't found an authority that really cares about it, other than ourselves. Although there is no explicit political or decision-making opposition to the initiative, there is no real generous public support for it. At the level of local government, the same cautiousness is both supportive and distant. To be a truly attractive tourism programme for most of the population, it would need to be much richer and thematically more general, with a larger budget, and perhaps environmental and infrastructure improvements that go far beyond the competence of such a festival.

However, it is feared that, if by some miracle such things were to happen, it would be the target audience, the local population, who would be excluded from the programme. We have repeatedly seen this in the case of successful rural cultural festivals, which were intended to promote rural development, where the local population became the victims of a week-long tourist influx rather than the 'beneficiaries' or the real enjoyers of the festival. At present, the festival's programmes are free of charge, and while we would like more than anything for locals to be able to demand and

pay for similar cultural programmes, this is unlikely to be realistic for some time. So our realistic aim is perhaps most of all to get local communities used to it and to take it on board; we are also constantly working to get someone to 'take it off our hands', given that it can be a response to a much broader set of problems that require a much broader set of competences than a small theatre association has room for.

**Utca-SZAK** is a non-governmental, non-profit organisation active in the cultural – artistic/creative and educational – sector. Our activities are based on our urge for value creation, as of art and society, and the possible forms of pedagogical and developmental application of theatre. Our projects mainly target the population of small villages, urban slums, rehabs, reformatory institutions and prisons. The empowerment of underprivileged youth is the most significant feature of our activities.

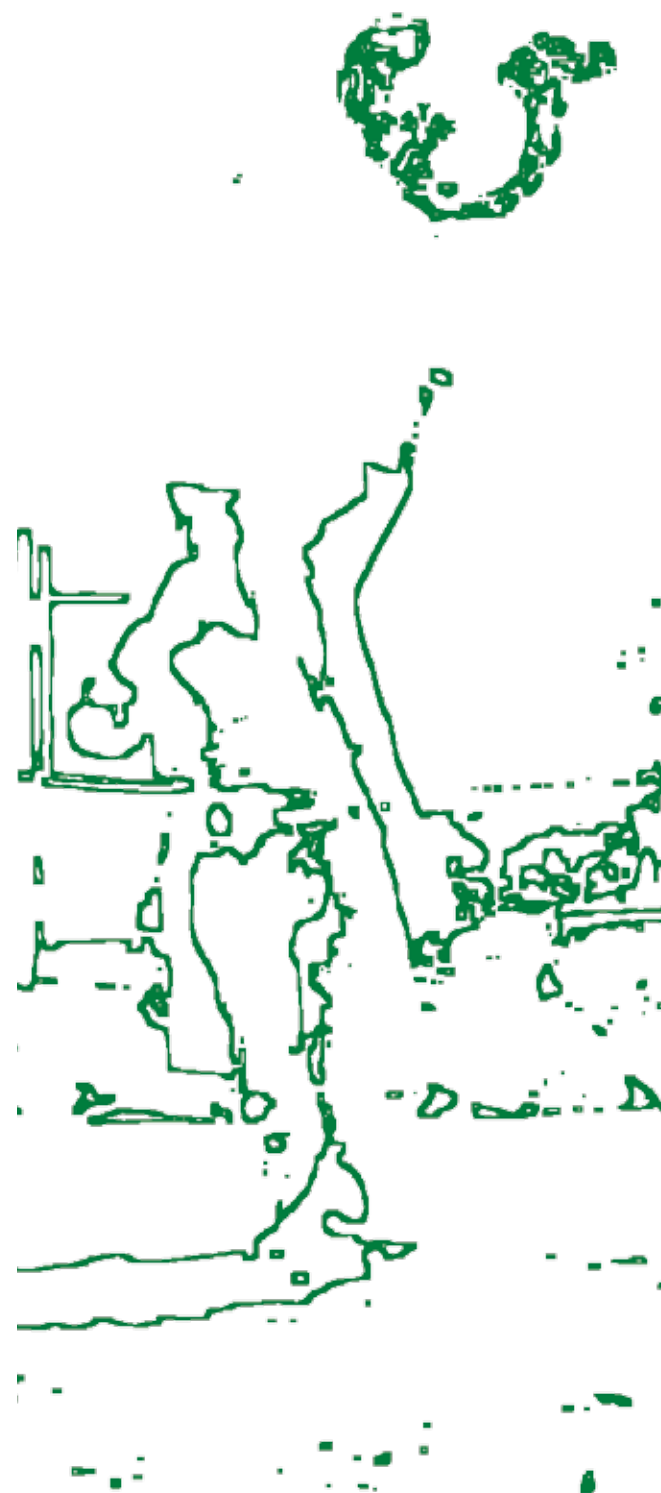
# EXPERIENCES IN ITALY

by Teatro Nucleo

## THE POLITICAL BACKGROUND

Since its foundation, Teatro Nucleo has always addressed its Open Spaces Theatre shows to the most marginal places and audiences, to the ones who are usually excluded from the mainstream cultural offer, taking this as its political and poetic mission. During years of experiences, we found out that the very particular kind of 'encounter' we look for is easier to find in those venues. From 1987 until 1989, Teatro Nucleo has been involved in a long 'tournèe' throughout the region of Castilla La Mancha, in Spain. The aim of this journey was to visit and fulfil with theatre the smaller villages of the region, where people had never seen a play before. The show 'Luci' was one of the first Open Spaces plays Teatro Nucleo had ever produced. This primary European experience of the company will define the path of the future days of Teatro Nucleo.

In 1989, Teatro Nucleo and other companies coming from all over Europe created the 'MIR CARAVAN' Project, that brought a parade of artists such as Slava Polunin (Licedei URSS), Footsbarn, OsmegoDnia, Divadlo na Provadzku, Ufa Fabrik (to quote some) to cross the Berlin Wall one month before its fall, in a long traveling festival from Leningrad to Paris. Since then, every ten years the most different traveling Open Spaces



companies, as we are, come together to repeat the experience and confront each other's, following the spirit that animated the first edition. In 2019, just before the pandemic, the 'Odyssee Karavane' took place: a group of more than 20 theatre companies that travelled from Avignon (France) to Plovdiv (Bulgaria), then European Capital of Culture, stopping and performing in many cities and villages. Teatro Nucleo is now the Italian representative of the CITI (International Centre for Traveling Theatre).

Drawing inspiration from those past experiences, in which political and social empowerment was the engine of the whole initiative, in 2020 'ERSA - Emilia-Romagna Scena Aperta' was born.

In these pandemic years, it became evident for the artists how meaningful and vital it is to meet the audience. People also found out that Art is something nobody can do without: during the long lockdowns we've all been facing, songs, books and movies have become our best friends, bringing us comfort. They became a weapon against isolation, loneliness, sadness.

We started to research how the distribution of the public cultural offer in our region, Emilia-Romagna, is made. The villages of interest are called 'small municipalities' due to their low population but still repre-

IN THESE PANDEMIC YEARS, IT BECAME EVIDENT FOR THE ARTISTS HOW MEANINGFUL AND VITAL IT IS TO MEET THE AUDIENCE.

PEOPLE ALSO FOUND OUT THAT ART IS SOMETHING NOBODY CAN DO WITHOUT: DURING THE LONG LOCKDOWNS WE'VE ALL BEEN FACING, SONGS, BOOKS AND MOVIES HAVE BECOME OUR BEST FRIENDS, BRINGING US COMFORT.

THEY BECAME A WEAPON AGAINST ISOLATION, LONELINESS, SADNESS.



senting the core of this territory, pearls of beauty hidden behind hills and corn fields where ancient wisdom and traditions are guarded. We asked ourselves if those areas were equipped enough to deal with these hard times. In the whole region there are 352 theatre venues: 193 are theatres and the remaining 77 are theatres of historical interest. The majority (122 – 63%) are distributed among the cities with more than 15,000 inhabitants. Despite 153 of these venues being public properties, 63% of them are run by private organisations, while 50 are managed by public entities. (2016 report by the Emilia-Romagna Region, Ater and the Observatory for the Performing Arts of the Region Emilia-Romagna - <https://spettacolo.emiliaromagna-creativa.it/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/teatri-geografia-tipologia-gestione-low-res.pdf>)

This precious document reveals that 250 small municipalities, with less than 15,000 inhabitants, don't have a theatre. They rarely have access to public cultural activities, since the regional funds designated to culture are concentrated in the higher populated areas of the region. We think that this extreme exclusion of political and social landscape should be worrisome, at least.

To face this situation, we conceived a network formed by the smaller villages in the region connected with the theatre companies on the same territory, to face the depopulation and isolation problems aroused in the pandemic time.

With the precious support of ANCI (Italian National Association for Small Municipalities), we started calling the mayors of each of the 250 villages, or whoever was available, to ask about the cultural context already existing in those venue and invite them to join the network by signing a 'document of support' and giving a symbolic 'membership fee'. In return we would live in their villages for 3-4 days, train 'en-plein-air' in the morning, give workshops for different generations, depending on the needs of the territory, and perform our two shows (that we created especially for this project) in the evenings: 'Eretica' by Marco Luciano, the younger director of Teatro Nucleo's new generation, and 'il Tempo del Canto' by Cora Herrendorf, founder of the company. We also filmed a documentary with interviews of the people we met on the street, the politicians and the families of the village.

After each call, we were surprised to discover that most of the mayors who enthusiastically welcomed our proposal, and were investing in it, were women. That's where the name of the

project comes from: we reclaimed what was previously one of the most common female names in our region, ERSA, whose letters form the acronym of Emilia-Romagna Scena Aperta (Emilia-Romagna Open Scenes). When filming our documentary, we invited the people to imagine: who is ERSA?

The ERSA network now includes 15 municipalities (in its first edition), a small commitment for the moment. However, this expresses the need of culture, and theatre, in these places, and this made us gamble on them again, hoping the network would grow bigger and bigger.

## REACTIONS

### Reaction of the Municipalities

In February 2021 Teatro Nucleo's staff undertook the adventure of E.R.S. A.

Coordinated by Marco Luciano and composed of the founders of the company Horacio Czer tok and Cora Herrendorf, we have worked in synergy with the new generation of actors and employees of the theatre enterprise.

First, we found a precious ally in ANCI Emilia-Romagna, the regional association of Small Municipalities, active at National level as well, whose role is to create links between these places, offering them different political approaches to culture, sociality, employment and other fields. This collaboration allowed us to reach all the 276 municipalities with less than 15,000 inhabitants to whom we could submit our proposal.

We sent a letter explaining the project to all the 276 villages, addressing it to the Mayors. In our idea they were the more suitable figures to fully understand the importance of this kind of action. Here is the text of the letter we sent:

*"Objectives and reasons of ERSA project*

*The project takes its cue from a study carried out by Teatro Nucleo using data published by the Regional Observatory for Performing Arts in Emilia-Romagna. This research highlights how the cultural offer of the territory and the financial resources destined to it are mainly spent in the capital cities and in the municipalities with more*



than 20,000 inhabitants, depriving a large part of the region and the population living there of the possibility of experiencing theatre.

This ERSA project of ours, which we could define as a pilot project for 2021, intends to create a network that directly connects smaller municipalities with National and International theatre groups and companies that conceive their shows and their theatrical practice in function of the meeting with these communities.

This is not only a matter of respect for a principle of equal citizenship (the inhabitants of these 'small' municipalities also pay taxes and would be entitled, like those who live in the city, to a decent cultural offer for transversality and quality of the proposal) but also because we are convinced that the cultural, social, and we could say anthropological value, that exist in the 'limes' territories of our region, are a wealth not to be dissipated. A cultural and human richness and, at the same time, an opportunity for us to improve our theatre-making, stimulated by certain types of meeting; and to invent best practices for

the re-connection between art and territories, would generate a process of cultural self-production that could trigger virtuous processes between public and private. This would be capable of creating economic incomes for small communities through the development of micro tourism, the activity of small traders, craftsmen and artisans and eno-gastronomic activities.

Another important reason that led us to conceive ERSA, sharing ideas with A.N.C.I. Emilia-Romagna, is the conviction of how necessary it is, in the middle of this health emergency, to foster social cohesion, overcome fear, and take care of the relationships that structure the identity of a community.

According to us, it is essential to create Moments capable of activating processes of collective intelligence and emotionality rather than Events that assist passively.

#### *The proposal*

Practically, adhering to the project ERSA, the municipality can choose 2/3 consecutive days between the middle of May and the end of September 2021 during which Teatro Nucleo will inhabit the territory, offering two open spaces performances, poetic actions and pedagogical moments addressed especially to young people through sessions of outdoor theatre workshops.

Moments of cultural 'barter' will be created, during which the group of Teatro Nucleo will collect stories, songs, traditions from the oldest inhabitants of the community. The whole project will then be told through a Video Documentary that will circulate on social channels (15K views per week) and on regional and national platforms, as well as being disseminated in Europe as part of several projects of which we are promoters.

All the actions will be carried out in strict compliance with current sanitary regulations. The actors and actresses of Teatro Nucleo will be tested and will work with all due precautions. Teatro Nucleo will provide a fruition plan relative to each show, considering the norms in force.

The Municipality will be co-producer of the whole project, not just the moment that it will host on its territory. You can adhere to the project by contributing with a symbolic expense and guaranteeing hospitality for the days of the stay for the group of actors, in addition to a simple electricity source for the light system. The rest of the expenses concerning organisation; technical equipment; expenses for inspections; pay and contribution of the actors; SIAE; pay and contribution to the teachers of the workshops; documentation; and video production will be met by Teatro Nucleo.

Aware of the many difficulties that the municipalities are facing, but convinced that an investment in sociality and citizenship is necessary for us to emerge from this pandemic with a more solid and fairer future perspective, both collective and individual, we hope to have aroused your interest."

More than 50 municipalities answered this letter asking for further information.

During the first phase of the project, we were able to verify the validity of our proposal 'in the field'.

Firstly, the conception, design and organisation of the network now includes the provinces of Ravenna, Forlì-Cesena, Ferrara, Piacenza, Modena, particularly in the territories of mountain communities, at the outskirts of the region.

Secondly, the internal organisation of each stage; after setting up graphic and communication materials, we could finally see that the initiative was well received by the administrations we met. They proved to be welcoming and willing to meet our needs in terms of stay, food, presence of specialised technicians and volunteers on site; identification of the places of performance and expression of their needs and research of the best conditions in which to set the experience.

Viewers, citizens, Councillors and Mayors who supported the initiative were involved as witnesses of the project, within our 'Diario di Bordo' and the documentary 'Who is ERSA?' to be released.

*'ERSA has long hair, shaped like Emilia-Romagna and she is the protector of my home!'*

Ilaria, 9 years old ERSA in Bobbio (PC) on 10/07/2021

This documentary includes opinions, sensations and poetic thoughts. It also features advice, doubts, interpretations of the nature of the project itself; curiosities and glimpses of the landscape of the visited places; and the thoughts of the administrations regarding the participation in a cultural network and the shows we presented. The affluence of the citizens (unaware spectators) to the performative moments allowed a real revaluation of the places of historical interest as well as of the peripheries of the cities. It put traders, hoteliers and restaurateurs in a position to receive indirect benefits.



The visibility of the individual stages in provincial newspapers and local press was good. It benefited from the joint efforts of our press office with the administrations themselves, who took the trouble to bring the audience to the project. We also had a good online following on newspapers and social media, exceeding 10.000 views in just over a month.

### Reactions of the audience

We have received the same feedback from the citizens, who have fed an increasingly larger audience at each stage, reaching a peak of 200 spectators per evening of different ages, ethnicities, gender and religious orientation. This happens thanks to the free access to the shows, guaranteed by the terms of the project and the contribution of the municipalities themselves.

Thanks to the experiences and stimuli given by the R.I.O.T.E. project, we've been able to avoid **some mistakes** that we found are common to every partner country:

**A** Forcing people to become your audience, participants to the shows, or to the interviews.

Project activities must be free and pushing people to take part doesn't make any sense. It's better to engage less people who enjoy staying with you. This welcoming sensation will attract other people more than we could ever do.

*'In the square of Borgonovo Val Tidone it has just rained, and the sun comes out again, strong and hot as always in summer. The 'welcoming table', where later the care-time will ensure everyone's safety, has been built. The actors and actresses are warming up and their voices fill the air. Some curious people start asking for information, what is going on in their 'rocca' (a military castle in the centre of the Garibaldi square). A moment after, a group of teenagers ensure their presence by shouting and jumping and wheeling on their bikes...'*

(ERSA tour log – 17/07/2021, Borgonovo Val Tidone)



## B Addressing all your attention to the inhabitants and audience.

When you offer a cultural activity in urban (open) spaces, there is always the risk that the audience feels invaded by the company and tries to fight and conquer their space again. The most courageous ones may put themselves in the middle of the attention and 'steal' the show's audience. It is always difficult to know how to manage this kind of situation, but if you have a clear respect of your job and of its aims, the others will feel it.

*'Here in Bobbio we can see different kinds of spectators. The Restless ones, who don't know if, where, when and how long to sit on the chairs (that we're still clearing). The generous ones, who want to leave some money for the project and for the company...it's no use to tell them we don't collect money from the audience because they already paid taxes. The very precise ones who want to fulfil the documents needed for Covid issues and carefully read all the privacy policy, creating an endless cue. The impatient ones, that complain about all the documents to fulfil. The curious ones, asking thousands of questions and then leaving. And the confused ones, who don't understand what's going on and ask for explanations, but especially a horde of children who answer by shouting out loud every question they hear...'*

(ERSA tour log – 10/07/2021, Bobbio)

## C Leaving rubbish (even small amounts) at the show venue.

The people who come to see an open spaces show in rural areas are the people living in the same place; they love it, or hate it, very much. In our workshops and performances, we always try to make the inhabitants see their villages, monuments and traditions in a different light, as places worthy to be lived in and visited, and able to host a range of events. To leave the venues clean only confirms our intentions.

Here is an example of a children workshop we've been doing in Terra del Sole:

### 'SPACES AND US

Urban theatre workshop for girls and boys aged 10 to 14 years

As part of the project ERSa Emilia Romagna Scena Aperta by Teatro Nucleo, we propose a theatre workshop for girls and boys of the duration of 2 h to discover the environment and urban spaces of Terra del Sole: elements of physical theatre and theatre games to rediscover the city and enhance the look the environment to the young people living there.'

This is what we did in practice, from our diary:

*"Around 10:40 am, we started a game with the boys and girls who took part in the workshop: let's draw a map of Terra del Sole!*

*A debate is opened about the story and the origin of the village, the things it has in common, and the differences, with ones nearby; the things they like and the things they don't like about it.*

*The purpose is not to draw a realistic map of the city, but rather to enrich it with visions and wishes that it inspires. Do you like the shape of your city? How would you change it?*

*At noon our map is ready, and the city also has its name: Canimifofu."*

## D Leave the place without establishing connections.

One of the principles that made the ERSa project work was to direct everyone's efforts toward the creation of links, connections and knowledge with the people we were meeting on the path. This simple but vital behaviour is considered as an extension of the open spaces play itself, and allowed the whole company to really become a part of the life of the municipality we were crossing. In each of them we were asking around for theatres, music schools, local associations, talking to the cook and the waiter in the restaurants, taking all the possible chances to have dialogues and exchange ideas.

Finally, we could make all this possible thanks to years of work with our actors and actresses; volunteers; families; employed; theatre students; photographers and technicians: we built the right team, action by action, involving them in R.I.O.T.E. 3 as well as in other activities over the years. This is the longer and more fragile job, requiring a lot of patience and a willingness to take risks.

## THE STYLE

For the ERSa project we structured a practice that had as its central point the relationship with the inhabitants, a relationship that was based on the encounter and the 'quality' of the

relationship between two communities: that of the inhabitants and that of the theatre artists who lived in the village for three days.

The company would arrive in the village on a Friday morning. The vans were unloaded, a part of the group took care of the children who were travelling with the group, another part of the group began to set up for the performance in the square. Others, armed with cameras began to film views and landscapes, to interview the inhabitants, and to talk with them about theatre:

*'What do they think? How long has it been since they've seen a show? How many years ago did the theatre here close?'*

The younger ones are distant: they don't remember that there was a theatre. About the art, they say, they don't understand anything and many of them have never seen a show. Most elderly regret it: it was the place of aggregation and education for those who could not go to school. But now it seems as if there is no need. At an intergenerational level, a sort of marked disinterest hovers, like a latent feeling of offense. Perhaps the theatre had betrayed them.

When did this happen? When did this heritage, which by its nature belongs to everyone, become something detached from daily life?

Has the systemization of the theatrical sector in which Italian politics has invested so much in the last 35 years really eradicated this need for theatre? Has it really been able to annihilate a thousand-year love story between the theatre and the community? We trusted that passion



would be rekindled in the practice of artistic presence, capable of transforming time and space.

But the spark also had to be lit in the hearts of the actors and actresses so that the full encounter could take place. And every village was different. The encounters were different, the people who welcomed us, the lodgings where we slept, what they offered us to eat. A delicate balance, made up of many small details. From these interviews, fairy tales and legends tied to the territory, popular songs and anecdotes about picturesque characters from the community often emerged.

An overflowing memory on which the actresses and actors fed greedily, and which allowed the group and the performances to penetrate more deeply the field in which they were researching.

On Friday afternoons, we practiced training in the square where we would perform the show in the evening. This attracted passers-by; they were curious to see 15 people performing exercises and singing in the hot summer hours. Some people got worried and brought water, others joined the training, participating actively or staying to observe and then asking questions about the reason for that practice, about what show we would present in the evening.

The breach had opened.

The choice of the shows to be presented in the 12 municipalities that have joined the ERSA network was not casual; on the contrary, it was the object of deep reflection on the part of the group. We were coming out of the first year of the pandemic and we were all moving in a society that was psychologically weakened, tense, distrustful and frightened. It wasn't just an issue of 'content', it wasn't just a question of the 'stories' we wanted to tell.

We had to invent an overall poetics of the operation. A way of crossing with care and gentleness the people, the hills, the villages that would welcome us, also from an organisational, technical and logistic point of view.

We chose to look for the essential, to travel with two shows adaptable to any architectural and urban context, with very few technical requirements. Staging that would not trigger the logic of the 'event', but capable of generating an unforgettable moment in the community, and the key to doing this was the actresses and actors.

## PERSPECTIVES

After the first ERSA tournée, and now that the third edition of the R.I.O.T.E. project is at its final stage, we would like to look at the future of these precious projects with a wider perspective, with our new eyes, fed by thousands of voyages of discovery, faithful that these thoughts will become bricks on which to build the social and political path of an inclusive, and joyful, European future.

Live theatre cannot be considered as a profit activity in financial terms. Its value is deeply different, and we had an overwhelming evidence of it during the pandemic. Our communities, be them rural or not, need moments to be lived collectively, rather than Events to take part in; only by taking off the 'economic-glasses' we all wear, will people really feel that they have access to these moments. The "sold tickets" policy doesn't work anymore, and in several nations the law recognise the happening of a show only by counting tickets, still. The theatre buildings aren't a safe place anymore, they don't even represent the local society meeting venue, as they used to. Meanwhile, we haven't been able to cover all the demanding municipalities with our ERSA project. We hadn't got enough time (unfortunately, summer never lasts more than three months) but we didn't have the proper funding for it neither. For the implementation of such actions, that evidently go in a non-commercial direction, we hope in a radical change of the politics that Europe promotes in the field of culture.

So we, the open spaces theatre company, find ourselves in the middle of a wide market, uncovered by the public demand.

**Teatro Nucleo** is an international Open Spaces Theatre Company founded in Buenos Aires in 1974, it has been settled in Ferrara since 1978. During the years Teatro Nucleo has always been working with actors and artists as well as with the many audiences met during the tournée all over the world. It has always had an eye on disadvantaged people, working with inmates in Ferrara's city jail, in what used to be the asylum of Ferrara, first headquarter of Teatro Nucleo in 1981, with disabled persons, students, children and the whole community of Pontelagoscuro, the district where it manages the Julio Cortázar Theatre. Here the company, financed by the national Ministry of Culture (MIC), organizes its theatre season "Magnifiche Utopie", its festival "TOTEM Scene Urbane", lead its "Theatre in Therapies" school, produces its open-spaces shows, hosts artists in residence with the support of the Emilia-Romagna region, implements european projects such as R.I.O.T.E. 3.





## CLOSING THOUGHTS

**What is theatre?** It's not (just) a career. It's not (just) a job. It's not (just) an art form. It's not even just a craft. It is a Way. It's a way of being in the world. It's a way of existing, of living. It's a way of thinking. About the world. About existence. About life. About self, family, and community. It's a way of solving problems, building bridges, realizing connections. Of tackling the place of the individual, and of tackling the group. The collective.

And because theatre is always a collective business, because it is created in collective and presented to the collective (even if presented by a single individual), it sets it in this respect in a pre-eminent place among the arts. This was the secret of ancient Greece. It is the secret of the mystery, of religion if you like. It is a medical device. It is a scalpel, a yantra, as Grotowski put it. And this makes it huge. It is much bigger (vastly bigger) than any one individual's place in the theatre. Because it's a system of existing, of operating in the world and in society.

This is why it is a mistake for theatre makers to think solely in terms of themselves, of pleasuring, gratifying, fulfilling or relating to only themselves in the theatre. And this is why endeavours of applied theatre, participatory theatre, community theatre and so on are so important. Especially now. Especially today, when isolation and distance are not merely products of technological advancements – oh, how much more simple was it when we could blame only 'modern society' and our screens for distancing us! –, but consequences of outer dangers, which threaten to tear the fabric of society apart.

Many elements of life and society, theatre among them, now have a second chance. A chance to redeem, reinvent, reconfigure themselves, and take their place which was forgotten, fulfill their role and their destiny. It is up to us, theatre people, people working with communities, people sensitive to those invisible yet so elemental parts of individual and society, to find what we will do with this device and how will we do it. In the pages that follow can read about endeavours of a group of people and organisations who try to tackle these questions in the frame of their work and the R.I.O.T.E. project, with the support of the Erasmus+ programme of the European Union. Their examples are not the only valid ones, but they can be a starting point, an inspiration, or a source for learning, a source for artistic diversification for those who wish to solve problems, build bridges and realise connections through theatre.



If you have questions, suggestions,  
thoughts you'd like to share, please contact us at  
**[rioteproject@gmail.com](mailto:rioteproject@gmail.com)**

Project Number: 2020-1-HU01-KA204-078826

Co-funded by the  
Erasmus+ Programme  
of the European Union

