

Aesthetics of creating an inclusive theater of actors with ASD as an intervention tool

(overview essay)

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Abstract: *The cardinal goal of the article is to point out the connection between the aesthetics of an inclusive theater performance and the degree of rehabilitation-formative work with an individual with ASD. We are based on the assumption and research that the more natural (healthier) the psychosomatic existence of an actor with ASD on stage as part of a theater production, the more aesthetically pleasing it is perceived by the audience. We focus on the theater therapy process, the basic means of which is bodily communication and bodily expression, which we consider to be the basis of an inclusive approach, which does not have to rely on words or the intellect as the primary communication channel. The following article aims to: Define the above-mentioned phenomena of para-theatre in such a way that their therapeutic-formative, rehabilitative and aesthetic significance is emphasized from the perspective of (not only) special education. Focus on the specifics of para-theatre work with actors with autism spectrum disorders from the point of view of two different approaches. It is closer to presenting a unique method of plastic-cognitive style of movement so that it can be a possible inspiration for paratheatre work with actors with disabilities in general.*

The article was also conceived on the basis of research within the project IGA_PdF_2023_021 Research on inclusion in individuals with special educational needs and problem behavior with regard to specific interventions.

Keywords: *specific theater, theater therapy, plastic-cognitive movement style, specific research, autism spectrum disorders, special educational intervention*

1 Introduction

Specific theatre, special theatre, inclusive theatre, integration theatre, theater therapy... these are terms that are often confused, often overused or, on the contrary, downplayed. The following post aims to:

- Define the above-mentioned paratheatre phenomena in such a way that their therapeutic-formative, rehabilitative and aesthetic significance is emphasized from the perspective of (not only) special education.
- To focus on the specifics of paratheatre work with actors with autism spectrum disorders (hereinafter ASD) from the point of view of two different approaches.
- To present closer a unique method of plastic-cognitive style of movement so that it can be a possible inspiration for paratheatre work with actors with otherness in general.

We look at these sub-goals from a perspective unique to the theater, although often neglected in paratheatre research and survey: from the viewer's point of view. Due to the reflection of the pandemic experience, we focus on the aesthetic benefit of audiovisual performances by actors with ASD, when we are interested in the extent to which it is possible to convey a specific artistic experience to the viewer in this form.

2 Specific theater and (versus) theater therapy

In the following part of the text, we will try to define elementary terms that are often misunderstood, are often confused even among the professional public, or are understood as contradicting each other. We believe that this fact does not stem from ignorance of the given issue, but rather from the nature of paratheatre work, which often stands on the border between art and therapy (cf. Valenta, 2011), and the specialists who deal with this work are recruited from two professionally different directions: special pedagogy and theater studies. It follows from the author's experience that these two professional camps are often subject to the mistaken impression of a kind of rivalry, competition and opposing directions. However, these tendencies often arise from differences in the terminology and theoretical bases of both disciplines, when the same paratheatrical phenomena are outwardly named by other, seemingly contradictory, terms.

However, if we examine the actual content and meaning of the given paratheatrical phenomena, we often come to the conclusion that both camps understand it similarly and only differ in their naming. To avoid the above, we will define some basic terms as we understand them for the given article:

A. B. Afonin, one of the prominent personalities in the field of specific theater, defines three types (2018):

- **Social theater**, which he understands as the most contemporary and up-to-date and theater that deals with social issues. The audience of social theater is encouraged to actively make social changes, and social theater presents them with topics on the one hand and solutions on the other. Social theater also includes work with marginalized social groups (e.g. homeless people).
- **Inclusive theater** is the one in which not only people with disabilities and healthy actors play, but also people with various specifics (seniors, people from other than theater professions). Here, the emphasis is mainly on socialization and integration goals.
- **A personal (specific) theater** is focused on an artistic effect, and the fulfillment of therapeutic-formative goals is a secondary effect. “Specific theater allows you to see the special side of a special person, their needs. ... The peculiarity of the ‘specific’ theater lies in a unique view of the world, a view that connects the archaic with the actuality of art” (Афонин, 2018, p. 36). We can also distinguish a specific theater from other forms according to its creation. If a production (performance) can do without actors with specific needs, it means that such a production does not belong to the field of specific (personal) theatre. (cf. Polínek, 2020)

Paratheatrical activity, which is the focus of this research, is a link between the two latter: in the productions both actors with otherness and intact ones (sometimes in the role of assistants) play in the productions, at the same time their dramaturgy is aimed at conveying the specific life experience of actors with otherness through the theater, which we understand as an extension of art as such. In this text, we use both the term inclusive and **specific theater**.

Theater therapy is perhaps an even more discussed concept. In the text, it is understood as a process that is present within the paratheatre staging work and which is sometimes an independent part of it, which manifests itself, for example, in the natural fulfillment of the actors’ basic needs (see Polínek, 2015 for details); at other times it is a very accentuated phenomenon that is purposefully channeled within the framework of para-theatrical work. An example of this second understanding of theater therapy can be the use of the method of plastic-cognitive style of movement, which is applied both as rehabilitation and as an artistic theatrical device (see below). Some authors speak of theater therapy as one of the expressive-formative or para-theatre disciplines (cf. Valenta, 2011, Müller, 2014, Růžička and Polínek, 2013). “However, realistically, theater therapy cannot exist without theatrical creation, or without theater as such. Clients of the theater therapy process usually do not consider their activity as therapy, but as an artistic or leisure activity” (Polínek, 2020, p. 47).

We can very well demonstrate the specificity of theater therapy by the phenomenon known as the paradox of theater therapeutic targeting, which was constituted on the basis of the examination of inclusive theater ensembles, or their goals (cf. Polínek in Müller, 2014; Polínek, 2020). This paradox states that:

- **The overall direction of the activity of specific theaters is aesthetic (artistic)**, where the basic goal is to create a theatrical performance – “to make theater”. Even the clients (actors) themselves often do not think of their theater activities as therapy at all. That is why this activity is: authentic, free from the “psychotherapeutic stigma” and strongly motivating.
- However, **the specific goals mentioned are clearly directed towards the areas of therapeutic-formative, integrative, educational**; concrete artistic goals are in the absolute minority. Clients subjectively very strongly perceive therapeutic processes during paratheatrical work: catharsis, the “as if” phenomenon, transference and countertransference in interaction with the audience, corrective emotional experience. – This experience clearly falls into the therapeutic-formative area.

From the above-described (seemingly contradictory) facts, we can formulate the following principle:

The artistic targeting of theater therapy fulfills and enhances its therapeutic and formative goals.

Paradox can thus be the key to understanding and connecting both perspectives and working in a specific theater. This connection of both therapeutic and artistic perspectives can lead to further improvement and development of everything that specific theater brings.

3 Basic principles of production work in inclusive theatre

These principles have been the subject of long-term research by the author, who is the head of an inclusive theater for actors with ASD. They are key to understanding the specificity and interdisciplinarity of inclusive theatre, and are also the source of a new artistic quality that an actor with an otherness can convey to the viewer based on his or her different, and normally difficult to transfer, life experience. We could formulate the given principles as follows:

- **The actor is the subject, not the object of creation** – a partnership and respectful approach is applied to the specifics of the given actor, which is not understood only as a “means” to fulfill aesthetic goals.

- **Content (theme) corresponding to the actor** – when the real life stories of individual protagonists can be processed, or their specific experience is offered to the audience in a symbolic, metaphorical form.
- Form and methods accentuating: **creativity, spontaneity, naturalness, diversity (not chaos) and improvisation, therapeutic (rehabilitation) effect.**

We can also define these principles on the basis of a case study, or analysis of an unstructured interview with an actor with Asperger's syndrome (for details, see Polínek, Lipovský, 2019; cf. Kalina, 2008):

- **Containment (the ability to safely express your feelings within the community)** – “And most importantly, I understood and believed that expressing emotions outwardly is right. For us people with ASD, it is difficult to judge how we should behave in a situation and whether we will behave well. I had a problem with that, so I preferred not to show up earlier... ... We are all different. It is important to function as a whole, but not to forget the individualities. E.g. you can't take the liberty with one as much as with the other.”
- **Attachment** – “It was challenging to realize that we are a collective and not individuals. This is important to us with PAS. We are very much individualists in terms of functioning in life and interests. This is another experience for me, that we can work together in the theater and we are not just next to each other. An important message of the performance is to show unity. The audience does not perceive individuals, but the performance as a whole. And the viewer doesn't notice that this one is autistic, this one is an actor, this one is a psychologist. In rehearsals, everyone has their own function, but during the performance we are all together.”
- **Taking responsibility for myself** – “When the director didn't meet all my demands, for example, he left out my solo scene, it hurt me at the time, but over time I understood it. ... When he didn't think about my needs, it forced me to start perceiving the collective.”
- **The importance of theatrical creation and its result (attachment, inclusivity)** – “For me, it is unimaginable that we would not perform. We are a theater, and the very development of the theater is related to the performances that come from our experiences. Without the performance, it would lose its meaning and motivation; I wouldn't have a chance to find out that I was able to play. I would lose the good feeling that I am able to do something that would have been unthinkable not long ago.”
- **The specifics of entering an acting role (aesthetic distance)** – One of the principles of staging work in the specific is theatrical distance. If the content of the production is based on the life experiences (story) of one of the actors, then the actor is fundamentally not portraying himself. Not only can he keep a safe distance, but he can get a different perspective on his story as part of the performance. “It was very important for me to see my story played by another actor. It was very moving

considering my past – bullying. Even though it didn't make me feel good, it connected me to the audience that cared. Even though I couldn't even act as a co-star in one scene, as hard as it was for me, it didn't affect my confidence as an actor. I just started to believe in myself in ModroDiv.” (Compare Polínek, Růžicka, 2020).

4 Method of cognitive-plastic movement

To understand the context of the given contribution, it is necessary to present in more detail the method of cognitive-plastic movement, the unique approach of Natalija Timofejevna Popova, one of the world's leading figures in the field of specific theatrical creation. Members of the inclusive theater group Tyátr ModroDiv¹ apply this method as the only ones in the Czech Republic to their work. An audiovisual recording of one of the performances of this theater, which was staged through the method of cognitive-plastic movement and meets the above-mentioned principles of a specific theater, is a key part of the investigation of audience perception (see below).

In addition, this method represents a paradox of theater therapeutic targeting, as it is both a rehabilitation and staging method.

The method is primarily based on deep work with the body, the principles of which are based on ontogenetic development and integrally connect the body schema with psychic experience and neurological development. The bodily level thus becomes the basic means of communication within the framework of theatrical expression. The level of physical communication is equally accessible to both intact actors and actors with the most different types of otherness, unlike, for example, verbal communication, which can be limiting for some types of cognitive disability. The mastery of expressive movement is closely connected with the development of symbolic activity as such and reflexive human behavior. Through the adoption of the symbolic meaning of the body, a person's “belonging” to the world is realized, which is a basic prerequisite for communication and knowledge as such.²

The principle of this system is to work with a movement stereotype, which is the first step to activate the creative process. In the form of constantly repeating movement exercises, the developmentally oldest muscle areas are activated, and later the perception of the partner on the stage develops. Most exercises are characterized by a slow pace of movement and static pauses – stiffness, immobilization, which allows to activate the lower levels of movement organization, reduce intellectual control and activate the bodily level of consciousness.

The process later continues with the development of dance movement and its use to create a theatrical performance within the framework of the so-called plastic

¹ www.modrodiv.cz

² Personal materials of N. T. Popova

special theatre. During the exercises, great emphasis is placed on increasing the awareness of the bodily experience. Each exercise is always followed by a short relaxation, in which the client is aware of the bodily sensations caused by the given exercise (cf. Popová, 2013; Polínek, Růžička, 2020).

5 Audience perception of the aesthetic level of audiovisual recordings of specific theater performances

The main part of the contribution introduces the audience to the pre-research of the perception of the aesthetic level of audiovisual recordings of inclusive performances by actors with ASD, the purpose of which is to investigate the premise that the higher the quality within the plastic-cognitive movement style of rehabilitation is, the higher is the aesthetics for the viewer.

Within the framework of the classical theater scene, the ordinary Czech spectator has a very limited opportunity to encounter productions of classical plastic theatre, which is an established theatrical approach abroad and which presupposes the spectator “experienced” in the perception of this theatrical medium.³

It is therefore a question of verifying the assumption that communication through bodily expression can be far more communicative, especially for individuals with an otherness, than verbal communication, in which people with disabilities often encounter limits both in terms of content and form. As part of the preliminary research, we therefore set the following questions:

Is the movement and symbolic style of the theater really informative for the (especially Czech) viewer?

Can it also have an overlap through an audiovisual recording?

Isn't theater based on verbal acting more expressive and aesthetic for the viewer?

The essence of the investigation was a comparison of the perception of recordings of two inclusive performances by two theater companies. The recordings had a similar footage; both productions were based on the actors' specific life experiences with ASD, and both plays featured actors with Asperger syndrome. The difference was in the theatrical means:

- **one production** was created on the basis of **cognitive-plastic movement** and the sharing of different life experiences was **metaphorical and symbolic**;
- **the other one** was based on **verbal acting**, which conveyed to the viewer **specific life episodes** of the protagonists – actors with ADS.

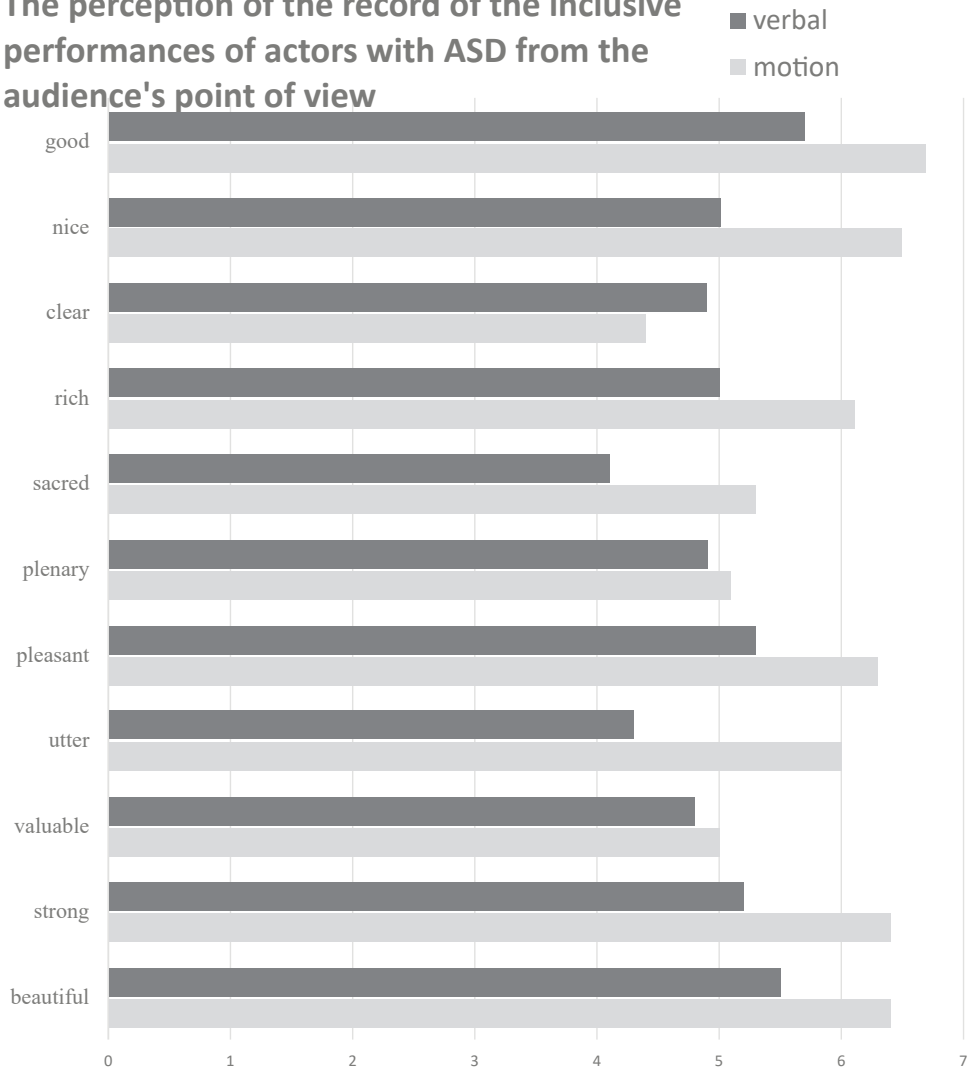
³ Far Eastern theater (e.g. the Chinese Peking Opera) also assumes an “educated spectator” in a similar way.

Due to the needs of the research, random sampling combined with the snowball method was chosen, where the basic set, which was equal to the sample, was all potential viewers in the Czech Republic. The research set consists of over 500 respondents, of which 40 were randomly selected for pre-research.

Data were collected through a modified Osgood's Semantic Differential, using which viewers rated both recordings. The data was then analyzed by the method of contrasts and comparisons and was expressed graphically:

Graph 1

The perception of the record of the inclusive performances of actors with ASD from the audience's point of view



From the preliminary results of the preliminary research, we can conclude:

- Both productions were evaluated positively by the audience globally. In a seven-point scale, when values 1, 2, 3 are an accentuation of the negative polarity of the given category, value 4 is neutral, and values 5, 6, 7 express a positive audience evaluation; viewers evaluated all categories positively, or no value was less than 4. **We can therefore state that the aesthetics of both theater performances are of a higher level.**
- Almost all categories were rated better by the audience in the case of a symbolic performance based on movement theatrical expression. When both the potency factor and the evaluation factor were almost 1.5 degrees higher in plastic theater than in verbal theater. From which it follows that **the movement and symbolic style of inclusive theater is generally much more appreciated by the audience than the verbal style.**
- However, the verbal performance is clearer for the audience (by half a degree) than the moving one, from which we can conclude that **both performances are sufficiently communicative at the rational-content level, even though the verbal theater is slightly clearer.**
- On the contrary, **in categories that focus more on experience and transcendence**, such as the concepts: beautiful, deep, strong, sacred, **the production based on the cognitive-plastic style of movement significantly dominates.**

6 Conclusion

These preliminary results indicate that the really high rehabilitation potential of the method of plastic-cognitive style of movement, which is proven by the researches of N. T. Popova for more than 30 years of research, is directly proportional to its aesthetic value. These results confirm the phenomenon of the paradox of theater therapeutic targeting and indicate the possibility of estimating the therapeutic-formative and rehabilitative effect of paratheatrical work based on its aesthetic level. A very interesting confirmation of the above is also the fact that the audience at the plastic performance very often expressed the need of a positive response outside the scope of the scale evaluation. These spontaneous reactions of the audience hardly occur in verbal theater.

In conclusion, we select some of the typical audience reactions to the recording of the plastic performance:

“I was fascinated by the show. It’s beautiful how many things, emotions, motivation, feelings are hidden in mere movement.”

“The theater was amazing, I had chills the whole time. It was great to be able to understand what was going on in this play.”

"I liked it very much. I was very interested in the whole concept, I like how the movement blurs the distinctions between people with autism and people without autism, intact. It's beautiful to watch, it exudes calmness and a certain confidence from all the actors."

"I really liked the show, I was very surprised that you can take the work of the body associated with the theater in this way and express so much emotion."

"I watched the show 3 times and I kept finding new and inspiring things here. Thank you for the wonderful experience and motivation."

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