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PLAYBACK THEATER AS THE PRACTICE OF COMMUNITY-BASED SOCIAL HEALING

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Abstract. *Community-based social healing as a holistic approach involves healing of traumatized individual experiences through constant support of the communal environment, as well as the formation of harmonious interpersonal interaction through understanding and acceptance of the experiences of others. Playback Theater, with its ability to create a liminal space that mixes the individual and the collective dimensions in the specific experience of fused reality and imaginarity, is one the ways to achieve this goal. We are not talking about the exclusiveness of this method, but rather about concretizing a quite abstract adjustment of community-based social healing through an approach that is already developed at the practical and conceptual levels.*

War, in all its destructive pervasiveness, is a collective trauma in need of healing. This means the need for the healing not just of a multitude of individual traumas, but also for healing the togetherness of a community. After all, it is the main means and goal of overcoming trauma, even if we consider the latter purely in an individual dimension. On the one hand, the collective nature of trauma can look like an abstraction, even a pejorative one— a generalization of a multiplicity of personal and often painfully unrelated stories with common causes or similar features. But this is precisely the basis of this trauma. It is a violation of togetherness: the usual way of everyday collective existence and the basic mutual understanding and self-identity due to it. At the individual level, the violation of the very way of existence is different — loss of loved ones, forced resettlement, mobilization, etc. In response to this, the holistic adjustment of community-based social healing involves the construction of a new community, or the maintenance and reconstruction of an old one.

In both cases, the main problem is the inability to grasp the experience and inner state of the other person, and therefore understand and accept it fully. This problem — the impenetrability, and in particular the unpredictability, of the other — is fundamental to human interaction. The answer to it, although always insufficient, is cultural development in general: the formation and historical complication of communicative practices and tools, norms and values, socio-political institutions, etc. In such conditions as the war, in addition to the existential threat, this fundamental problem is also radicalized. After all, the difference in experiences increases, in their totality they are even worse exposed by the usual means of expression, and the misunderstanding becomes even more conflictual and traumatic.

The purpose of the article is to analyze the Playback Theater as a practical application of community-based social healing and to concretize the latter through it.

The idea of Playback Theater (PbT) — "paradoxically simple and complex, common and unique, ancient and yet totally contemporary form of performance" [4] — emerged from Jonathan Fox's research into experimental post-modern theatrical forms, pre-modern oral communicative practices and the therapeutic method of psychodrama. However, the basic principles and structure of this performative practice, which were formed by "The original Playback Theater Company" (created by Fox and J. Salas in 1975), go beyond these inspiring areas as something much simpler and more complex at the same time.

The event of PbT is a time-limited repetition of a clear pattern: the conductor offers to tell a personal story, each person in the audience has the opportunity to become a storyteller, after this the conductor clarifies the details of the story and a team of actors and musician improvisationally play the told story back to the teller and audience. "As such, Playback Theater can be conceived as a series of storytelling performances interspersed with a series of dramatic enactments, within a ritual framework" [2]. However, the apparent simplicity of this basic structure carries many different dimensions, which are synthesized in a special way of interpersonal interaction, which is one of the most vivid examples of community-based social healing.

According to J. Fox, the key feature of PbT is that it is simultaneously intimate and communal. Theatrical-ritual "form" of performance combines individual "content" and common "context". In other words, it can be expressed thanks to the dimensions of the PbT event, drawn by H. Dauber [1]. Individual experience has the opportunity to enter the objective dimension, to manifest itself in the oral performance of the narrator himself and its in-embodiment by the playback performers. On the other hand, the objective dimension of everyday life — social roles, rules and norms — is deconstructed in the ritual interaction that forms and structures the "collective-subjective" dimension of mutual transformation — liminal space. The concept of liminality arose initially to denote the central phase of the rite of passage, in which the previous condition of the person or the community is already gone but the new one is not constructed yet. Nowadays this term doesn't have only ritual connotations and is applied in general to the saturated and opaque inbetweeness of individual or social disintegration and reintegration.

The playback performers, like a priest in a premodern ritual, lead an audience of narrators-listeners through such liminal space and returns them renewed, defined by a shared narrative, healed by common lived experience. In this case, a clear and constantly repeating structure of the event is important — "readily understood by new audience members and providing continuity to those who have come before" [5]. Moreover, it is a security framework that simultaneously separates the PbT event from everyday life and normalizes the transformative process at the level of minimal predictability.

One of the basic dimensions of the liminal space of PbT is going beyond the usual social hierarchies — similar to the ritualism of medieval carnivals, in which differences were overcome and accepted roles were rejected in temporary equal access to full self-expression. In contrast to the carnivalesque ecstatic explosion, PbT appeals to equal access to the realization of another basic human need — to tell one's story publicly and to be heard, recognized, and accepted. This opportunity is extremely important because telling one's story is performing and constructing oneself — a process in which the audience is not a passive witness, but an active accomplice. "The stories told in PBT are both the product and the "end" of an experience, but also the "beginning" of a journey towards understanding"[7].

However, the storyteller's experience is ambivalent: the flip side of discovering one's own agency, asserting oneself from an unusual active position is always "taking a risk", an experience of vulnerability. Therefore, the playback performers need to form and ritually maintain a special safe space, in which an empathetic relationship is formed in contrast to condemnation and prejudice.

An interesting aspect in this matter is the specific inclusion of the main theatrical attribute — the stage — in the PbT event. The border between the stage and the audience in the classical theater form is the border between the active and passive position, the significant and the insignificant. In PbT, this border becomes permeable: there is a constant change of positions, however, the specific staging of the story, the formation of an aesthetic (sensitive in a broad sense) distance retains its classic function of enhancing the significance of the story and the narrator who defines himself through it.

Another dimension of liminality — the state between, in the middle, everywhere and nowhere — is the spectacle of PbT, quite unusual for classical theatrical forms, but very close to ritual. Participants are in "completely and simultaneously to two different and autonomous worlds: the image of reality and the reality of the image" [A. Boal in 1]. Real personal experience goes beyond oneself, expands in playing back, acquires implicit meanings and commonly understood forms, is revealed in an image that is distanced from the usual perception of reality. However, the story was told/heard first - it supports the reality of the image, and emphasizes the relationship to the life of another. Moreover, the PbT event is an expression of multiple stories. Listeners-spectators have already been or can potentially become narrators, who put their undoubtedly real experience in the center of image-producing, and expose their existence to others directly by voice and through the playback medium. To undermine the reality of another's experience is to deny the significance of one's own.

This dimension is decisive for understanding PbT as a practice of community-based social healing. Briefly, it can be defined as "ability to imagine experiences of the 'other'... and reality of our interdependence" [6]. The central role here is played by the ability of the actors to grasp different levels of the story told — the emotional, interpersonal, social, and universal level of archetypes — and combine them in a performative act. "Performers of a teller's story disengage the story from its lived-experience, find its center, dismantle its pre-reflective underpinnings, re-project it in mythology, metaphor, symbol, and reassemble it for presentation"[4]. It is about the ability to reflect the common in the emotional intensity and concreteness of the personal, and therefore to open it for perception and acceptance by others. On the other hand, to integrate the personal into a common narrative, to give it significance. In other words: to subjectivize the objective and vice versa.

In addition, although the liminality outlined above presupposes the temporary ritual exclusion of participants from the social context or at least an aesthetic distancing from it, the sensitive and resonant role of the playback performer must always take it into account. PbT always remains a social event, inscribed in the context of the here-and-now.

Of course, the enacted story, witnessed by listeners-spectators, does not become experience of reality that will be common with narrator's one. However, this is an opportunity to feel it in the heightened register, not rational perception. Moreover, it becomes a common experience of the imaginary, which is revealed to the narrator in the same played form — everyone becomes equal in front of her in a common imaginary-real space.

Actually, this shared experience should be considered as the healing of the community in the PbT event. After all, a community is not just a group of people united by a compact area of residence, a type of employment or common problems. First of all it is a feeling of togetherness - the common meaning and significance of the

common. In his studies of the transformative function of ritual, V. Turner uses the Latin word communitas to denote this simultaneously imaginary and practical interpersonal relationship, which is formed in the liminal space and constitutes everyday life.

For an already existing community, the use of PbT practices is a way to expand the boundaries and dimensions of everyday interaction, as well as to resolve misunderstandings and conflict situations. Actually, according to its founders, PbT is ideally considered as a "theatre of neighbors" — that is formed within the community and has a permanent supporting effect on it. However, in the current conditions, the primary creative ability of PbT is more important: thanks to external but sensitive "intervention" to provide an opportunity for understanding, sympathy, and a special common experience — to stimulate the transformation of a group of people, that have different lived experience, into a supporting community.

A vivid example of the application of PbT practices as a means of community-based social healing in the Ukrainian context is the project "Contact2U", which is conducted by the NGO "Power of the Future" for the integration of internally displaced persons in the Dnipro city. This project applies different activities from lectures to drum circles, but PbT is its core transformative practice and the general model for supporting of the community and its sustain healing impact on the individuals.

Conclusion. Community-based social healing as a holistic approach involves healing of traumatized individual experiences through constant support of the communal environment, as well as the formation of harmonious interpersonal interaction through understanding and acceptance of the experiences of others. PbT, with its ability to create a liminal space that mixes the individual and the collective in the specific experience of fused reality and imaginarity, is one the ways to achieve this goal. We are not talking about the exclusiveness of this method, but rather about concretizing a quite abstract adjustment of community-based social healing through an approach that is already developed at the practical and conceptual levels.

On the one hand, PbT provides an opportunity for expressing, performing and reforming personal history in a shared context, which ensures individual self-identity. On the other hand, the community gets the opportunity to live a special ritual experience of unity and acceptance of differences outside of everyday rules and roles. It gives significance to common existence and weaves personal stories into a shared narrative.

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