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## Sensitive Research Areas in Theatre and Disability

*Theatre – a play in which everyone is a participant;  
a participant and a spectator*

Max Herrmann

*Human life occurs only once, and the reason we cannot determine which of our decisions are good and which bad is that in a given situation we can make only one decision*

Milan Kundera

### ABSTRACT

The article raises the issue of research in artistic expression and creativity used in therapy. Such research requires an interdisciplinary approach combining the humanities (art studies) and the social studies (pedagogy, psychology, sociology), which causes issues with implementing a consistent research perspective. The author points out a few issues, called “sensitive areas”, and analyses them in relation to the disabled people theatre. These are: the presentation status of such groups, the dangers of subjectivism or the necessity of implementing the qualitative research model, the methods of research documentation.

### Keywords:

qualitative research, ethnographic research, disabled people theatre, performance, applied theatre, disability, theatre

## INTRODUCTION

The research in artistic expression within its educational, personal-growth, therapeutic or general psychosocial context may cause a variety of not only methodo-

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logical issues but also ontological and epistemological ones. Researching a work of art (an artistic effect), one has to be aware that it is both:

- 1) a work on its own;
- 2) an effect of ones actions (artistic, creative, therapeutic, educational, etc.), moreover, by some actions that work of art is seen by;
- 3) the recipients who are the subjects of its influence.

In each and every one of these stages we face different issues, from the question about the author of the work, through the methods thanks to which that work exists, to the questions about its reception.

Solving these issues requires an interdisciplinary approach combining the humanities (art sciences) and social sciences (pedagogy, psychology, sociology). On the one hand, it opens up new methodological perspectives that arose from different disciplines, on the other hand though, it requires tremendous caution beginning with adopted research paradigms. When we conduct research in the fields of pedagogy and psychology, pedagogy and sociology, we stay within these science fields; on the contrary, the research of artistic expression in its social, psychological and pedagogical contexts puts the researcher between the fields of humanities and social sciences, which greatly hinders the adaptation of a consistent research perspective.

Even the theatre academics struggle with this issue as performance studies, mostly in the Unites States, are becoming more and more independent from theatre studies. Christopher Balme claims that issues with setting research objectives may be the consequence of that. On the other hand, he writes: “Theater has become a key medium, and theater science becomes an ideal discipline to mediate the development of interdisciplinary research” (Balme, 2002, p. 97). A similar opinion is represented by Erica Fischer-Lichte (2012) who observes a lot of issues at the meeting of theatre science and other sciences that are essential to the development of theatre studies. In case of the nature of these problems, the researcher decides “whether and to what extent [...] reach the state of research of other disciplines” (Fischer-Lichte, 2012, p. 185). However, analysing the theatre performance as a cultural one justifies the need of requiring information from other sciences to conduct research. This makes the cooperation of, *inter alia*, pedagogues and theatre science specialists important. “In a similar case, cooperation with teatrology should also be recommended to other disciplines. If we do not pay enough attention to a given phenomenon as a performance, we risk losing sight of its important dimensions. The field of research of various cultural representations is therefore a paradigm for interdisciplinary research” (Fischer-Lichte, 2012, p. 185).

In this article, I shall focus on a few issues which I called “sensitive areas” in research combining pedagogy and theatre science that concern disabled people. Some of them are:

- 1) The presentation status of such groups. There is a problem in answering a question: is it an artistic or non-artistic event (Fischer-Lichte, 2012, Shusterman, 2001)? Categorising it as either a theatrical performance/stage production or a cultural performance is impossible (*cultural performance*, see: Singer, 1959; *applied theatre*, see: Schechner, 2006). As a consequence, it is connected with applying certain research methodology.
- 2) The danger of subjectivity or the necessity of applying the model of quality research. There is also an issue of unpredictability of effects of the theatrical performances in both the recipients and performers. Therefore, there are problems of the meanings of the performances.
- 3) The methods of research documentation and connected issues of perception, memory, and verbalization (Fischer-Lichte, 2012); applying visual materials (Banks, 2009) and methods of ethnographic research and observation (Angrosino, 2015).

## **THE FIRST AREA: THE PRESENTATION STATUS OF DISABLED PEOPLE THEATRE**

Defining the presentation status of theatre groups created by people with disability is one of the key issues in art research. The representatives of social studies, mostly educationalists, very often simplify it, assuming that by looking at a performance that is happening in a different space divided into the stage and the audience, looking at people dressed in costumes and using props, moving to the sound of music and using words, they make an artistic performance – a theatre performance. However, this may not be true.

When in the 1950s Milton Singer introduced the notion of *cultural performance*, he used it to describe events such as weddings, religious holidays, dances, concerts, recitations and performances, including drama theatre performances which he saw as a specific type of cultural performances. Their goal is to define their own culture and creating their image (Singer, 1959, 1972; Tedlock, 2009).

In theatre performances the actor is serving the art. The actor uses their body, their appearance, their skills, e.g., cognitive that are connected with memorising the lines or emotional side in portraying a person. The actor submits all to their

creation: the preparation process, rehearsals and public presentation all depend on the planned artistic effect. In such case it is difficult to see it as education or therapy, when relations are reversed. It is the skills of disabled actor that the means of expression, topic, space or organisation depend on.

The artistic effects are a part of the culture created by people including an element of it that could be called disabled people culture, such as Deaf Culture, defined by Barbara Kannapell as “a set of learned behaviors and perceptions that shape the values and norms of deaf people based on their shared or common experiences” (*What is Deaf Culture?*). This begs a question if the research subject is the artistic effect or searching the truth of man through an analysis of his products? Therefore, the problem could be simplified to a question: is my research subject an artistic or non-artistic performance? This notion is connected with a differentiation between performative performances and non-performative ones, which J. Wachowski (2011) writes about. He puts theatre within the non-performative performance as stage activities do not cause real effects in recipients (Wachowski, 2011, pp. 117–119). How could we separate ones from the others? If „in all cases, it is about performances that have one thing in common: their starting point and approach are the co-presence of performers and viewers, which does not lead to the creation of any permanent artefact”? (Fischer-Lichte, 2012, p. 169).

Richard Shusterman (2001) suggests that “dramatisation” as a criterion, in his opinion, is an essential feature of art. However, everyday actions are also dramatized, as it is during sports, political or religious events. Moreover, the disappearance of boundaries between everyday life and artistic objects is a feature of contemporary actions. On the one hand, the artists are trying to make the performances feel more like everyday life; on the other hand, non-artists use esthetical and theatrical methods (see: Balme, 2002, pp. 93–97).

E. Fischer-Lichte suggests a different solution: “Without any major problems, we will set an appropriate boundary between them if only the classified performances take place within specific institutions. We regard artistic performance as artistic if it takes place within the framework of an art institution, but we treat it as non-artistic, when it was created within institutions typical for politics, sports, the sphere of law or religion” (Fischer-Lichte, 2012, p. 170). The institutional criterion seems very convenient, however it may not always work. Applying it would mean that only the performances that are made in, e.g., cultural centres are artistic, and the ones made in nursing homes are non-artistic, solely on the basis on location. On the other hand, this criterion may be logical. My yearlong observations of theatrical actions of people with disability confirm the difference in artistic quality between the performances made in different locations with the ones made in or

by cultural centres being of better quality. The difference is caused, surely, by the difference of work in these locations, but also by different goals of actions. The goals are not always artistic, but very often therapeutic.

Here we come closer to one more criterion that could become useful – the goal of the performances. Why is a given group – directors, actors, therapists, social workers, etc. – making the performance? In artistic performance the goal is to cause an aesthetic experience, defined as a state different from everyday life, usually pleasant (but not always), state of specific emotions, sometimes resulting in emotional reactions such as crying, smiling, motion. It can be present with a feeling of unity with actors or co-participation (even co-creation, just because of the presence), even community bonding. This state is usually as long as the performance, sometimes a little bit longer (Fischer-Lichte, 2012, p. 63). In other forms of theatre or paratheatrical expressions which could be classified as *cultural performance*, the aesthetic experience is also present but only as means to reach other goals that exceed the time of the performance, usually connected with a long change, personality changes, social attitudes in both recipients and actors. “However, it is difficult to achieve this goal only by exceeding specific content. It is also necessary to have some aesthetics [...] to disregard the aesthetic dimension of these projects is inappropriate and even impossible to analyze them in full” (Fischer-Lichte, 2012, p. 174). Therefore, it is difficult to find the answer to the question where the border between an artistic and non-artistic performance is. It is impossible to find any general rules that allow such distinction.

Assuming the perspective of non-artistic actions, we will follow the footsteps of, e.g., C. Geertz (2005) and performative ethnography (see: Alexander, 2009, pp. 581–622; Carlson, 2007, pp. 35–61), losing a very important element of the performance that is its artistic side. On the other hand, focusing on the artistic actions, one can not only lose the social context, but also omit a very important message which needed to be expressed through art and which caused change in people or in the world (Finley, 2009, pp. 57–79).

## **THE SECOND AREA: THE UNIQUENESS OF THE PERFORMANCE AND THE DANGERS OF SUBJECTIVISM**

The second sensitive area in theatre studies and disability is the result of the nature of theatre and the uniqueness of the performance. Even if recorded, it is not a general image of a performance, but only a record of one presentation, which would not be identical in different conditions. A factor determining this unique-

ness (transience) is psychophysical condition of the actors. In short, there are no two identical performances. Therefore, analysing the performances I generalise and assume that even though performed in different conditions, the performances are similar to each other.

“Analyzing texts or images, we are situated in front of the object of research. However, during the analysis of the performance, we are an element of this process, which we simultaneously analyze. We are involved in it and by our behavior we influence its shape. The participant of the performance cannot take the position of an outside observer. Therefore, the analysis is always subjective in part” (Fischer-Lichte, 2012, p. 68). This situation is very similar to the research through participant-observation, even if the participation is only intellectual, not physical (see: Cichocki, Jędrkiewicz, & Zydel, 2012, pp. 212–214). Michael Angrosino writes, “the ethnographer should become as much as possible a subjective *participant* in the life of the people he examines and an objective *observer* of this life” (2015, p. 45), then this criteria in theatre research, mostly the objectivism part, become incredibly difficult to meet. Even though we can use the script of the performance (if it exists) and know the sequence of the actions (scenes), it is impossible to predict the reactions of the audience, which consequently influences the relationship between the actors and the recipients. It is true for all types of performances, not only the ones that are focused on audience participation. “In the final analysis, the performance is the work of all its participants. No individual or group can fully plan, direct its course and control it. It escapes any attempts at domination by the individual. [...] The presentation is the result of the commitment of all participants” (Fischer-Lichte, 2012, p. 39). In such cases the participating observant becomes a friend who conducts research but cannot control its elements and accepts “going with the flow” (Angrosino, 2015, pp. 48–49).

Ethnographic methods that are very useful in cultural performance research were used already in 1980s. It is believed that they were not used enough due to, e.g., lack of competence of theatre academics. E. Fisher-Lichte suggests applying methods that are used in social research for searching the answers to the issues concerning the influence of the performance or audience preferences; she stresses the importance of, e.g., interviews in research in mentality and behaviour changes caused by participation in a performance (Fischer-Lichte, 2012, pp. 175–176).

The difference between theatre research and typical ethnographic one is about reading and creating meanings during participation in a performance. The model in which the creator of the performance creates meanings to be read passively by the audience and presents the meanings created earlier is not appropriate in theatre studies. Therefore we differentiate in theatre studies staging meaning as “structure

of aesthetically organized signs” (Balme, 2002, p. 111) and performance which “exists as a scenic product or as a scenic process only in the subjective impressions, opinions, ideas of the recipients and producers” (Schälzky, 1980, p. 9; see also: Fischer-Lichte, 2008, pp. 42–55). Performance is unique, but as a research subject it should be “interpreted not only in terms of aesthetics, but – because in the case of any theatrical performance it is a very complex interaction system – also in sociological and possibly psychological terms” (Balme, 2002, p. 111). Furthermore, we know that the process of performance perception is not identical in every recipient as every person creates their own meanings and fictional worlds.

If the staging is analysed, we can focus on fixed features, e.g., in repertory theatres. However, the performances made by theatre groups consisting of people with disability, often categorised as therapeutic (school, prison theatre), are more similar to cultural performances. They are often called “applied theatre” assuming that, apart from visual experience, the objective is to transform the audience. In this kind of theatre every member of the audience “creates meanings themselves, using a system of references specific to themselves and using the experiences that he/she has gained during the performance” (Fischer-Lichte, 2012, p. 179). The source of meaning is naturally the visual experience.

The physical appearance of an actor, their corporeality, physiognomy, including psychological features such as mental abilities, is one of the most important means of artistic (theatrical) expression. Visible disability of an artist acting in front of a live audience creates a space for important questions about the ontological status of the performance. Therefore, by assuming the nature of the event, performance, therapy or a form of demonstration, the audience interprets the event in a predefined way. Due to this, different meanings and different interpretations of the seen event are created. This interpretation is very often wider than just aesthetics and combines the social issues, even if this is not the authors’ will. Therefore the authors of theatrical and paratheatrical events with disabled people intentionally inform (or not) the audience about the type of disability or the nature of the group. Moreover, people taking part in these events not always call themselves artists (actors), which may be seen as a reflection of their job attitude and objectives. Due to all these reasons, understanding of an event, which relies on reading the signs and giving them meanings, depends on the relations between three groups of factors:

- 1) the objectives of the theatre group (artistic, social, therapeutic), which is often decided not only by the people on stage,

- 2) the recipient's awareness of the type of the group, their objectives and disability,
- 3) the attitude of the disabled creators, for whom subjectively the actions may not be consistent with the objectives.

### **THE THIRD AREA: THE METHODS OF RESEARCH DOCUMENTATION, ISSUES WITH PERCEPTION AND MEMORY**

The third of the sensitive areas is concerned with the problems with performance documentation and, relating to that, issues with perception and memory. Even though the performance is unique, the researchers need different forms of recording and materialisation of observed performance. Ethnographers point to the necessity of keeping notes during observation, adding interviews and, if needed, analysing existing data (Angrosino, 2015). No matter what is used, the analysis of the performance is mostly based on the observer's memory which is contaminated by the meanings assigned during the performance. Due to the fact that memory is led by attentiveness, it is impossible to receive all information (stimuli) equally if a person attends and observes the performance simultaneously. The nature of human perceptiveness, led by attentiveness, causes different situations, both stage and non-stage (e.g., audience behaviour or subjective feelings), to be chosen and memorised. Therefore, awareness that plenty of elements of the performance are omitted and forgotten, influencing the observer's interpretation of the performance, is needed.

Naturally, the research objective should lead the attentiveness, however the course of a performance is difficult to plan and subsequently it is impossible to predict which element to focus on. Psychologists ensure that people usually focus on the most meaningful element, therefore even the most detailed notes, photographs and videos are subjective. The following are usually helpful:

- multiple seeing of a performance,
- creating so called 'memories log', in which a person writes down the changes in their own perception or audience reactions to the performance,
- making notes (the ones made during the first performance are, however, not useful; making notes on its own is connected with choosing the elements of a performance),
- video (if not planned may cause the same issues as making notes); all in all, videos and photographs help to capture and notice the details that may be



useful during analysis. Watching the videos multiple times may lead to the analysis of the recording, not the performance itself (Fischer-Lichte, 2012, pp. 69–70).

Theatre academics suggest other sources for performance analysis: reviews, audience comments, opinion of the experts, theatre programs or even the director's copies (Balme, 2002, pp. 114–119). E. Fischer-Lichte (2012, pp. 69–70) notices a difference in using these materials; they are the basis of documentation analysis, for the theatre performance researcher, however, they should only help refreshing the memory and recalling the memories of the performance.

## CONCLUSION

The aforementioned “sensitive areas” should be taken into consideration during the research of:

- similar events with inconclusive artistic status, e.g., school theatre research; and
- artistic expression of the disabled people, which is more and more often conducted by educationalists.

The need of further methodological reflection over these types of research is becoming one of the most urgent in the scientific community and practitioners, especially those who use artistic activities in therapy, rehabilitation, or education. It concerns mostly people conducting art therapy, music therapy, bibliotherapy, etc.

On the other hand, the theatre community itself seems to begin to notice the possibilities of cooperation with scientists from other fields. It is one of the still not enough fulfilled demands of bigger interdisciplinarity, or in Wojciech Dudzik's (2002, p. 236) words, “broadening the contexts”. Scarce studies on the people with disability theatre in Poland are contaminated by cultural perspective (theatre), main issue of which is the lack of knowledge about the disability leading to the studies being incomplete, or by pedagogical perspective which lacks the tools to describe the performances. Sławomir Świontek (2003, pp. 77–78) wrote about similar problems in the theatre studies: theatre stays in “isolation” and “stopped looking around, losing understanding of not only the novelties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century science and humanities, but also forgetting about the essentials in theatre syncretism that should inspire the researcher to broadening their horizons”. The educa-

tionalists fault lies in, however, general neglect of aesthetical education practice and research. The art research in its educational context would help to create more appropriate, maybe even auctorial, research methods.

I would like to cite the words of Jerzy Grotowski (2012, pp. 579, 580), a man whose actions may be the cause of the issues in art and social studies, for all the incurable optimists who believe that one day a universal method will be created: “In art we will never be able to create specific definitions and we should not look for them. [...] The only real embeddedness is caused by the way of living: how you live is where and how you are embedded”.

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