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/ RESEARCH-ARTISTIC PRACTICES

Provocateurs of Experiences, Practitioners of Traps

Dorota Ogrodzka

Abstract

This article is a self-analytical description of the work of the Laboratorium Teatralno-Społeczne (Social Theatre Laboratory), an artistic collective based in Warsaw. It mainly focuses on the Theatre's audience/participant involvement strategies and their ways of constructing theatre experiences and telling stories in a participatory style. The author discusses examples of performances, performative actions, ways of creating the dramaturgy and the type of relationships that performers establish with the audience in the work of the Laboratorium Teatralno-Społeczne collective. At the same time, she examines what kinds of challenges are faced by groups and artists who declare their willingness to create participatory art. She seeks to propose interpretative notions for naming and describing these challenges.

Keywords: participatory art; performance; experience; trap; collective

When the Laboratorium Teatralno-Społeczne (Social Theatre Laboratory) was founded in Warsaw's Praga district in January 2016, we inhabited a different socio-political galaxy. That was a mere six years ago but revisiting that time in our minds is like the work of an archaeologist or attempts to dust off pictures that seem almost unreal.

Six years ago we lived in a pre-pandemic world before the most sweeping expansion of conservative forces in the Polish government. At the time no one could have predicted the assassination of the Mayor of Gdańsk Paweł Adamowicz at the Great Orchestra of Christmas Charity's event. The climax of Polish women's strikes and the intense struggle for reproductive and civil rights may have been foreseeable, but all that was yet to come. And even though the migration crisis was becoming a reality, full of pain and hardship and giving rise to ethical and geopolitical dilemmas, this was long before the humanitarian crisis that would engulf Poland's Eastern border. We lived on another planet socially, politically and culturally.

In his essay written in May 2020, when the world's grapple with the new virus had just began, Jacek Dukaj pointed out that changes and events started to accelerate in an uncanny way.

> I hear over and over again how the pandemic has slowed down the world and people. But it's been the other way around: coronavirus means acceleration. Of economic strategies. Of technological trends. Of geopolitics, of the power play on the world's stage. Of lifestyles. Of changing values and culture. Of the evolution of social systems. Of consciousness. Today, in the eye of an information cyclone and with my mind still unsettled, I reckon that the virus has accelerated us, on average, by 10 years. When we emerge from its shadow, we will be where we would be around 2030 minus the virus.

Now, almost two years later, it is difficult not to agree with Dukaj. If anything, his prediction did not go far enough.

Looking back on the work of Laboratorium Teatralno-Społeczne, I think of it as reflecting our need to keep on revising our assumptions and stimulating our mindfulness and the ability to name things, paraphrase and challenge social dynamics that flicker with the intensity of a strobe light.

We started out in a different context. What seemed most urgent at the time was different. Social priorities and tensions were different too. In addition, a great deal has since changed in the field of social art in Poland. Many brilliant projects and efforts have been launched, numerous important texts that began to introduce engaged art, including community theatre and theatre pedagogy, to a wide audience have been penned.

Discussing one's own work and one which unfolds in a changing context is risky for several reasons. Many researchers contend that it is impossible or extremely difficult to let go of an affirmative perspective when discussing one's own work, to adopt a detached, self-reflective, critical angle. I agree that to achieve this, one needs to be alert and mindful, but this is what we have been doing from the inception of Laboratorium Teatralno-Społeczne – we recognized that it was necessary to be both alert and mindful in both our creative practice and theoretical inquiry. And we have always harboured a belief – stemming from the coalescence of our academic and artistic practices – that action can be research. It is a particularly valuable practice to speak of one's own work while striking a balance between deep immersion in experience, the familiarity with all the contexts of one's work and a full-of-wonder, critical outside perspective on the ramifications of one's work.

In her book *The Mother of All Questions* (2021), Rebecca Solnit writes at length about projecting and releasing one's voice, letting go of shame (shame is almost organically passed on through generations of Polish artists

and practitioners, who must prove their right to practising culture and art) and giving oneself permission to name and interpret one's efforts. Solnit suggests that it is a particularly important breakthrough for female artists and activists to talk about their own work and interpret it if they work with themselves, i.e. use themselves as a tool, or incorporate their limitations, body, imagination and condition into the creative process (it is not without reason that Solnit identifies their shame, insecurity or coyness as a significant element of the cultural position of women). Solnit claims that this is emancipatory. In another of her books, *Men Explain Things to Me* (2017), Solnit argues that since it is so common for others to explain to us the meaning of what we do and to usurp the right to understand our actions better than we do, there is no reason why at least one voice in the public chorus of voices should not be our own, especially if the story is not about individual creative work but about co-creation involving collective communication and decision-making. Being aware of the potential pitfalls and traps, my intention is to do just that. I am not afraid of the traps. In fact, methodologically, they are one of the key strategies and ways of working at Laboratorium Teatralno-Społeczne.

I will weave my story around two recurring notions: the trap and experience. But before I start exploring them, I will first take a step back to look at the context in which the group operates.

The Puncturing Begins

Laboratorium Teatralno-Społeczne is part of the Stowarzyszenie Pedagogów Teatru (Association of Theatre Educators). For about 18 months now, we have been based in the venue of the School, a grassroots arts organization we are building together with Komuna Warszawa at the very heart of the

Polish capital. In recent years, we have worked closely with a host of organizations including Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszewskiego (The Zbigniew Raszewski Theatre Institute), Fundacja Inicjatyw Społeczno-Ekonomicznych (Foundation for Social and Economic Initiatives), Krytyka Polityczna, Teatr Powszechny, Forum Przyszłości Kultury (Forum for the Future of Culture) and Europejskie Centrum Solidarności (European Solidarity Centre), as well as designing action plans for organizations such as Towarzystwo Inicjatyw Twórczych „ę", („ę" Association of Creative Initiatives), the Cervantes Institute and Szkoła Liderów (School for Leaders).

These names demonstrate that we do not work in a temporal, social and institutional vacuum. The landscape in which we are embedded co-shapes our actions, priorities and choices. We put out feelers to monitor what is happening, including in our own community. Being a part of Stowarzyszenie Pedagogów Teatru brings our artistic profile closer to the perspectives and methods of theatre pedagogy. Being part of the School keeps us in close contact with the alternative artistic community (including its theatre part) where we are a socially oriented wing, exploring not only political, publicly relevant topics but also working with the community.

Founded in January 2016, Laboratorium Teatralno-Społeczne brought together a group of people who had previously collaborated with each other, including artistic, research-oriented and activist individuals, movement practitioners and theatre educators united by a desire to explore new ways of addressing social themes in the arts. I was the initiator. At the beginning, I organized the rehearsals and workshops from which the group emerged, but I always saw the value of moving towards more democratic and collective forms of creative work[1].

In its early days, Laboratorium Teatralno-Społeczne was a space of research

into theatre form and of looking at the contemporary world. The first filter was our own affective reactions and critical thinking about the city, the state and democracy, asking ourselves what riles us and what we think needs to be told in the form of stories, what themes and lenses can be used to tell stories about contemporary Poland, its present situation, hardships, tensions and needs. We also thought about how we could use the theatrical and performative tools we had as theatre educators, directors, choreographers and researchers.

From its beginnings, a key priority of the Laboratorium Teatralno-Społeczne was to seek tools that we could use to explore social realities but also to puncture them. I borrow this metaphor from Joanna Rajkowska, who in an interview titled 'The Art of Public Possibility,' while explaining the goals and strategies of her work, talks about perforating the smooth surfaces of the public sphere, the field of visibility and discourse (see Żmijewski, 2009, pp. 234-257). Impressed by the interview, I wondered what she meant by 'puncturing'. To let some air in? To make something that we usually glide over or consider uniform slightly uglier and rougher? I also liked the idea of looking through small holes underneath something, the assumption that there is something under the surface, multiple layers; and the fact that what is invisible, hidden (deliberately or not) can be revealed. Puncturing also brings to mind stripping something of pathos, as well as an injection, a vaccination, a preventive or healing measure; or, possibly, a poisonous one.

'Can asking questions be at once a poison and a cure?' I wondered while reading Jacques Derrida's essay on the pharmakon, a substance that has both poisonous and healing powers. Interestingly, Derrida used it as a metaphor for art (see Derrida, 1992). Puncturing can also refer to being mean, finding fault; to ruining other people's mood and complacency,

making a mountain out of a molehill. This is what we wanted to do as a collective: to be subversive, to look askance, to deflate the complacency of us all, including the community of Warsaw residents, of academics, creatives and activists (those who often equate working with communities with working for others rather than with internal work for the benefit of their own group or worldview). Our intention was to hold up a mirror to ourselves and things around us, which is a different metaphor that refers to the same process of puncturing smooth surfaces.

Themes at an Intersection

We chose security as our first theme. The process of choosing it generated no small amount of disagreement. Some considered security to be a psychological notion related primarily to the individual's experience of the world and herself/himself in it, including setting one's limits, meeting one's needs and making sure one is comfortable. Others saw it as primarily political as it is used as a tool to manage citizens. They thought that security is embedded in normativizing narratives which serve, among other things, to determine who is welcome in a state and who is not, for it is a construct that can be used to control bodies, communities and minds and to exclude individuals or groups perceived as a threat. We chose this theme because we found each of the above perspectives legitimate, and it seemed particularly interesting to combine them, which later on proved foundational for the Laboratorium approach. Since then, we have always sought to work at the intersection of the individual and the social. We want to include personal stories, existential experiences, to provoke reactions, play with the audience's expectations while allowing them to catch themselves reacting in certain ways and to consider changing these reactions. At the same time, we keep on reaching out to the public and working at the political level, which

we regard as particularly important due to the rise of the ubiquitous therapeutic culture, which, by ascribing responsibility for happiness, success (including economic success), good health and climate catastrophe to individuals, places a heavy burden on them. To balance things out, we want to draw attention to the fact that each problem is systemically embedded and we propose that we take a shared responsibility in striving for change. These proposals are not easy to implement: their costlessness is a fiction, just as is the apparent separation between the public and the private. In fact, they are closely interconnected and it is all too rare, also in art, to think and talk about their coexistence, interconnections and interdependence.

These thoughts led us to create a performance entitled *A Course in Public Health and Safety*[2]. We offered the audience a series of micro-activities using a format akin to a course in which we were supposed to learn together with them the principles of what we identified as social health and safety in contemporary Poland. We were interested in tacit social contracts, transparent normativizing concepts, stigmatizing and privileging processes, the ways in which the state and public systems used the concept of security to control, mould and educate individuals and groups, not always oriented towards equality and emancipation. The micro-activities were created following in-group and field research – we looked at how we used different ways of protecting ourselves and what we had been taught in school, church and families. Immediately, most of these ways seemed to us paradoxical and spurious, masking real needs in favour of commodifying emotions or of promoting privileges or benefits of a section of society, and many of them promoted models based on violence and a belief in the superiority of some people over others.

For examples, we turned to history textbooks (notably passages on the

history of national defence and independence), life insurance offers, school and company health and safety policies, housing and gated community rules, traffic regulations, playground rules, recommendations for camp staff, media coverage on refugees and progressive safe sex guides.

These resources were the starting point for building provocative situations of participatory nature. We sought to identify the full, literal consequences of the health and safety recommendations, checking how they worked, what they led to, what results they produced. This, of course, triggered the mechanism of the distorting mirror, revealing an array of paradoxes and absurdities. As we were building performative situations, we tested them on ourselves in rehearsal. As performers, we realized how easily we succumbed to the persuasive and reassuring discourse of security, how many consequences of the discourse that were at odds with other values we held dear we were willing to accept. We thought how to translate our civic relationship with the seductive power of the security stories into a performative experience mechanism.

How do we pick apart the compelling promotional narrative of a company that makes equipment designed to protect us from the effects of the climate change, the manufacture of which negatively affects not only the natural environment but also those involved in the process? How do we expose the fact that, even though we declare ourselves to be open and non-discriminatory against any living things, we sometimes condone or fail to protest against government solutions designed to control or exclude organizations that are, according to some interest groups, a threat?

When developing *A Course in Public Health and Safety*, we investigated this mechanism in the discourse on migrants, based on the famous 2016 speech of Jarosław Kaczyński, who, appealing to his listeners' need for security or,

rather, their fear and feeling of being threatened, argued that the people arriving from Syria were spreading disease, which, considering the events of the past year, proved merely a prelude to the real crisis. The situations/scenes we designed, whether they concerned migration, space management or education of youth people, were based on our critical and suspicious look at how we act when confronted with security regulations.

Experiences and Traps

From the very start, we searched for a way to create a performative structure that works rather than merely represents. We asked ourselves how to thrust the audience in the midst of action unfolding ‘here and now’ so that she or he can activate emotions, reactions and mindfulness (which I dwell on more further on) and a critical meta-level. This is when we invented two strategies: experience and the trap.

First, we began to use questions to immerse audiences deeper into their experience, and instructions to lure them into a trap. The notion of experience implies an appeal to emotions and an invitation to become directly involved. Experience engages the physicality of participants as well as their senses, particularly touch, taste and smell, which are very infrequently activated in situations of theatre representation. Theatre works still tend to be designed for watching, listening and understanding.

Discussing the evolution of contemporary art, Brian O’Doherty points out that the emergence of art forms engaging the viewer’s body, such as installation and visual performance, was the first step towards challenging the primacy of the eye and mind in the perception of a work of art. According to O’Doherty, this gave art the power to work with the

unconscious, bypassing or outsmarting the defensive mechanisms of the mind (2000).

Performative experience is not much different: the relation between performative experience and theatre corresponds to the relation between installation and painting. One is intended to be experienced, immersed in, be part of, the other is meant to be received, viewed from a distance. In an experience, a member of the audience, and especially the audience as a collective subject, complements and co-creates the meaning.

Laboratorium Teatralno-Społeczne focuses on involvement not because we want to get our thesis across more effectively but to enable each member of the audience to formulate his or her own ideas, to reach hidden and perhaps contradictory inner emotions, mental aporias, and then use them – together with the theses and antitheses we offer – to build their own syntheses for the topic we offer. We want them to carve their own path stumbling around in a thicket of ambivalent feelings and different perspectives that are often inconsistent with one another.

The notion of experience needs to be clarified here. In everyday language it can refer to almost anything that can happen to an individual or group. However, in a theatre context, I would say that provoking an experience is a different type of strategy than presenting a theatre work. Inviting an audience to immerse themselves in an experience, as I understand it, is to actively bring them into a context, enmesh them in a net of events that affect an individual subject or a collective strongly and directly at the affective level as well as the intellectual one. The idea is to put the audience in the midst of events rather than looking at them from a distance, so that in a sense they become a collective of performing people whose actions or failures to act are relevant to the further development and interpretation of

the action.

Dilemmas of Empathy and Dialectical Circles

At the Laboratorium we have a particular interest in experiences that span at least two levels: the social level involving a set of political, historical and cultural meanings and tensions and the subjective, psychological level, related to the experience of a person who passes each situation through his sensibility, memory, body, understanding and imagination.

A case in point is the Laboratorium's performative work *Empathy* which was created in 2016 and has been developed since then. The launching point for it was our interest in the notion of empathy, which, expansively moving beyond the confines of psychological discourse, entered wide circulation several years ago. Empathy began to be ever frequently discussed in the context of business and politics. We heard about interspecies empathy and about empathy underpinning almost any public situation. Books on empathy and articles encouraging readers to practise it were published. The offering also included two-day courses suggesting that empathy could be learned in forty-eight hours and could serve as a remedy for any dilemma or predicament.

We decided to create a performance work examining these narratives with suspicion but at the same time seeking to identify when and in what versions empathy can be socially transformative. The piece we devised includes a series of narrated situations and scenes in addition to arranged experiences and traps, all of which are mean to demonstrate the ambivalence of approaches that see empathy as an easily applicable remedy or an attitude that can be practised in any circumstances and at no cost. Just as we find the

alluring slogan ‘Do what you love’ suspicious, we distrusted the belief that can be expressed in the words ‘Let’s empathize to make things easier’.

Let’s look at some stories from our show.

We offer the audience the opportunity to take part in a counter-protest held to derail a fascist march. At the heart of their potential decision is a doubt: Should I, can I or must I – in keeping with my convictions and sense of belonging – engage in this situation which is regarded as a matter of utmost importance while facing a personal crisis, the need to take care of my health or take a rest, or the lack of time due to my precarious employment situation? Or rather, should I permit myself the right to miss it or the right not to blame myself for missing it? How to handle the conflicting and fraught emotions that arise when one is confronted with this choice? How to negotiate between one’s values and needs?

Another dilemma, which affects the middle class, including those who self-identify as activists: do we hire a housecleaner despite the fact that we know that neither the conditions of employment nor the rate we are willing to pay are decent or fair but our hiring them would buy us time to fight for labour rights, build healthy relationships with our loved ones or do unpaid work caring for our dependents? By telling, reconstructing or enacting one of these stories, performers confront the audience with a dilemma. They ask them to make a choice by taking a position on the stage or saying what they think.

With these types of stories, we set in motion – to use a Hegelian turn of phrase – dialectical circles suggesting that empathy is important, necessary, possible. We invoke psychological and neuroscientific findings indicating that empathy has natural roots and that all beings are able to feel and

practise it. In addition, we invoke, in a nutshell, progressive narratives holding that we need to turn away from competition and rivalry in social life to focus on solidarity and empathy. Of course, we believe in these narratives ourselves and try to live by them. These are our theses.

But a moment later we cite entirely different claims, saying that empathy can not only be harmful to those who practise it but can prove to be impossible, superficial. Empathy undermines systemic change, causes responsibility to be shifted to the individual, while stripping her of her expectations of public systems. When practised excessively, individual empathy is in fact a gesture of political suicide and a step towards the belief that individuals are responsible for everything.

In our stage creations and stand-up monologues, we refer to our numerous failures to display empathy and how this worked out well for us and others. We construct the field of antithesis telling stories of empathy that led to hypocrisy, to an enduring failure to act or to the annihilation of someone's needs.

Then we invite the audience to contribute (by speaking or writing down their responses on white sheets of paper), to react, to express their emotions (by naming their emotions, defining them on a scale from one to ten, showing them with a gesture or taking a position on the stage) and to join in the process of making a collective decision on how the show should proceed or on the activist action we launch as part of the show. They are encouraged to attempt a synthesis, that is, to understand their positions on the dilemmas of practising empathy.

The dialectic circle is one of our favourite strategies of audience involvement. We involve audiences in the process of examining a spectrum

of possibilities, of showing how complex certain issues are. By doing so, we want to knock both ourselves and our audience out of the ruts of easy answers, complacency and the belief that a pill or a flimsy psychology volume can provide us with a recipe for living a good and noble life. We share the belief that changing the world requires effort, radicalism, self-criticism and paying a personal price and that our efforts often result in helplessness, uncertainty, personal inconsistency and finding out the truth about personal and systemic limitations[3], all of which are notions and experiences that tend to be pushed out of the public sphere. We do not seek to determine that certain arguments are right, nor do we want to promote (supposedly) good choices. Our goal is to shatter the illusion that there is something that can be unequivocally regarded as a good choice in situations that generate tension between somebody's personal needs and their values or beliefs. We are interested in endless ambivalences that we recognize not only as the fundamental emotional and ethical experience of individuals and society but also as the fundamentally dialectical structure of our world.

We encourage viewers to practice mindfulness which we understand as the ability to notice facts, events and one's reactions to them. We assume that this perspective enables one to accept themselves, their incongruences and inconsistencies, while not necessarily stripping them of social sensitivity and agency. Of course, this may seem naive but, in the final analysis, is there anything more we can do? The bereavement theorist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross argues that in the face of our fragility, transience and imperfection, the first step to make change and create a new world is to accept our loss and go through the stage of grief, including grief for one's ego and its possibilities (cf. 1998).

We Are All Trapped

The trap is a special type of experience. The idea of a trap is that it causes those entrapped to lose control, partially or completely. On the face of it, the trap may seem to be about the audience or participants, but in fact it is about the group of performers. Traps in the Laboratorium's work are usually introduced through objects, stories or instructions. Instructions help to set up a situation that is formally artificial but evokes real emotions and impressions. A spectator invited to complete a task does not know what it will lead to, but if (s)he decides to trust it, (s)he submits to the experience and falls into a trap. Experiences and traps are closely connected. Every trap is an experience but not every experience is a trap.

The trap is a notion introduced into art theory by the British anthropologist Alfred Gell. His starting point is the fundamental question of what can be considered art. How do we define something as art and something else as not art? (cf. Gell, 1998). Gell distinguishes three common criteria and adds a fourth of his own. The three existing criteria are:

– The aesthetic criterion, which is highly suspect, particularly in the postmodern era but lingers in the collective imagination and understanding. It holds that something is art if it is beautiful, artfully crafted, intricate and executed with virtuosity. (This criterion is invoked when art viewers resort to the world's most famous argument: 'It can't be art, can it? My four-year-old child would paint something like that').

– The interpretative criterion, which comes into play when one props up their judgment with art history, the canon and tradition supposedly legitimizing something as art.

– The institutional criterion according to which something is art if it has been accepted by the artistic or academic communities, becoming part of the description and display circuit at an art institution.

The researcher also proposes a fourth path: the action criterion. Gell gives the example of the 1988 ‘ART/artifact’ exhibition curated by Susan Vogel at the Center for African Art in New York. The show included a Zande fishing net which was displayed next to other works of contemporary art. Gell contends that the curator’s intention was to shift the viewers’ perspective while making a critical gesture targeting art history and its arrogant colonialism. The curator wanted to break the trend of exoticizing such objects in order to expose the superficiality of art institutions’ decisions that result in placing objects such as the fishing net in the context of other non-Western creations, considering them, regardless of their function and meaning, as products of a foreign culture fit for an ethnographic exhibition.

Instead, Vogel placed the fishing net side by side with works of contemporary New York artists, which provoked a heated discussion. The art critic Arthur Danto, who authored a critical essay for the exhibition catalogue, argued that associating the fishing net with contemporary American art is confusing and can only be justified by the institutional criterion that defines something as art after its inclusion in an art show. Alfred Gell begs to differ. In his opinion, the curator’s decision is a masterstroke undermining all the previously mentioned criteria for legitimizing art and calling for a fourth criterion. According to Gell, the inclusion of the fishing net in the system of contemporary art prompts questions about how art works, i.e. what is its social function, and about its performance, effectiveness, agency[4]. First of all, the fishing net contains the story of its context – the story of who uses it, why and in what

circumstances, as well as of what can be caught in it and how. The object is thus a model of a trap and, as Gell argues, when placed next to works of contemporary art, it serves as an invitation to think about them in the same terms and ask the same questions: who uses them, why, in what circumstances, what can be caught in them and how.

This perspective provides a new key to understanding and classifying art – as a working instrument, as a trap provoking attention, emotions, relationships, thoughts, habits.

> The trap is… both a model of its creator, the hunter, and a model of its victim, the prey animal… But more than this, the trap embodies a scenario, which is the dramatic nexus that binds these two protagonists together, and which aligns them in time and space (Gell, 1999, pp. 202-203).

Gell thus suggests that we look at objects in their full context and consider their functions, the way their elements are interconnected, the embedded structure of relationships and the potential to animate that structure. It can be said that in this perspective the fishing net – and likewise art – becomes an object that activates a complex situation and multi-level responses. This perspective allows us to go beyond the simple division between recipient and creator. Therefore, by comparing contemporary art to a net and seeking to show an artwork in terms of a trap offers the chance to break the semiotic regime in which the question of ‘significance’ obstructs the agency of art. The constant search for meaning and the artist’s intention prevents us from seeing art’s activist power, what it does. Referencing Gell’s idea, Roger Sansi asserts that the most evident example of the prevalence of this regime

in popular experience is a question often heard in modern art museums, ‘What does that mean? What’s the meaning?’ (cf. 2014), while it would be more relevant to ask about what artworks ‘do’, how they work, and to regard them not so much as expressions of certain values but as provocations and impulses intended to provoke a response. At the Laboratorium we are very fond of the trap as a dramaturgical mechanism that does something to audience members (and to performers), provokes emotions, thoughts and reactions, challenges their habits.

How a performative trap works in practice can be explained with reference to *Empathy*, specifically the scene entitled *The Question Machine*, which begins with some audience members entering, one at a time, a space containing a set reminiscent of a carnival show or TV quiz, full of glittering red-and-navy-blue tinsel that creates an aura of excitement. Its tackiness brings to mind the 1990s ‘New Year’s Eve with TV1’ show. Upon entering, audience members sit down in three chairs set up in the middle of the stage (numbered one, two and three).

Opposite them sits a performer who is about to ask them a series of questions. He asks about their fears, dreams, discomforts and aspirations. Some questions are trivial and concern things such as breakfast eating habits. Others are more serious, relating to the respondents’ attitude to refugees, their romantic disappointments, life failures. The interviewees are expected to answer the questions but have the right to refuse. A camera is recording their faces with live footage streamed to the waiting room and displayed to the rest of the audience who are unaware that the machine contains an element they cannot see. The interviewees are shown cards with additional instructions, cues for imagination, a research tool for empathy. Each of them is given a cue specifying the point of view they should take

when providing their answers: ‘Imagine you are a clergyman/a mother of five/a recent divorcee/the CEO of a corporation that has declared bankruptcy/Imagine you have cancer/you work night shifts in a supermarket warehouse’. These and other cues present the audience with immediate challenges to their imagination, empathy and ability to quickly judge what an identity or situation might mean. Naturally, some of the cues trigger stereotypical, superficial and shallow associations (first reactions and automatic thoughts are also part of our research). We want to catch people off guard but we side with them, acknowledging that we are also prone to emotional and behavioural reflexes which we refuse to acknowledge. Sometimes we combine several ‘identities’, encouraging an audience member to include all of them in her answer: ‘Imagine you are a priest, a homosexual and a victim of domestic violence’, or ‘Imagine you area feminist, a mother of five children, one of whom is disabled, and you’d just had a love affair’. Interviewees do not always succumb to their first responses, especially when combined identities are concerned. Sometimes they successfully apply the dialectic circle. They quickly examine several different perspectives and eschew answers that come too easily. If empathy is exercised here, it happens at the very moment of that effort.

Those watching the live footage have no idea that the interviewees are shown identity cues, so the answers given by their partners, friends or colleagues often raise their eyebrows, as they are markedly different from what they expected to hear. For them and the interviewees, it is an exercise in imagination and a platform for examining their responses.

Neither group is fully aware of the scenario. They follow rules that are gradually revealed. Their control over the situation is very limited. I suggest that the scene be referred to as a trap, chiefly because the questions are not

straightforward but come wrapped in a subversive instruction. The instruction is an overriding force and lures the audience into an ambush.

When the ‘machine’ is opened at the end of the scene, everyone enters it, including those who have stayed outside and had only partial knowledge of the rules of the game. The audience faces a line of performers who show them the previously hidden cues, such as ‘Imagine you have a loan of 3,500 PLN to repay/you’d just learned that your partner had cheated on you/you are employed at a greengrocer’s’. A performer reads the questions and asks the audience to answer them out loud or in their heads. At the end, when the final few questions are asked, the performers show the card ‘You are yourself’. This is the time to reflect, breathe, be mindful.

That last sequence is intended to dismantle the trap. The audience gains full knowledge of how the trap works and can finally decide how to use that knowledge. The instruction is withdrawn, or rather, fully revealed. What matters more is the questions, the present moment and the community of (shared) experience we are all immersed in at that point, somewhat helpless in the face of the questions and multiple situations we are confronted with; entrapped by the first associations that come to mind which are difficult shake off. We, the creators, have been frequently told by the audience that this moment makes them emotional. ‘I was starting to realize’, one person told us, ‘that being myself was the most complicated thing in our culture, some incomprehensible expectation and un-obvious aspiration. What does it actually mean to be me? Whatever the answer, it is anything but easy. Being me also requires empathy and understanding.’

The evocative questions, the way they are asked and the conditions for reflection created for the audience prove to be a very powerful experiential impulse. Many spectators later admit that when they were standing next to

other people and grappling with the questions, they experienced genuine and extremely ambivalent emotions, a kind of solidarity, collective empathy and self-reflection.

Performative mindfulness

In our productions, we often tell participants that if they do not want to answer our questions, feel angry, irritated or anxious, want to opt out or watch from a distance, they can do so. We communicate this clearly, in various ways, in the form of encouragement and instructions[5].

Our machine is an invitation to explore different empathy levels. From the start of the sequence, we encourage participants to stop being judgmental about themselves and others and to check what thoughts and emotions accompany their perception of the scenes and proposed experiences. Therefore, we draw their attention to their inner world, suggesting that they perceive it as part of the stage, of the theatre space. As a result, the performance is different for everyone. In addition to what happens to everybody, there are individual, subjective performative fields that are different for each person.

Consequently, we hand over a large portion of responsibility to the audience and always treat them as agents in a performative field who have control over the situation insomuch as they can withdraw from it or imbue it with their own meanings. Their participation is one of the things we want them to look at. Even when we build a scene that includes a trap, we make sure it is later deconstructed, dismantled.

Also important are the time we give and the conditions we create for the audience to reflect on how they have fallen into the trap so they can examine

the situation; take a step back to see whether the fact of ‘falling into the trap’ was or was not due to their responses, values, social ideas or perhaps the power relations in a theatre setting. We encourage the audience to be mindful.

In recent years, the word mindfulness has become a buzzword in much the same fashion as the term empathy did a few years earlier. One of the reasons why this happened is the growing popularity of mindfulness practices. In the past ten years or so, they have been more and more frequently offered as part of commercial courses and self-development workshops. Mindfulness has been enlisted by capitalism, e.g. becoming a tool for controlling and stimulating the effectiveness of corporate employees[6]. Yet it should not be dismissed; its origins can be traced to Buddhist tradition and the ages-long practice of meditation. Mindfulness was first introduced into modern psychology and neuroscience, and more broadly into Western culture, by Jon Kabat-Zinn, a physician, MIT theoretician and mindfulness practitioner (cf. 2009), who argues that the practice is not about relinquishing thinking or analysis but about affirmative observation of one’s own feelings, body signals, associations and thoughts, which enables one to perceive and realize the fact that events are happening in real time. It is also meant to help give up denial and avoidance of unpleasant events and feelings. Acceptance allows for a moment of choice: Do I want to try to change something? To act differently than on automatic pilot? To try to change my attitude or external factors? In the Laboratorium’s practice, a mindful approach is not about passive being and acquiescence. It can be the starting point for activism and for developing a critical social sensibility.

Performances that involve the audience are of course intended to elicit reactions. But it is also important what the audience can do with their

reactions. We do not just want to catch them, make fun of them or wave a finger. ‘Well, well, well, if it isn’t Mrs Capitalist and Consumer!’; ‘Not a shred of empathy, you’re such a hypocrite!’; ‘There you go, deep down you’re a fascist!’. Such diagnoses would represent symbolic violence of theatre and performance against the audience.

Instead, we invite individuals to experience things mindfully, to notice what is happening to them, what social narratives and individual tendencies are affecting them, to try to view these observations as valuable, authentic knowledge, to look at them with curiosity rather than judgment or expectation.

We deliberately design situations entangled in a net of judgments, dependencies and contradictions; situations to which our culture almost immediately responds with ready-made theses.

In order to find antitheses – other perspectives – and to arrive at a syntheses requires emotional and critical labour and a negotiation of different extremes. Performative traps enable multidimensional participation – they involve the audience as self-reflective subjects who, over the course of the performance, are given the opportunity to experience themselves and to look at their social sensibility in the context of the proposed topic.

Storytelling Tools

We tend to reconstruct situations rather than to enact them. That is why we use the present tense when telling stories and invite audiences into the midst of action as if it were a site visit. One example is *Lessons in Resistance*[7], a piece exploring the 2019 teachers’ strike, an attempt to give the protest greater public visibility, to persuade the audience to take an

interest in the events that were confined to school buildings and pushed out of the public eye. *Lessons in Resistance*was made on Zoom, which further complicates the question of audience involvement as instead of a community of bodies gathered in one place there is a community of interacting intimacies, people immersed in their everyday, private settings and participating in the work from that perspective[8].

Lessons in Resistance starts with a story about the Polish public education system. An actress says, 'Let's start by entering the school. Let's see what happens. It might not be easy.' The camera follows her, enabling the audience to symbolically enter a building. The situation brings to mind live, phone-recorded coverage, the TikTok aesthetic where individual performance and presentation is the prevailing paradigm.

As we enter the building, the audience is shown a snapshot of Warsaw as seen through one of the theatre's windows in order to activate real-time experience, with the weather outside and the Palace of Science and Culture's clock displaying the current time. The mediating broadcast aside, it is obvious from the start that we are entering a school building in real time, which is crucial for the quality of participation we want to get to help raise awareness of the cause of Polish schools. This makes it possible to form an activist collective from those watching, to transform the audience symbolically into 'everyone'. At the end of the show, the figure of 'everyone' is proposed as necessary for social change to occur. It appears in the rallying cry of the final song and on the banner draped over the facade of the school.

In the beginning, we follow the actress as she ushers us into the school spaces and describes them for us, invoking the collective knowledge of schools, the shared multi-generational experience and the recognizable signs of school realities. The corridor. The toilet where cigarettes were furtively

smoked. The cubicle walls and doors inscribed with a chronicle of the students' loves and disasters. The door to the teachers' room, the threshold of anticipation and horror. The stairs leading to the first floor, a setting for trysts and first friendships. The biology lab conjuring the stress turning into stomach ache. The spectators can again look at things from the perspective of a school desk, they can solve a test, jump at the sound of the school bell. The topic of the teachers' strike does not come up until the second part, when we suspect that the memory of the school has already been triggered enough that there is no easy escape from it, and the audience experience emotions evoked by their school memories. This is when we begin telling the story of the protest, pointing to its social, political and economic implications. We invite the audience to adopt a meta-perspective, a position of detachment and critical thinking, from which we ask the question about the state of Polish schools. We ask the audience to voice their opinions, we encourage them to signal what they think and to make decisions about the future of the school or the strike – just as citizens and authorities did during the nationwide strike of Polish teachers in 2019. But this time they have direct agency. If those watching refuse to make a decision or get involved, their choice 'works' later on in the performance, offering an emphatic proof of what happens when everyone remains silent. What we get as a result is a micro-scale laboratory of participation.

We are not so naive as to think that the audience's involvement reflects their attitudes in a full and unmediated way. After all, there are the theatrical conventions, the audience's habits concerning the rules of theatre participation and the limits of the framework we operate within. How do we work with this?

Firstly, from the start, we problematize these habits and the complex

situation of participation in a theatre work – we subject it to scrutiny and encourage suspicion. Secondly, we make sure that the audience always has the option to not participate, to refuse, to withdraw or hide, which at times becomes meaningful. We consider non-participation as a form of participation. Thirdly, we make an effort to build relationships with the audience. We ask ourselves what we want: do we want to recreate the power relationships in some way? Who is supposed to have power, and how do we bypass the obvious but enduring fact that it is the directors, creators and initiators who tend to have the upper hand in a performing arts setting? First of all, the creators are familiar with the rules of the game, they know the structure everyone is part of. With these limitations in mind, we always devote a large portion of our rehearsals, preparations and audience tests to reflecting on how our invitation works, what it gives to the audience and what it takes away from them, what possibilities are actually offered and what possibilities the audience think they have; to what extent we, the creators, are willing to take risks, surrender control, what we want to achieve and what we want to research; whether and how we take responsibility for audiences' responses, including unpredictable reactions, and how we handle them. This presents an ethical, participatory and aesthetic dilemma. It is often that case that audiences are invited to participate in structures or situations whose 'codes' they do not know.

Aesthetic Dilemmas of Participation

The machine sequence is formally simple. There are questions, a film camera, chairs and microphones. Any reaction fits our script easily, blends in rhythmically and structurally, including an absence of reaction, an answer that subverts the meaning of the scene, a lie or even a grunt. Things get more challenging when we invite the audience to get involved in situations,

as their structure is less clear and gives us less control.

A case in point is the scene in which we tell stories that can potentially trigger empathy but can also tempt with the option of withdrawing it. We describe moments in our childhood, at school, at work and in close relationships when someone meant well but ended hurting us. Everyone but the storyteller is allowed to note down the emotion(s) they feel when listening to the stories. The audience are encouraged to express their emotions freely and non-normatively and to rate their intensity on a scale of one to ten. In effect, audience members often write down phrases like 'Oh fuck! 7,' 'I'm not talking to her anymore, 5,' 'I'm in heaven, 10'. The performers often improvise but their stories are concise, fast-paced and rhythmically flowing as a result of rehearsal, their mastery of the convention and the tools we have developed. In the second part of the scene, the spectators are invited to share their stories and they readily do so. They see many benefits including a kind of 'cleansing' that results from naming and talking about their memories (often for the first time). When presenting a story as a performer, they feel a sense of agency that many of them lacked in the situations that are being reconstructed. A mechanism recognized by community theatre and theatre pedagogy is activated: sharing a story from the stage legitimizes the experience, makes it visible, allows one to control it. Moreover, many people say that they feel their story helps put an important social topic on the public agenda and is an argument in a public discussion about change.

The stories told by the audience are not necessarily fast-paced and rhythmically flowing. Some are convoluted, confusing, punchline-less, rambling. This produces an instructive exercise in empathy for other audience members and the creators, an exercise in participation understood

as allowing the audience to co-shape the action and share directorial and dramaturgical control. We design many situations like this, ones in which the audience get the chance to disrupt the dramatic flow. Such disruptions often occur unexpectedly and prove that a relationship has been built and a sense of agency triggered. We are committed to enabling this experience and testing the participatory potential. This mobilizes us as creators to mindfully examine our own emotions and reactions in contact with the audience, their willingness to participate and their way of contributing content and presence.

In his book *Prawo do kultury* (The Right to Culture), in a chapter on 'Moving Beyond Participation' Igor Stokfiszewski holds that we should think about participation after participation and test the possibilities of developing a participation paradigm more consistently and radically, even, or perhaps especially, at the price of sharing the privilege of determining the final shape of social and artistic situations (2018, pp. 257-271). In the context of social art, participation can be seen not only as a horizon of working with a broad audience or a strategy for inclusion of subjects and voices that are diverse or rarely heard in theatre situations, but it also involves the risk of disrupting the creators' vision, ideas and the structure they have devised. Participation requires a departure from, or at least a relaxing of, the primacy of aesthetic perfection and consistency. Participation after participation takes place at the expense of the language of art.

Manipulation, Provocation, Participation

When provoking experiences and setting traps, we always ask ourselves questions about manipulation and violence. We draw audiences in without their consent and without granting them a sense of control. Aren't the

situations we set up unequal? Don't we take advantage of the audiences' helplessness, ignorance, submissiveness? Don't we 'adjust' their reactions to suit our ends?

We are committed to testing various options while communicating our ideas as honestly as possible. We are interested in the similarity of performative situations to social life. When facing everyday social situations, our knowledge and ability to control things tend to be incomplete, too. We believe that providing an artistic translation of social conditions, inviting audiences to experience emotions that arise from a shortage of power, knowledge or subjectivity, and drawing their attention to the fact that this is the way things are in real life, strengthens their critical thinking and thus their ability to understand their own identity and condition. In keeping with the belief in the world's dialectical logic, we also want to reveal the 'blind spots' in social life that resist questions about making a good choice and finding the right solution.

To explain this mechanism, I will cite an example from the performance *The Island: We Are All Castaways*[9]. Plot-wise, the performance's starting point is Sigríður Hagalín Björnsdóttir's novel *Blackout Island*, in which Iceland is mysteriously cut off from the rest of the world. The internet and telephones stop working, there are no incoming planes, no supplies, no news, no possibility of leaving the island. The initial surprise turns into anxiety, then into panic and, finally, a disaster. Food and medication start running low, no information is coming in, riots break out in the streets, an organizational and decision-making chaos ensues. We shifted the setting to Poland and added an island subplot about an island discovered in the Baltic Sea – it can accommodate and feed twelve million people, less than a third of Poland's population. In the climax of *The Island*, the audience is told of the island and

informed that the situation must be solved. The government abdicates. Up to that point, the performance is a story we tell, a theatrical representation.

The performance was developed during the pandemic. Its starting point was a theatre production of the same title. We took it online knowing that we wanted to preserve, even strengthen, its participatory element. The story took on even more relevance during the pandemic. Earlier, it was mostly about how society justifies class division, how the notions of usefulness and productivity often imperceptibly cause exclusion or social divisions and inequalities.

In the midst of the pandemic, with everyone locked in their homes, the media began to report on the shortage of hospital beds and ventilators. In some European countries where health care systems were on the brink of being overwhelmed, decisions were taken on who should be hooked up to the available ventilators and who should not based on the patients' usefulness. Seen in this context, the island metaphor became even more telling.

In the second part of *The Island*, the audience are split into rooms and told they are about to take over the reins of the country. Each group is joined by one female performer serving as their secretary. The audience draw lots to determine their specific government role. The roles include Minister of Culture, Minister of Health, Prime Minister, Digitization Minister, Ombudsman, etc. Each group is asked to hold a meeting to work out a solution and the best way to communicate it to the public. The secretaries record the discussions unfolding in the different rooms. At the end of the discussions, before the speeches are drafted, the secretaries read their notes to the groups as a kind of feedback. When listening to these subjective transcriptions, participants often realize how easily they slip into political

newspeak, how rapidly they adopt the discourse of social engineering. It is a sobering moment, one of the many cold showers that we administer to the audience. The fact that they need to consider multiple factors and make complex decisions, none of which are simple, infuses the discussions, speeches and votes with great emotions. The audiences' reactions vary but they tend to accept the challenge. They often try to evade the task, protest, call into question the ethical standing of the experiment every step of the way. Yet, despite their reservations, they take on responsibility for finding 'less bad' options and implementing the solutions. The discussions reveal much: attitudes, values, strategies. Spectators turn into performers: they make speeches, propose solutions. A vote is then held to select one of the solutions which is then applied by the winning government to the group comprising all spectators and performers so that no more than one-third of them are allowed to leave for the safety of the island.

The finale is full of excitement: those who are not allowed to go the island after are booted out of the Zoom meeting (or required to leave the stage in the live theatre version) and asked to go to another space where they listen to a propaganda speech about the importance of doing 'invisible' support work for the chosen ones. They are told that they will not benefit from their work, but they will help the rest survive. It is a narrative of sacrifice, submission and inequality incorporating quotes from speeches of Polish politicians given in recent years. At the end of the performance, the audience are left with their emotions and invited to join a post-performance conversation.

In post-performance conversations, participants often say that *The Island* got them thinking, was a lesson in communication, imagination, resistance and self-reflection, an encouragement to pause and think about the seemingly

smooth narratives that are used to justify exclusion, inequality and violence; an act of puncturing smooth surfaces. One can, of course, object to this format as the audience is forced to act without giving their consent/expressing their readiness, but we decided to make use of these circumstances in this part of *The Island*, because they resemble emergency situations in which one has to respond, communicate and decide (about oneself and others) without adequate knowledge, competence and time.

This action is a trap – the audience fall into a situation they cannot control. They only regain control gradually, including through resistance. When they come up with solutions, draft speeches and decide the way the performance is going to develop, we, the creators, virtually lose control, at the symbolic and dramaturgical levels.

A sequence that involves the need to choose a path without knowing what is possible, what will turn out well, is a laboratory situation, an artificial one, but, as it happens in an instruction-based performance, it has the power to evoke real emotions and trigger authentic inner conflicts.

The trap works. After falling into it, we need to look for a way out. Even if we refuse to take part, speak or act, the fact usually makes us think of the circumstances we face. Entangled in a net, we stop denying that something restrains our movements. We need a strategy. When later someone asks questions about the chosen strategy, the reasons why it was chosen and the resulting emotional, intellectual, communicative and social consequences (at the micro-scale of the community of audience members), one can hope that this experience will enhance the audiences' ability to reflect. The subtitle of the performance, *We Are All Castaways*, is an encouragement to grapple with the sad truth of the human condition – we are all in crisis as a society. There are no perfect recipes or solutions. The only path to saving dignity

leads through critical thinking, staying in touch with oneself in challenging and difficult-to-understand situations and, if possible, through acting in solidarity, respecting equality and not excluding anyone. We feel that a theatre practice navigating the borderland between the individual and the political can be used to stimulate these three values: critical thinking; the ability to be in touch with oneself, one's emotions, needs and experiences; and a focus on building a solidarity-based community.

This is what we should keep in mind if we want to involve audiences in performative practices.

Summary

In its practice of involving audiences, the Laboratorium focuses on the following key aspects:

– Experiences, i.e. situations that involve feeling and imagining, triggered by questions, a story or by engaging audiences in performative actions or event reconstructions.

– Traps, which we see as a kind of dramaturgical script or a net capturing audiences' and performers' emotions, thoughts, bodies and responses.

– Giving thought to what kind of relationship with audience members we want to create.

– Invoking and deconstructing stories, events and social mechanisms; applying or recreating them in the performative present.

– Working in the borderland between the individual/psychological and the political/social on the assumption that these levels are inseparable.

– Resorting to provocation but avoiding manipulation (or persisting in it) by giving the audience impulses (time, space, encouragement) so they can observe their own reflexive reactions and by being forgiving and accepting (to a degree) but at the same time critical.

– Asking questions and pluralizing the perspective by, among other things, triggering the dialectical circles of colliding theses and antitheses. We believe that, in the absence of perfect solutions, it is possible to strengthen social sensibility and openness by examining topics from multiple perspectives.

– Inviting audience members to co-operate within a precisely set formal and aesthetic framework; staying open to audience interventions that may lead to a formal disruption resulting in boredom, a derailment of the dramatic momentum, rambling action, having to endure discomfort and loss of control.

– Giving greater public visibility to topics that involve violence, oppression, discrimination and underestimation and tend to be pushed out of the public eye; we do this to strengthen political will, agency and democracy on a micro-scale.

Translated by Mirosław Rusek

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This article would not have been written without years of conversations with my Laboratorium colleagues and collaborators. Many of the ideas contained

here are the result of our joint reflection.

In my article I use a variety of different grammatical forms. I refer to audience members and participants as they, she, he and (s)he. I realize that this does not exhaust the need of including all subjects, but I have opted for this solution as a transitional one until I can use neutral or even more inclusionary personal pronouns in academic papers.

The article is an expanded version of a paper I presented at the 'Involvement Strategies in the Performing Arts Space: Research Methodology, Mapping, Ethics, Democracy' seminar held in 2021 by the Institute of Theatre and Media Arts of the Faculty of Anthropology and Cultural Studies of the Adam Mickiewicz University in partnership with *Didaskalia. Gazeta Teatralna*. The seminar was conceived by Agata Siwiak.

Author

Dorota Ogrodzka

Dorota Ogrodzka (doti.piwowarska@gmail.com) is a social artist, theatre educator, director, trainer and researcher. She is Vice President of Stowarzyszenie Pedagogów Teatru (Theatre Educators Association), with which she co-runs the independent theatre venue School and delivers original artistic, social and educational projects. Dorota has been long associated with the Institute of Polish Culture of the University of Warsaw, where she wrote her PhD thesis and where she has been teaching for fourteen years, and with the Polish-Japanese Academy of Information Technology. She is the founder and director of the Laboratorium Teatralno-Społeczne (Social Theatre Laboratory) and the winner of a scholarship awarded by the Polish Ministry of Culture and National Heritage. Dorota collaborates with many Polish theatres and organizations. She is a programming curator for the SLOT Art Festival, collaborates with Towarzystwo Inicjatyw Twórczych „ę" („ę" Association of Creative Initiatives), Centrum Edukacji Obywatelskiej (Centre for Civic Education), Krytyka Polityczna and Szkoła Liderów (School for Leaders). Dorota is a member of the international RESHAPE network dedicated to programming new solutions for the arts and culture sector. She writes, publishes, reflects and joins conversations about participatory art, social art and the notion of new participation. ORCID: 0000-0002-9992-4726.

Footnotes

1. The issue of democracy, joint decision-making and participation within such groups is of course a separate topic. Our colleague Iga Dzięgielewska (Institute of Polish Culture of the University of Warsaw) is currently writing her master's thesis on the paradoxes and challenges of working in a non-hierarchical and equal way while respecting the needs, desires and limitations of all members of a collective in line with its stated mission, all this in a capitalist environment.
2. *Kurs bezpieczeństwa i higieny społeczeństwa* (A Course in Public Health and Safety), directed collectively, Laboratorium Teatralno-Społeczne/Stowarzyszenie Pedagogów Teatru, Warsaw, 2016.
3. Socially repressed emotions are perspicaciously discussed by Tomasz Stawiszyński, including in his book *Ucieczka od bezradności* (Escape from Helplessness).
4. Inspired by the concept and ideas of Alfred Gell, Weronika Plińska (2021) has recently written an excellent book on the agency of art.
5. Wojtek Ziemilski's production, *Come Together* (Studio teatrgaleria, Warsaw, first performed on 24 February 2017) focuses, among other things, on the problematic nature of calls/appeals/invitations to the audience and the possibilities of moving beyond theatrical conventions to gain agency with respect to a the action of a performance work.
6. The tension between the emancipatory and therapeutic dimensions of this practice, on the one hand, and its commodification, on the other, is discussed by Zuzanna Ziomecka in her book *Wyspa spokoju* (Island of Tranquility, 2021).
7. *Lekcje oporu* (Lessons in Resistance), directed by Dorota Ogrodzka, Laboratorium Teatralno-Społeczne/Stowarzyszenie Pedagogów Teatru (first performed on 15 December 2020).
8. The question of participation in events streamed or performed online, including the issue of intimacy, is investigated in the section *Nowe uczestnictwo* (New Participation), edited by Dorota Ogrodzka, *Dialog* 2021 no. 7-8.
9. *Wyspa. Wszyscy jesteśmy rozbitkami* (The Island: We Are All Castaways), directed by Dorota Ogrodzka and the ensemble, Laboratorium Teatralno-Społeczne/Stowarzyszenie Pedagogów Teatru (first performed on 27 June 2019, online version 7 November 2020). The production was inspired by Sigríður Hagalín Björnsdóttir's book *Blackout Island*.

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