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Theatre and War: The Creative Process as a Form of Working with Trauma

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The article combines the medium of theatre with the experience of war, analysing its therapeutic role in the context of working with both cultural and individual trauma. By citing examples of theatrical activities, the article considers the importance of stage work in the process of taming trauma and in social education about its long-term consequences. The discussion is contextualized by theoretical considerations on memory and trauma, both on a cultural and individual level, with particular emphasis on the therapeutic role of theatre.

KEYWORDS:

theatre, cultural memory, cultural trauma, war, post-memory, therapeutic function of theatre

Introduction

In the terminology referring to the operational level of military operations developed by the National Security Bureau, the words "*theatre*" and "*war*" are juxtaposed in the description of real military operations (Kaczmarek et al., 2008). Using professional terminology, *a theatre of war* is an area that can be used to conduct hostilities, while *a theatre of war operations* (theatre of operations) is defined as the area required to conduct or support specific operations within the theatre of war (Kraszewski, 2018). This lexical affinity within the official nomenclature surprisingly links the field of art with conflict. Samuel Weber, a German-American philosopher and cultural theorist, in

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his book *Theatricality as a Medium* (2009), develops the concept of theatre as a medium that is closely related to the experience of war. Weber analyses the common elements of warfare and theatre, such as representation, spectacle, manipulation of perception and the use of images. He also evokes the history of theatre, drawing on the tradition of ancient Greek theatre, illustrates how theatrical practices have addressed war issues, and poses questions about the role of representation and perception in the context of social conflicts.

The aim of this article is to relate theatre to the experiences of war and a reflection on theatre as a tool in the context of an attempt to tame the trauma of war. The experience of two wars, present in the memory of the Polish community, creates dynamic connections with the contemporary traumatic experiences of many conflicts taking place around the world, including the most recent one, the war in Ukraine. The context for the discussion on selected theatrical activities will be theoretical reflections on memory and cultural and individual trauma, and in particular the therapeutic function of theatre.

Memory, War and Culture—a Few Theoretical Reflections

We live in times of increased interest in the problem of memory. Representatives of social and political sciences, historians, therapists, psychologists, doctors, literary and cultural experts are interested in it. Memory research examines the social, cultural, cognitive, political, and technological changes affecting how, what, and why individuals, groups, and societies remember and forget. Typing the following phrases into Google Scholar: *collective memory*, *individual memory* throws up several million scientific articles dealing with this issue in a fraction of a second. As the introduction to the journal "Memory Studies", founded in 2008, points out, despite the epistemological and causal importance attributed to memory in the study of issues such as the formation of personal and public identity, culture and politics, and social communities, there are still dramatic divergences in the basic concepts and methods in this area. One of the areas of research on memory, important from the perspective of the issues raised in the article, is the exact relationship between its individual and collective aspects.

In the individual dimension, memory touches the experiences of a specific person; events in which he/she participated, actively or passively, as a witness. Memory understood in this way involves emotions, subjectivity of the evaluation of experienced events, their conscious or unconscious selection (Bałdys, 2016). Individual memory is only one type of memory that is formed in communication with others. The others, as Jan Assmann points out, "they are not, however, any arbitrary set, but form groups with

an image or image of themselves, of their unity and specificity, based on an awareness of a common past" (Assman, 2008, p. 12).

Maurice Halbwachs, a sociologist who was one of the first to introduce the term „social memory”, pointed out that human memory is always social in nature and cannot exist outside its context (Lewicka, 2012). According to him, memory is an individual act, but it is strongly conditioned by the relationship of the rememberer with the group, its resources of knowledge and memory, and interests (Kapralska, 2022). Polish researcher Barbara Szacka defines the collective memory of the past as:

Ideas about the past of one's own group, constructed by individuals from what they remember... information from and through different channels. It is understood, selected and transformed according to their own cultural standards and worldview beliefs. These standards are socially produced, and therefore common to the members of a given community, which leads to the unification of ideas about the past and thus allows us to talk about the collective memory of the history of one's own group (Szacka, 2006, p. 44).

The terms such as: group, social or collective carry a convergent understanding and will be treated interchangeably, moreover, all of them can be derived from Halbwachs' works (Wądołowski, 2021).

Collective memory refers to the question of how the past is perceived. This notion helps to define how the collective itself looks at and finds itself in its own history. Assman distinguishes between communicative memory and cultural memory. The former concerns the past experienced by a person, is based on oral transmission as part of interactions with others, is impermanent, has a limited time spectrum, the horizon of which reaches no more than one century back. Cultural memory, on the other hand, has a stable time horizon, it has its fixed points that guarantee its permanence, the so-called memory figures, i.e. significant points in history, the memory of which is kept alive through, among others specific texts, monuments, celebrations, rituals, images and institutionalized messages. What is important in cultural memory is not so much the facts as the perception of historical events, the remembered history, the content of which determines group identity (Assman, 2008). We can say that, in relation to Assman's considerations above, theatre is a special figuration of embodied memory. Looking at it as an architectural structure, we place it in the spatial figures of memory. On the other hand, theatre as a moment of action enlivens the process of memory and reaches for active images of mnemonics, which, by evoking emotions, create a theatre of imagination (Butzer, n.d.).

The issues of remembering and commemorating, inheriting or taking over experience, as well as creating one's own attitude to the memories of loved ones, concern entire communities that face the process of recalling often traumatic events from the past, while struggling with issues that are silenced, masked and pushed aside. A turn

towards cultural memory also appears in theatrical practices which, using the therapeutic impact of theatre, adopt the mechanisms of memory as an identity strategy of resistance, contributing to the empowerment of the individual and thus creating a reservoir of individual and cultural knowledge that can be relied upon to build a sense of identity for the individual and the group (Kowalcze-Pawlik, 2020).

The Therapeutic Function of Theatre

Taming individual and collective traumas has been one of the most important tasks of culture since the dawn of humanity. In the transcendental dimension, religions and mythologies served this purpose, in the earthly dimension—rituals, customs, superstitions and proverbs. As well as art and literature. Today, in the unstable, changing times of the postmodern era, in the face of numerous conflicts taking place right next to us, culture is faced with the difficult task of undertaking the representation of old and recent traumas, so as to disarm the destructive potential hidden in them. In the context of the subject matter of this article, I would like to look at the therapeutic role of theatre centred around the experiences of war and refugees. Theatre has long dealt with division and violence. Schism, portrayed by thinkers from Aristotle through Derrida, Phelan and Turner, provides the foundation for both dramatic narrative and performative representation. Both of these approaches suggest that the spectacle is a particular area for the study of trauma (Wallis & Duggan, 2011).

According to Jeffrey C. Alexander's definition, cultural trauma refers to a situation in which

members of the collective feel that they have been subjected to a horrific event that leaves indelible marks on their group consciousness, forever scarring their memories, and altering their future identity in a fundamental and irreversible way (Alexander, 2010, p. 195).

However, in the face of the considerations undertaken here, the essence of the meaning that a given community gives to specific events needs to be emphasized. Events in themselves are not traumatic without being semantic as such by an individual or collective. As Alexander points out:

Events are one thing, depictions of these events are quite another. Trauma is not the result of a group experience of suffering. It is the result of this serious discomfort entering the core of the collective's sense of self-identity (Alexander, 2010, p. 204).

Grzegorz Niziołek wrote about the role of interpretation of traumatic events in the theatre space in his book *Polish theatre of Holocaust* (2013). It presents a new perspective

on the Polish theatre scene, for the first time in Polish literature addressing the issues of theatre and the Holocaust. The author gives a full overview of theatrical phenomena—from *Easter* directed by Leon Schiller to Krzysztof Warlikowski's *(A)pollonia*. The author is interested in the role of the play of theatrical structure (stage and obscenity, actors and audience) in the face of the experience of the Holocaust, and the post-war space of the theatre as a place where there could and often was a return of what was repressed in that original event, namely the trauma of the audience's participation in this wartime history. The monograph shows both the supportive function of theatre in the process of working through traumas, as well as the "danger of preserving collective defense mechanisms" (Bojarska, 2013, p. 102). A kind of game played within the theatre and, more broadly, the social discourse related to the Holocaust are critically reflected. Niziołek introduces the issues of the attitude towards historical traumas and the relational and emotional baggage associated with them to the history of theatre and theatre studies as a discipline, in the expanded field of cultural studies. He analyses "the understanding of theatricality itself and its role in relation to historical events and history in general" (Bojarska, 2013, p. 103).

The identity of the theatre is conditioned by the social reality surrounding it, which indicates its task in relation to this society. It determines its social function in a given place and time. According to teatrologist Andrzej Hausbrandt, this relationship situates the function of theatre on two levels: external, referring to society as a whole, and internal, concerning the theatre itself. In defining the external role, the theatre scholar enumerates four main basic functions: educational-cognitive, cathartic (purifying), entertaining and ceremonial (Hausbrandt, 1990). The cathartic function of the theatre is of particular importance in the context of the discussed issues, creating space in this form of art for the emphasizing psychological effects of the theatre; through the possibility of identifying with the protagonist of the performance and emotionally accompanying him in his adventures, we can work through our hidden fears and reduce tension; or experience emotions that we lack in everyday life (Hausbrandt, 1990). Theatre in the context of social revitalisation is described by Teresa Wilk (2010). The author takes up the issue of the process of social revitalization carried out in the space of medium-sized cities: Legnica, Nowa Huta, Wałbrzych, with the practical use of theatrical art/theatre activity. It portrays revitalization as activities focused on securing and improving human existence. Functioning in the social space, theatre is not only created by society, but also „shapes relationships, motivates to change, activates to action" (Wilk, 2010, pp. 108–109). Małgorzata Łączyk and Aleksandra Pyrzyk-Kuta (2015) use the phrase „creative revitalization" to refer to thinking about the effect and the process, which are aimed at stimulating the individual to transcend non-constructive forms of action for change, which is identical with psychological transgression.

The above considerations orient the notion of trauma in relation to the contexts and discourses of contemporary culture. Numerous recent and future publications testify to the developing rooting of this issue in theatre studies. New perspectives explore the different ways in which theatre practice can address trauma, how performance can provide a critical framework for reflection on trauma in culture, and how trauma theory and traumatic experiences themselves can be a productive tool for thinking about performance and a potentially powerful creative force (Wallis & Duggan, 2011).

Post-memory in Theatre

Initiated by Marianne Hirsch, the idea of „post-memory” very quickly became a key element characterizing the state of European culture after World War II. As the author points out:

Post-memory reflects the complicated oscillation between continuity and rupture. But it's not about a trend, a method, or an idea. It is a structure for the transfer of traumatic knowledge and experience between or beyond generations (...) Post-memory, therefore, is not related to the past, which literally returns. It returns in the form of investments of imaginations, various types of projections or artistic creation (Hirsch, 2011, p. 29).

Hirsch describes a variety of methods of memory transmission, including conversations, parental behaviours resulting from past experiences, and their impact on the next generation. The concept of post-memory emphasizes not only the process of memory transfer, although awareness of this process is crucial for understanding the entire mechanism, but also the way in which it is absorbed by the recipients who participate in this process (Bryś, 2020). The phenomenon of post-memory in theatre refers to the process of transmitting and processing collective memory, which is not directly experienced by the individual, but is transmitted through cultural, social or historical inheritance. In the theatre of post-memory, actors can play roles that transcend their own individual experiences, reaching into collective or cultural memory. This approach allows for the exploration of historical, social or cultural traumas that are inherited by society. Theatre artists often use a variety of techniques, symbols, or metaphors to convey deeper layers of collective memory. As a result, theatre becomes not only a place of entertainment, but also a platform for reflection on history, heritage and social traumas.

Marta Bryś writes about the experience of post-memory in theatre. Using the examples of performances by Tadeusz Kantor, Jerzy Grzegorzewski, Monika Strzępka and Krzysztof Warlikowski, the author tries to answer the following questions: how

does the theatre participate in the process of memory transfer? How does the theatre respond to this transfer and use it? (Bryś, 2020).

An important aspect of this work is to demonstrate and prove that the specificity of the post-memory process means that regardless of whether a given medium contains a commentary on memory transfer, it is always seized by it and automatically becomes a part of it. In this way, the theatre of post-memory plays a double role: it is theatre that is an element of the post-memory process, and at the same time it thematizes and stages it (Bryś, 2020).

One example of memory reworking on stage is the monodrama „121 023 J”, directed by Ariel Goldmann in São Paulo. It tells the story of Renata Jesion’s family—a Brazilian actress and director of the Teatro Para Alguém, a theatre founded by her father, Majer Jesion. Renata Jesion wrote and starred in the play „121 023 J”, inspired by the life of her father, who survived four concentration camps during World War II. Despite the apparent Jewish motif, the play universalizes the problem, touching on the difficult situation of those who were simply „different”. The title of the performance refers to the oppressive practice of camp numbering, symbolizing usurped identities, tattooed forever on the skin and in the memory of Holocaust survivors. The performance was based on direct contact with the traumatic memory of the father, the affective transmission of memories from father to daughter, and Renata Jesion’s stage enactment of the past. Sylwia Papier (2021), who analyses this performance, points out that in a symbolic way, through theatrical staging, Renata Jesion contributed to the processing of a long-repressed family trauma, a story that had not been told before. Undoubtedly, the medium of theatre has become a tool for her to transmit the memory of the Holocaust between generations. In its interpretation of this phenomenon, paper refers to the idea of *Self-Revelatory Performance* (Papier, 2021), which is defined as a form in which the performer initiates a theatrical work taken from current life problems that require healing (Emunah, 2015). It is a practice that becomes possible only thanks to the techniques discovered and applied in the field of drama therapy, but at the same time it represents a completely different field outside of drama therapy due to its theatrical and aesthetic values. While drama therapy typically involves process-oriented exercises designed to provide therapeutic development to clients, *Self-Rev* should be seen as a more creative and artistic process and achievement for both the performer and the director (the practicing drama therapist) while also providing a therapeutic experience for the performer (Emunah, 2015). An important goal of this form is to achieve a balance between creating a theatrically inspiring work and the possibility of performing it in front of the audience. *Self-Revelatory Performance* not only allows artists to express themselves through art, but also to share this experience with viewers, which can be both a therapeutic and educational activity.

An important aspect of post-memory in theatre is facing the past and trying to understand the impact of historical events on the present. This dialogical approach to memory allows the performer, but also the audience, to immerse themselves in history and reflect on the contemporary implications of trauma. Theatre thus becomes a place where the past and the present intertwine into a single story, which enables a better understanding of cultural heritage and the impact of history on our present. The theatrical medium creates an important platform that exposes certain previously stigmatized areas and stimulates a dialogue that can begin to contribute to their normalization and taming.

Theatrical Work with a Direct Witness of Traumatic Events

Recent years have confronted the inhabitants of Europe and the world with a rapid migration flow. UNHCR's flagship annual report, *Global Trends in Forced Displacement 2022*, found that by the end of 2022, the number of people displaced by war, persecution, violence and human rights violations had reached a record 108.4 million. This is the largest increase in history (UNHCR, 2022). War refugees, forced to leave their homeland due to armed conflicts, often experience not only difficulties related to the migration process itself, but also significant traumas related to security, the loss of loved ones and the destruction of social structures. These traumatic experiences, marked by uncertainty, loss, and violence, have profound consequences for mental and emotional health. In the face of the migration crisis, theatre is also speaking out, becoming a tool of inclusion, as well as an area of therapeutic and social support.

An example of theatrical work with refugees is the *Cantieri Meticci* theatre group, founded in 2012 by the Italian actor and director Pietro Florida. Florida invited non-professional actors from more than 15 countries, refugees, migrants and Italians. By creating theatre with refugees, the director faced the inevitable fact of the progressing multiculturalism of societies. Theatre served as a form of bridge and support in learning the rules of the community in which the refugees would live. In a way, it was an intermediary at the level of language, but also in the sphere of behaviour, beliefs and values, thanks to the people met during theatrical activities (Borkowska, 2016). With the help of *Cantieri Meticci practices*, Florida brought out in actors the ability to think, create, reason, externalize what has been blocked, internally, closed by pressure, violence, diminishing one's value. Theatre served as a process of awakening. As Florida pointed out in an interview with Alicja Borkowska conducted as part of the ATLAS festival organized by the Free Word Zone at the Powszechny Theatre in Warsaw in 2016:

Arriving refugees are very often marked by the complete disintegration of the social fabric, interpersonal relations, burdened with traumatic experiences in relationships with people. That is why, first of all, it is necessary to rebuild the emotional sphere in them, the mechanisms that restore what they have lost (Borkowska, 2016).

In 2013, the group formally registered as an association called *Cantieri Meticci* and since then the number of available activities and regular participants has increased. The scope of *Cantieri Meticci's* activities was also broadened by the creation of the Quartieri Teatrali (Neighborhood Theatres), whose aim was to stimulate intercultural dialogue and foster intergroup relations at the neighbourhood level. These theatres conducted workshops aimed at pupils, teenagers, unaccompanied minors and the elderly. These workshops aimed to provide participants with the tools and knowledge to express and share, through artistic language and practice, their own feelings and life stories. *Cantieri Meticci* has created a number of theatrical performances, all of which have been structured around themes such as encounters with "the other", feelings of loss, experiences of uprooting and intercultural challenges (e.g. related to social coexistence and communication). The performances were enjoyed by both actors and theatre lovers taking part in cyclical workshops, several hundred migrants and refugees, many of whom acquired the skills to be group leaders and take new initiatives on their own, and of course hundreds of local residents, both Italians and migrants, who were involved in the organisation as active members or passive spectators of the activities and productions. In the summary of the project, published on the website of the *European Commission, European Website on Integration*, among the effects of *Cantieri Meticci's theatrical practices*, a significant increase in the self-confidence of its participants is mentioned, as well as a noticeable improvement in their language and creative skills and the ability to build relationships with people from different cultural backgrounds.

Theatre as an alternative or rather additional tool to traditional work with trauma is also presented in the Playback Theatre formula. The first Playback Theatre Group was formed in 1975 under the direction of Jonathan Fox in the central Hudson River Valley in upstate New York, as part of the experimental theatrical explorations of the 1970s. This activity uses constituent forms or theatrical works, developed on the basis of sources in improvisational theatre, storytelling, psychodrama. The main difference between playback theatre and psychodrama is that a narrator emerges from the audience to tell a personal story, and then the actors on stage act it out. The narrator does not take part in the game, he sits with the host at the side of the stage. After the first rehearsal, the actors improvise a scene and the narrator adds additional information. The actors, enriched with new information, improvise the scene again. Music plays an important role in this theatre. The members of the group who create the music during

the scene use simple instruments. Improvising on instruments, they try to follow the presented story and its atmosphere, creating a musical background for the stage. The story ends with a transformation or a new ending, suggested by the facilitator, if the narrator accepts the suggestions to play a scene with a new ending (Bielańska, 2002). As Anna Bielańska points out, acting out of stories by others “allows you to see your subjective world from a certain distance, and so it can allow you to see what you can’t see when you’re personally involved” (Bielańska, 2002, p. 22).

The Playback Theatre formula has been incorporated into the activities of the *Freedom Theatre*. It is a theatrical and cultural centre in the Jenin refugee camp. There are performances and theatre workshops in the refugee camp, in the town and villages of Jenin, training in acting, pedagogy and photography, book publication, exhibitions and short films. Initiated by the centre in 2011, the *Freedom Bus* project has become a mobile tool that has reached some of the key sites of oppression and resistance in the West Bank through the playback theatre formula, bringing together foreigners and Palestinians who come to learn from community members and meet in solidarity. The actors and actresses of *Freedom Bus* are Palestinians, familiar with the language, values, as well as the psychological and socio-political context of the stories they encounter (Rohrbach, 2018). As Rohrbach points out, theatre has the ability to create a safe space where you can visualize themes and emotions that are often suppressed or considered socially forbidden. The Playback Theatre produced by the *Freedom Bus team* not only allowed us to express sensitivity, grief or anger, but also made it possible to relive these emotions in the context of stage illustrations. The events of this kind of theatre do not focus only on acts of violence or the role of the victim, but rather emphasize the ability to act actively. The storyteller often shares it not only to inform the audience, but also to spur them to protest against injustice. From the perspective of the audience, Playback Theatre can therefore be seen as a form of testimony and a tool of resistance against representations of Palestinian life. In addition, the organizers of these events conduct meetings after the performances, where the participants, including those from outside the country, have a chance to discuss the results from the presented testimonies. The *Freedom Bus team* also strives to forge long-term relationships with collaborating communities, with the goal of building trust and reuniting fragmented communities in the West Bank (Rohrbach, 2018).

Theatre, especially in the form of playback interactive theatre, creates a safe and creative environment in which individuals feel relief, change their perspective and find support in the community. This tool not only helps to turn trauma into a narrative, but also reinforces a sense of identity, agency, and solidarity, providing an effective form of therapy and cultural empowerment.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we note that theatre is actively engaged in the discourse on war, trauma and the fate of refugees. There is a clear shift from passive listening to stories to active action, transforming real stories into a form of socially engaged art. An important aspect is also the emissive power of theatre, capable of creating a space for meetings, exchange of experiences and direct participation. In addition to its role as a witness, theatre has therapeutic and cathartic potential, which intensifies its impact in the process of trauma processing. This medium becomes a kind of laboratory, exploring various artistic languages and forms of processing difficult experiences and emotions, contributing to the autonomy of the individual and creating a reservoir of individual and cultural knowledge on which one can rely in building individual and collective identity in the face of difficult historical events.

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