

FORUM THEATRE IN THE PREVENTION OF EXCLUSION FROM A PEER GROUP IN THE SCHOOL SPACE

BARBARA FORYSIEWICZ

Institute of Cultural Research, Faculty of Languages,
University of Gdańsk

ul. Wita Stwosza 55, 80-308 Gdańsk

E-mail address: barbara.forysiewicz@ug.edu.pl

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1166-1667>

ABSTRACT

Aim. The article is a report from the research conducted in 2017 during the Forum Theatre performance, and it demonstrates the possibilities of using the Forum Theatre of Augusto Boal in activities to prevent exclusion from the peer group of teenage students. The purpose of this article is to signal the possibility of using the idea of Boal in preventing exclusions in the school space.

Methods. In order to discuss the problems, the analysis of source material and participant observations were used.

Results. At Forum Theatre, young people reveal their worldview and value system by interacting with actors and performing stage activities. The teacher, observing the students actions in the performance, can assess their empathy, sensitivity and interpersonal competence. The teacher gets to know the qualities that affect the student's mental state at the time of exclusion from the peer group. In the theatrical activity, the personality of the student with his or her predisposition to being a victim or torturer is revealed. Using the example of the analysed spectacle *The Cage* directed by Jarosław Rebeliński in 2017, it is clearly seen that the Forum Theatre makes it possible to get to know the student, and thus his or her problems in relation with peers. Forum Theatre shows the effects and causes of exclusion while simultaneously signalling to the teacher the symptoms of the problem manifesting themselves in the behaviour of young people.

Conclusion. Forum Theatre can be a diagnostic method for teachers in activities preventing the exclusion of a student from a peer group at school. Forum Theatre can be used as a method of working with students at risk of exclusion due to intolerance, lack of acceptance or lack of developed communication skills.

Key words: Forum Theatre, social exclusion, Augusto Boal, conflict, drama



INTRODUCTION

The author of Forum Theatre method is Augusto Boal – a Brazilian theatre director and theoretician, lecturer at New York University, Harvard University and Université de la Sorbonne-Nouvelle. Boal's ideas come from the pursuit of democratisation of the stage art. He believed that “everyone has the skills and disposition to art and has the right to do so. ‘To art’ has two meanings, it is about playing in a theatrical sense, but also about undertaking social and political actions” (Babbage, 2012, p. 159). In theatre practice, Boal collaborated with representatives of various environments, with prisoners, psychotherapists, hospital patients, favela residents and factory workers, as well as actors who in his opinion “can also do theater” (Babbage, 2012, p. 159). More than theatre-art, he was interested in authentic theatre, defined as intervention in social space. He saw in the theatre the opportunity to change people, he created a method that extracts socially valuable property from the theatre. Boal believed that there were no ready-made techniques. Every method of work in society must be prepared, and then you still need to modify it to adapt it to new situations. According to Boal (2014), Forum Theatre cannot be understood as a ready-made scheme that can be applied in every situation. This method always requires modification in order to adapt it to a specific problem. The ability to twist the pattern of the Forum reveals the social value of Boal's (2014) idea.

Getting to know the idea of Boal (2014) made me search for institutions and theaters in Poland that offer Forum performances addressed to teenagers. I started my search in Gdańsk. Here I met Jarosław Rebeliński – a theatre director who works with young people using the Forum Theatre method. I was going to check how Forum Theatre affects the teenagers and whether it is possible to create a method of working with teenagers based on the idea of Boal's. I was eager to learn about the properties of the Forum that would be important in the prevention of social threats in the school space. This article is a fragment of my longer scientific dissertation about the possibilities of using Forum Theatre to act to prevent the exclusion of a teenager from a peer group in the school space.

This article is based on the analysis of one performance – *The Cage* (original title *Klatka*), by Jarosław Rebeliński in 2017 in Gdańsk. The following text is the result of one of the first studies on the possibilities of using Forum Theatre in preventing exclusion from a peer group at school, which can be confirmed by the Drama Way Foundation, which conducts workshops and performances of Forum Theatre in Poland.

My research has shown that Forum Theatre can have an impact on shaping the worldview of teenagers. Participation in the Forum performance results in a review of the teenager's own worldview, his attitude towards another human being. The greatest value of Forum Theatre, in my opinion, lies in the fact that this theatre induces its participant to reflect on a given problem.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Cage is a performance based on authentic events and presents the situation of a teenage girl who experiences exclusion from the peer group and humiliation. The main character of the performance is Zuza. She is a confident teenager who expects her parents and teachers to comply with identical principles that they expect from their students, e.g. consistency and timeliness. This causes her difficulties in relations with parents and teachers. Zuza is sociable, empathic, loyal to the system of her values, so she does not understand why people around her do not understand her. Zuza is raised in a full family: the father is a housewife, the mother is a bank clerk and her older sister is studying law. Her parents are proud of her and often use her as an example for their younger daughter.

Family relationships are not perfect. Because of the mother's job, the family spends little time together. Dinners are an opportunity to talk, but the conversation often turns into a quarrel. At school, Zuza is liked by her peers, but she does not have the best opinion among the teachers. During one of the breaks, Zuza's friend confesses to the girl that she likes a boy, but she does not have the courage to talk to him. It turns out that the boy likes Zuza. A girl does not want to make an appointment with him, so as not to hurt her friend, but the boy insidiously (under the pretext of choosing a gift for his girlfriend) urges Zuza to meet. During the meeting, the boy embraces and kisses the girl against her will, at the same time making a selfie. He uploads his picture with Zuza on Facebook. The protagonist tries to explain to her friends what really happened, but the girls do not believe her. The girls exclude Zuza from the group and take revenge on her. After Physical Education classes, they record by a mobile phone as she takes a shower. They put a movie with a naked girl on the Internet. The main character goes down and is inclined to commit suicide. She thinks she cannot count on peer, family and teacher support. Zuza is alone with her problem. The performance of Forum Theatre always follows the same pattern, although the content that fills it changes with each staging. The spectators occupy seats in the theatre room. From the moment spectators enter the theatre hall, their activities will be coordinated by the animator. At the beginning, the animator encourages spectators to jointly perform several integration exercises and exercises conducive to concentration of attention. Thanks to the exercises, young people are more willing to cooperate in a group and focus on the action. Then the animator explains the rules of participation in the Forum spectacle. After this introduction, the spectacle is played on stage, always about the current problems of the social group to which the spectators belong. In every performance of the Forum, there is a main character struggling with a serious problem, whose behaviour is analysed by the spectators. Young people try to determine the reasons for the presented situation and test various possibilities of preventing the unpleasant events of the main character. The performance ends with a kind of understatement. The action is brought to a climax and interrupted, and the recipient is to answer the question of what

will happen next. After the performance, the animator encourages spectators to share their reflections on the presented situation. The animator asks questions such as: what would you advise the main character if he or she were your friend? What do you think the main character will do? What would you do in such a situation? Then the performance is played again. This time every spectator can stop the action by clapping his or her hands. The actors stand still, and the viewer who interrupted the action enters the stage and takes the place of the main character. The spectator-actor can take over the main character's attribute (the character identification: object, pendant, cap, etc.), which makes transfiguration easier for him or her, and his or her identification as the main character for other spectators. The spectator-actor changes character, creates a character again, while showing the possibilities of preventing a difficult situation in which the main character finds himself.

When the student goes on stage, this is the right time to start a pedagogical diagnosis. The teacher has the opportunity to assess the degree of the student's involvement in solving the problem, to assess how natural and how creative it is. During *The Cage* I observed twice that the students treated the participation in the Forum as fun, the opportunity to show off their skills and sense of humour before camaraderie. Such behaviour of young people may indicate a lack of maturity to start a discussion on the topic presented on stage. Playing the role, other students showed their position and their in a potential emergency. Their behaviour showed information about their mental condition, worldview, system of values and moral principles. At this stage, observing the students' activities, the teacher was able to deduce what the student's attitude to the problem of exclusion was.

During the Forum Theatre, the diverse position of young people was noticeable regarding the problem of excluding Zuza from the peer group. The vast majority of teenagers condemned stigma and violence against the main character of the performance. But there were also students in the room who did not see a problem in posting compromising video recordings "on the net" as an act of revenge on someone who in their opinion deserved such an act. This group was further divided into people who only became aware of the seriousness of the consequences of such an act by Forum Theatre and the youth who blame the tragic ending of Zuza's story on the "weak-minded" girl. For one group, the Forum has become an opportunity to shape the right social attitude. In the case of the last of these groups of students, the Forum suggests teachers which topics to discuss, e.g. during an educational hour. Attention and awareness of the presence of a problem is a very important element in the prevention of social threats at school. There is a message from each spectacle: do not reject, justify the proceedings, listen, try to understand, give a chance.

Forum Theatre develops social competences in the areas of tolerance, proper threat identification and conflict management. Lack of the last of these skills is a common, if not the most popular, reason for exclusion from a peer group. Forum Theatre can be one of the methods supporting the work of a school counsellor, e.g. when discussing and resolving conflicts, indicating

opportunities to deal with difficult life situations, searching for values by a teenager, developing empathy and awakening feelings, while helping the student discover his or her own personality. When we look at the theatrical message, we see that all of these goals were shown in the stage action of *The Cage*:

- Conflict resolution:

The situation presented in the spectacle: revenge - convincing girls to resolve the conflict by excluding her friend from the peer group and humiliation.

Possibilities of preventing a difficult situation: discussing conflict resolution options, increasing students' communication skills, responsibility for their own actions, supporting the development of reflective thinking.

- Difficult life situations:

Situation presented: lack of sense of security, the breakup of family and friendship relations, rejection due to misunderstanding, conflict relationship with the teacher.

Possibilities of prevention: cooperation of the educator with parents, development of interpersonal skills of the teenager, observation of his reaction and diagnosis of the cause of rebellion or self-isolation.

- Searching for value:

Situation presented: an inverted system of values, a conviction that the world belongs to the strong, the suspect must be punished if it improves the victim's mood.

Possibilities of prevention: discussing the values and norms that our culture requires to respect (e.g. respecting human dignity).

- Empathy and awakening of feelings:

Situation presented: egoism, a sense of harm and a desire for revenge.

Possibilities of prevention: discussing the role and importance of feelings in a cultural community.

- Discovering your own personality:

Situation presented: I am and what next? Intuitive operation, without the ability to predict the consequences of the procedure.

Possibilities of prevention: training to control emotions and impulsiveness, developing the ability to think reflectively.

Forum Theatre can be a method of supporting the school's work in developing students' social competences. What is also important in this process is the fact of emotional involvement of the student and his experience. Lucyna Maksymowicz (2002, p. 55) points to "three basic types of dramatic experiences:

- personal - experiences of each participant;
- interpersonal - jointly solving problems, removing difficulties arising in contacts between people;
- socialising - playing disharmony and conflicts."

The socialisation meaning of the Forum Theatre is also realised in the drama-specific "improvisation and constant modification of the role, depending on the topic and the relationship with others" (Swędrak, 2008, p. 28). The conflict indicated by Maksymowicz (2002) is also an indispensable component of the Forum performance. Joanna Swędrak (2008, p. 28) claims:

Conflict is the main driving force in drama, one may be tempted to say that without conflict, drama does not exist, the space in which conflicts are resolved appears to be a safe place where the participant can confidently face the difficulties encountered; tension is an element of drama about the state of enormous effort and emotional commitment, which later becomes an opportunity for discussion and reflection.

Finally, the conflict situation in the spectacle helps students identify with the characters in which they will be able to play the role; facilitates taking sides in the conflict. Fictitiousness of a situation gives participants a sense of security resulting from the reversibility of their action. Personal experiences are revealed in referring to one's own experiences or in looking for an analogy with the events one has witnessed. Interpersonal dramatic experiences take place at the crucial moment of transformation for the Forum, i.e. when the spectator plays the main character. Equally important is the work of a teacher, the benefits of using drama are associated with the fact of performing group work. Group work promotes integration and teamwork. During drama classes, young people can shape forgiveness, acceptance and cooperation skills. Swędrak writes (2008, p. 28): "Drama precursors and people who use this method of education in their work distinguish several basic meanings of these classes: educational, therapeutic, creative, inspirational, communicative, integration, and individualisation meanings." At Forum Theatre, these meanings occur through activities that are not imposed, but those that give the teenager a sense of making their own independent discovery. By testing the possibilities of conduct, the young people creates their own stock of possibilities of behaviour in various situations. Thus, the Forum's activities serve the moral and ethical message, influence the socialisation of students, verify their code of values, raise communication and interpersonal competencies, unite a group taking part in a performance jointly (e.g. a class). This is the proof that Forum Theatre can be a very good method of preventing peer exclusion in school space.

METHODOLOGY

I derived the conclusions presented in the article from the analysis of the material obtained using active observation method during *The Cage* performance. I decided to carry out hidden observation because of the desire to obtain reliable material for the analysis. If I were to reveal myself as a researcher, the teenagers would probably not speak freely about the problem presented - they would not want to reveal their thoughts fearing my negative opinion about them. I conducted the observation throughout *The Cage* performance. I observed the reaction of the teenagers to the spectacle, as well as statements and actions of the teenagers who played the character Zuza on stage, which presented their point of view of the situation. The studies were conducted in person using non-standardised observation techniques. The documentation was made up of notes taken during observation.

Sixty people were present in the observed Forum performance, of whom four teenagers took an active part on the stage. It was interesting that only boys played the role of Zuza. The girls did not go on stage. This can be explained by the fact that they were afraid of identifying themselves with the main character. They preferred to remain silent instead of expressing their opinion on the problem presented in the performance. The research sample is not limited to creating the main character on stage. In the study, I also took into account the statements of the teenagers who did not go on stage, but substantiated their opinion about Zuza's behaviour. The information about the target group that I had before the study was limited. At the time of observation (in 2016) I only knew the teenagers were 15 years old and were students of a school in Gdańsk. Participation in the performance Forum was not aimed at introducing a specific change in the target group's environment. It was only intended to make the teenagers interested in the problem of exclusion and to encourage young people to reflect on this problem. First of all, the causes and effects of exclusion were significant in the Performance Forum. During the research, it was found that Forum Theatre gives a teacher the opportunity to know a teenager because a teenager expresses his or her worldview and moral principles that guide his or her life. So Forum Theatre can be used as a method to change a teenager's behaviour. The analysis of the collected material enabled me to start working on developing a socio-therapeutic method using the Performance Forum. The study was preliminary, so a description of the above method is not included in this article.

The aim of my research work was to draw attention to the Forum Theatre as a way of getting to know young people. By persuading young people to show their own worldview and attitude to the situation on stage, Forum Theatre enables teachers to diagnose students in the context of their entanglement in problem situations, so it allows to counteract problems, for example exclusion. In response to the question whether it is possible to use the idea of Boal (2014) in working with teenagers to combat exclusion, it was also necessary to refer to publications in the field of sociology and pedagogy.

CONCLUSION

From the observation and analysis of the behaviour of young people during the Forum performance, the following conclusions may be drawn: during Forum Theatre, a teacher can learn about the student's worldview and a student's value system in which exclusion is allowed. Forum Theatre helps to meet the student, to discover his or her character traits causing his or her exclusion, and shows young people the negative effects of exclusion. The character of the Forum performance is a contemporary of the spectator, which facilitates the identification of the spectator with the character; joint problem-solving favours the integration of the class group and counteracts exclusion.

At Forum Theatre, education takes place in an atmosphere of fun, engaging and encouraging young people to participate together. The youth participating in *The Cage* performance confirmed that the theatrical message form of the Forum is attractive. The youth would like to participate in other performances of this type. This sentence was also spoken by young people who did not go on theater stage.

Based on the observations made, it is difficult to determine to what extent the Forum Theatre affected individual students. It is also not known how long the change lasts assuming that Forum Theatre affects the perception of young people. This is the reason why I decided to conduct more detailed research on the use of the Forum Theatre method in specific problem situations, also in sociotherapy and resocialisation, but this is a problem for another article.

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