

FOREWORD

Being Heard, Being Seen Sociodrama in institutions

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One of the many benefits of working transnationally is the opportunity to learn about and understand the practices of our peers. It is inspirational to hear about and marvel at colleagues' creative endeavours while feeling affirmed by the connection to shared ethics and values. The PERFORMERS project has been joyful as well as challenging, exhausting and gratifying among a host of other feelings and thoughts.

When reading the three booklets describing the field work of the Hungarian, Portuguese and Swedish sociodramatists, it was impossible not to feel proud to be a part of a collective with such skill, delivered with such heart and held together by sheer willpower during what may well be the most challenging time in our lives.

PERFORMERS was born from the fervent wish to use sociodrama with practitioners in a juvenile detention centre in Budapest. The intention of the sociodramatists is clear at the outset, an ambition to review all activities with a view to creating a sustainable and replicable programme:

"The sociodrama in the detention centre was launched with the determination to create a real and lasting methodological development in the sector." (Hungarian introduction)

Partnerships were key to making this happen and involved earning the trust and respect of the staff. Some of the detention centre practitioners were included in PERFORMERS' meetings and we, as a transnational team, were able to follow the journeys from their discovery of the methods to learning how to use them and then integrating them into their practice. The English language excerpt from the Hungarian booklet is an introduction to a more comprehensive book describing the entire system from the perspective of each person in it, bringing to light the specific needs of working with young people in a 'total' institution that is not visible to most of society.

Because the beneficiary group is often shrouded in misunderstanding by the general public, a critical aspect of working morally and responsibly with young people who are incarcerated is safeguarding. It was not until an issue querying the potential, historical exploitation of a young person associated with the detention centre was raised did the vastly differing opinions, perspectives and legal requirements emerge among the entire transnational partnership. FEPTO (Federation of Psychodrama Training Organisations) representatives from Greece, Romania and Serbia were also part of the whole group in addition to the British, Hungarian, Portuguese and Swedish teams. The repercussions are still impacting PERFORMERS both internally in these groups and externally as we relate to and understand one another and our

evolving views on the specific situation and the wider system of ensuring the safety of young people under one's aegis. This is important because all of us work with young people.

There are no simple answers or solutions. We used sociodrama and action methods to voice, hear from and explore the differences, with respect and care. We did not come to any fast conclusions or resolutions; that would have entailed "taking on all of Hungarian society" in the words of one PERFORMERS partner.

Our crisis was not without relevant action, however. We researched European Union regulations about safeguarding issues. The British team also shared national resources as the UK has strong and robust safeguarding policies and procedures regarding working with young people and vulnerable adults.

We have stated the intention that we will include safeguarding in all future agreements at the outset of any project focused on young and/or vulnerable people in any country and with any partner. No one person or organisation is too important to bypass this process. The work on this issue will endure and finding ways to remain in partnership with institutions within a safeguarding framework is a daunting task of optimum concern.

While the beneficiaries of the work in Hungary were juvenile offenders and the people who worked with them, the Portuguese practitioners focused on another vulnerable group: young people who are 'differently' abled as well as the social care professionals who led the voluntary association, Nos's activities. They found that it was necessary to bring to view the plight of the carers. Margarida Belchior writes:

Beginning with the difficult feelings of the Associação NÓS workers, the responsibility and demands of the work they do, we became aware of their invisibility in society - a work so necessary, so useful as caring for people, young people and children with disabilities and with so little visibility and recognition.

In addition to not being seen, the carers' needs were often not given voice and the imperative of the project emerged as one that provides 'care for the carers' especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Carers were not among the initial beneficiaries of the project. The focus was initially solely on the young people with disabilities. This is a population that experiences grave discrimination everywhere. Lea Kellermann shares:

I confess that working with young people is always very challenging for me... I never know if I will be able to create a plan that will engage them. I usually have doubts that they might find the dynamics too childish. I work on myself to find the best way to establish a healthy and honest bridge with them. I start from my immense desire to hear what the youth have to say, and from my genuine interest in learning from them.

Lea articulates the constant reflexive nature of our practice that while we may encounter thousands of people throughout our worklife, it starts with us, the roles that we choose to introduce, develop, and sustain the group's energy. Choose an appropriate role and everyone flourishes. If the sociodramatist's role is not adequate, an imbalance emerges, and some group members are unable to participate fully. Jacob Moreno's vision of a place and space for everyone, regardless of status, is diminished.

This weighty responsibility – and each sociodramatist's understanding of it - is so clearly expressed in the accounts from each of the three countries.

Our Swedish colleagues have equally formidable circumstances as they work with asylum seekers and refugees from the most conflicted places on earth. Creating environments for people fleeing war and dangerous situations into a Swedish society that is not always welcoming was going to be hard. Facing the scrutiny of non-sociodramatist peers made it doubly so.

Mariolina Werner describes an example from her practice:

“When I presented some of the games we had done to a group working with traumatised children, they were horrified by the games, such as the 'The whole sea is storming' exercise... They felt it was too strong for them to do this exercise. With hindsight, I cannot agree with them. Even this simple exercise made the young people realise the importance of cooperation and reliability. The mood of the group was noticeably relieved when they managed to get the whole group into the right place.”

Here we recognise the lack of familiarity with Morenean methods for those offering similar provision to a particularly marginalised group. It can breed scepticism and fear. Sociodrama involves a certain amount of risk-taking in a safe enough environment where experimentation is not only possible, it is the explicitly stated purpose. Bringing common challenges to the group and finding effective ways to meet them is enormously empowering for the players in the dramas.

And the effects are...frankly, stunning. Mariolina asked her students to record their thoughts in journals to track their own learning. Here is an excerpt from one young man:

I found the course as a whole very embracing, everyone in the group was welcoming and everyone had equally strong words. I, on the other hand, have a very hard time opening up in front of groups but after this course I realised that everything I do is just a lot of "macho" games. My goals were simple, it was to be able to open up to a group and show my "true" self which I think I managed to do. (...)

The creative means with which Mariolina and her team work enables transformation from the inside that then manifests on the outside. Another young person reflects:

The course was all about us, and if we weren't honest I wouldn't get what I wanted out of the course, so I told myself to start opening up slowly but surely, so that's what I did. I started showing my feelings and really trying to talk about my opinions. I have had a very difficult time in my life when it comes to feelings and opinions, I have always been closed in and kept my opinions to myself, but this course actually helped me a lot. My family noticed a big difference because I started to be more active when it came to family, I started to talk to the family more and gave my opinions when we sat at the family table.

What underpins everything in the PERFORMERS projects is the role of creativity in mapping, learning and transforming the individuals, groups and ultimately, society. Change and growth amidst the backdrop of enormous issues such as migration, poverty, differences of ability and imbalances of power are brokered using Morenean methods. And as with the safeguarding conflict, no clear answers emerge; instead a wider perspective is gained, a commitment to learn more secured and a vision adapted to encompass kindness, compassion and the strength to manage the unmanageable.

I invite you to read these testimonies and delight in the possibilities they both present and promise. I ask you to consider how they relate to the topics and systems in your world. Finally, I welcome you on behalf of PERFORMERS to join us in community to deploy our collective creative genius to meet the challenges we face.