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The Experience of Change within Playback Theatre: Between the Individual and the Community—as Exemplified by Local Practices

Doświadczenie zmiany w Teatrze Playback. Między jednostką a wspólnotą – na przykładzie praktyk lokalnych

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Playback Theatre, dramatherapy, social performance, community theatre, transformation

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Teatr Playback, teatroterapia, performans społeczny, teatr wspólnotowy, transformacja

ABSTRACT

The article examines the experience of change in Playback Theatre, understood as a process situated between individual experience and the communal dimension. It explores the psychological, ritual, and social aspects of this phenomenon, with particular focus on local practices in Kraków. An interdisciplinary perspective, encompassing performance theory, dramatherapy, Moreno's psychodrama, and approaches characteristic of community-based theatre, was adopted. The text draws on available literature, as well as case studies and participant observation from two Kraków-based playback groups: Ukrainian Playback Theatre and Playback Theatre Esperanto.

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The article first discusses the historical and theoretical context of Playback Theatre, then analyzes participants' individual transformation processes, and finally focuses on the role of community and dialogue with the Other. It demonstrates that Playback Theatre activities foster emotional closeness and the reinterpretation of experiences, while also creating a platform for integration, solidarity, and cross-cultural communication.

The main conclusion highlights the potential of Playback Theatre as a tool for community development and for supporting work with refugees and culturally diverse groups. At the same time, the article encourages further research into local practices, which can provide valuable insights into the transformations of community in the contemporary world.

ABSTRAKT

Artykuł podejmuje temat doświadczenia zmiany w Teatrze Playback, rozumianego jako proces rozpięty pomiędzy indywidualnym przeżyciem a wymiarem wspólnotowym. Analizowane są psychologiczne, rytualne i społeczne aspekty tego zjawiska, ze szczególnym odniesieniem do krakowskich praktyk lokalnych. Przyjęto perspektywę interdyscyplinarną, obejmującą teorię performansu, teatroterapię, psychodramę Moreno oraz podejścia charakterystyczne dla teatru zaangażowanego. W tekście wykorzystano dostępną literaturę przedmiotu, a także studium przypadków i obserwacji uczestniczących w dwóch krakowskich grupach playbackowych: Ukrainian Playback Theatre i Playback Theatre Esperanto.

W artykule najpierw omówiono kontekst historyczny i teoretyczny Teatru Playback, następnie podjęto analizę indywidualnych procesów transformacji uczestników, by w końcu skupić się nad rolą wspólnoty i dialogu z Innym. Wykazane zostało, że działania Teatru Playback sprzyjają oswajaniu emocji i reinterpretacji doświadczeń, a zarazem stwarzają przestrzeń do integracji, solidarności oraz porozumienia ponad granicami kulturowymi.

Zasadniczy wniosek wskazuje na potencjał Teatru Playback jako narzędzia wspierającego rozwój wspólnoty i pomagającego w pracy z uchodźcami oraz grupami zróżnicowanymi kulturowo. Jednocześnie artykuł zachęca do dalszych badań nad lokalnymi praktykami, które mogą dostarczać wiedzy o przemianach wspólnotowości we współczesnym świecie.

Introduction: Art and transformation

Over the past several decades, there has been a growing interest in the use of art as a medium for individual development and the building of social bonds. Contemporary approaches in pedagogy, therapy, and social work increasingly integrate forms of artistic expression that allow not only for articulating emotions, but also for negotiating difficult experiences, discovering and shaping one's identity, and initiating processes of transformation—both personal and communal (Stefańska 2017: 75–76). This process falls within the framework of transformative learning[1]—a pedagogical approach concerned with helping individuals critically analyze and alter their understanding of the world. Transformative learning often begins with a crisis or "disorienting dilemma" that challenges existing beliefs, leading to reflection, dialogue, and ultimately a shift in perspective. According to Mezirow's theory, changes in frames of reference—perspectives, ways of thinking, and habitual patterns of thought—occur through constructive dialogue, which allows us to draw on the experiences of others in order to critically evaluate their own beliefs and take steps toward transformation (Mezirow 2000: 7–8).

In therapy, art may function in several ways—as something we receive and experience, as a tool for understanding our emotions, or as an active creative process in which the participant becomes the author, interpreter, and witness of their own experience (Bielańska 2002: 13). This form of work enables the expression of experiences resistant to verbalization, supports internal integration, enhances the sense of agency, and creates space for personal and social change. In this sense, the creative act may serve as a symbolic transformation, which gives one's own story shape, meaning, and value. As Lech Śliwonik argues, its greatest significance lies in "the unrestrained development of personality, and all actions and activities serving self-realization and liberation from imposed and learned roles"[2] (Śliwonik 1999: 66).

1 The concept of "transformative learning," developed by the American andragogue and adult education scholar Jack Mezirow, was introduced in 1978 and refers to adult learning processes, meaning-making practices, and the transformative potential of learning experiences.

2 Unless otherwise stated, all translations are the author's own.

In this article, we attempt to examine the ways in which Playback Theatre functions as a pedagogical tool for the reconstruction of identity, and how the experience of transformation—a process bridging the personal and collective dimensions of experience—takes shape within this practice.

Drama therapy: From historical traditions to contemporary practice

While drama therapy originated in medical and healing practices, it gradually expanded into education, preventive health, and personal growth. It is effective not only for people with impairments, but is also valuable for children, youth, and adults functioning without special limitations (Badora 2015: 129), offering these groups a space for self-discovery, emotional reflection, and purposeful action through the theatricalization of experience: "Dramatherapy is a form of dramatic art that, even if not explicitly religious or based on belief systems, has nonetheless a potential spiritual quality similar to that of ritual" (Pitruzzella 2004: 116). Although the term *drama therapy* came into common use only in the second half of the twentieth century—mainly to describe the combination of theatrical practices with psychotherapy and special education—the idea of using theater as a tool for healing, transformation, and psychological development has a much longer tradition. As early as antiquity, the stage was regarded as a space of inner purification—catharsis—understood as a profound process of spiritual and moral transformation for the spectator (Bielańska 2002: 17).

Precedents for the therapeutic use of theater can be found in the avant-garde experiments of the early twentieth century. Nikolai Evreinov's experiments with "theater therapy" and "theater for oneself" in Russia during the 1910s and 1920s investigated both the individual and collective dimensions of theatrical transformation, paving the way for later developments in therapeutic theater. For Evreinov, theatricality was not only an artistic practice but a fundamental human necessity—a capacity for self-transformation that precedes and enables emotional and social development (Evreinov 1922).

In the 1920s, the concept of *psychodrama* emerged, introduced by Jacob Levy Moreno, an Austrian physician and pioneer of action therapy. He proposed an innovative therapeutic method that used improvisation, the enactment of personal experiences, and role reversal as means of gaining deeper self-understanding and activating processes of internal change (Bielańska 2002: 19–20). In the second half of the twentieth century, ideas of using theater for therapeutic purposes were further developed by Brazilian director, theater scholar, playwright, and educator Augusto Boal, creator of the Theatre of the Oppressed. Boal introduced the concept of the *spect-actor* (spectator + actor), which challenged the traditional passive model of the theater audience: "the spectator no longer delegates power to the characters either to think or to act in his place. The spectator frees himself; he thinks and acts for himself!" (Boal 1979: 155). Similarly to Moreno, Boal viewed theater as a space for artistic expression and, above all, as a tool for change—personal and social. In Europe, he enriched his method with a therapeutic element that arose from a growing need to work with internal forms of oppression.[3] The stage became a field for experimentation—a place where participants could test new roles, process difficult emotions, and better understand themselves. What distinguished Boal's approach was its strong emphasis on actively confronting oppression—whether social or psychological—through direct action, dialogue, conflict, and decision-making.

Contemporary drama therapy focuses primarily on the process and on the experience itself, rather than on creating a polished artistic product. Its goal is not to produce a "finished" performance, but to enable participants—through movement, improvisation, and body-based work—to reflect on their experiences, name their difficulties,

3 In his book *L'arc-en-ciel du désir* (*The Rainbow of Desire*, 1990), Boal described the process of adapting his techniques to a Western European context. Rather than focusing solely on the exposure of external violence—as in the Latin American context—he began to concentrate on the concept of the "Cop-in-the-Head" (*Le flic dans la tête*): the internalized norms, fears, prohibitions, and stereotypes that constrain individual agency. As one commentator notes, "He concluded that while people in Western Europe—unlike those in Latin America—were not exposed to immediate external violence, they had nonetheless internalized an oppressive 'cop' into their own heads" (Feldhendler 1994: 87–88). Techniques such as "Cop-in-the-Head" and "Image Theatre" enabled participants to recognize and confront these internalized voices.

and discover new coping strategies. In recent years, a clear shift has become visible: drama therapy increasingly engages with themes related to trauma, the search for and expression of cultural identity, confronting social inequalities, and strengthening psychological resilience. Today, drama therapy extends far beyond clinics and hospitals, entering community, educational, and social settings. It relies less and less on traditional psychiatric models and instead becomes a tool for supporting social change and giving voice to those whose voices are often unheard. Improvisation, bodily expression, and storytelling remain its foundation, but they are now understood not only as forms of personal expression, but also as ways of creating collective dialogue and conscious participation in social life (Emunah et al. 2021: 31–35).

In Poland, the Art Generacje (Art Generation) project, carried out by the Drama Way Foundation for Education and Culture in Warsaw,[4] is evolving along a similar path. This intergenerational initiative brings together younger and older participants in a shared creative process based on theatre, movement, and improvisation. Its purpose is not to stage traditional artistic performances, but to create a space for self-expression, the sharing of experiences, and reflection on socially and existentially important themes. Participants co-create the performance script, drawing on their own stories and experiences, which gives the project both a personal and a communal dimension. Each edition focuses on a different theme—for example, values, the body, or harmony—and culminates in a public presentation, often accompanied by workshops and discussion. Art Generacje exemplifies socially engaged theatre, which strengthens intergenerational bonds, fosters empathy and social sensitivity, and builds a sense of agency and belonging through art.

Working in a similar vein is Patrycja Bartoszak-Kempa, a special educator and art therapist who develops theatre projects aimed at groups at risk of social exclusion. Her work addresses themes of

4 The "Art Generacje" project has been active since 2013. It was initiated by the Drama Way Foundation for Education and Culture. In 2020, its fifth edition, titled *Love*, received second prize in the 11th Warsaw Cultural Education Awards in the category of non-governmental organizations. See: "Art Generacje," https://www.fundacja.dramaway.pl/projekty/art-generacje (accessed 29 July 2025).

identity, violence, and social oppression. *Homophobia in You and Me* (*Homofobia w Tobie i we mnie*, 2011) presents the struggles of loneliness, fear, and misunderstanding from the perspective of a seventeen-year-old lesbian girl. The project *I Felt a Hand* (*Poczułem dłoń*, 2014) explores the process of coming to terms with a homosexual identity and confronting dominant social norms, as it focuses on internal experiences and the social realities of heteronormative individuals. To address women's perspectives, she created projects such as *I Didn't Scream Either* (*Też nie krzyczałam*, 2020), which engages with the taboo of sexual violence, and *Madwoman* (*Wariatka*, 2018), performed in the Forum Theatre format.[5] The latter tells the story of a woman experiencing domestic violence at the hands of her husband; despite repeated attempts, she receives no real support from social services. While presenting the protagonist's experience, the performance also challenged social service workers to reflect on systemic barriers and entrenched patterns of action.

The aforementioned projects, although diverse in form, share the conviction that theatre can be a medium of personal expression and of social change as well as a space for marginalized voices (Bartoszak 2022: 37–55). Among similar European initiatives, one worth mentioning is REACT – Community Theatre Setting the Stage for Refugee Integration (2016–2018), which used community theatre to support refugee integration. Participants with migration experience devised performances grounded in their personal narratives, facilitating dialogue with local communities. Productions in Bristol, Rotterdam, and Palermo addressed questions of identity, cultural tensions, and the everyday challenges faced by migrants. The initiative promoted empathic engagement, strengthened communicative and social skills, and worked to counteract stereotypical representations.[6]

5 Forum Theatre is a participatory form developed by Augusto Boal within the Theatre of the Oppressed, in which spectators intervene in the staged action by proposing and enacting alternative solutions to situations of oppression.

6 "REACT – Community theatre setting the stage for refugee integration," 5 January 2018, https://culture.ec.europa.eu/news/react-community-theatre-setting-the-stage-for-refugee-integration (accessed 29 July 2025).

Playback Theatre as transformative practice: Structure, safety, and collective meaning-making

Among the various theatrical approaches used in this integrative context, Playback Theatre holds particular significance. It functions as a "contemporary, interactive, non-scripted performance form" (Fox 1999: 5), in which the lived experiences of audience members are enacted in real time by a trained ensemble. "Playback theatre often takes place in performance settings with a trained company of actors enacting the stories of audience members… All that is needed is respect, empathy, and playfulness" (Salas 1999: 7). Rooted in principles of empathy, co-presence, and active listening, this method creates an environment in which individual narratives acquire communal relevance, and the theatrical enactment embodies ritualistic, artistic, and social aspects. (Dennis 2007: 19).

Playback Theatre functions both as a vehicle for individual development and as a practice that supports integration, therapeutic intervention, and educational objectives. Its effectiveness is especially notable when working with socially marginalized groups—such as refugees, migrants, or individuals affected by trauma—where the performance space facilitates recognition, safe emotional expression, and the rebuilding of social bonds: "If oppressed persons can be defined as those who have nowhere to tell their story, our mission has been to provide a space for anyone and everyone to be heard" (Fox 1999: 6).

Playback Theatre establishes conditions that are highly conducive to transformative learning: confronting traumatic experiences within a safe space, while maintaining essential critical distance, allows participants to engage in the process of reflection and reconstruction of meaning. As Mezirow emphasizes, supportive relationships and a supportive environment are central to transformative learning, as they ensure "a more confident, assured sense of personal efficacy, of having a self—or selves—more capable of becoming critically reflective […], and having the self-confidence to take action on reflective insight" (Mezirow 2000: 25).

Playback Theatre draws inspiration from the oral storytelling tradition, in which spoken narratives functioned as communal rituals. As Jonathan Fox, its founder and theorist, notes, stories in oral cultures conveyed potent emotions, carried social significance, and

transmitted foundational values (Fox 1999). Storytelling in these societies served predominantly communal ends: it maintained collective memory, consolidated social relationships, and ensured the intergenerational continuity of cultural knowledge. It functioned as a socially embedded practice rather than as a product of individual authorial intent. Informed by this heritage, Playback Theatre reclaims the performative and social power of the spoken word, employing it as a means of engagement, communal meaning-making, and the reinforcement of social connections.

Jacob Levy Moreno's psychodrama represents another major influence on Playback Theatre, influencing both its theoretical principles and practical applications. Jonathan Fox was introduced to psychodrama at the Moreno Institute in Beacon in 1973, shortly before establishing the first Playback ensemble. Moreno's concepts of spontaneity, unscripted action, and engagement with participants' personal experiences were instrumental in shaping this new theatrical form. Notably, psychodrama introduced the practice of grounding performances in the authentic, unplanned narratives of audience members (Fox 2018: 32), thereby positioning the creative act as a simultaneous process of understanding and transformation.

Unlike psychodrama, which is mainly therapeutic and centered on the protagonist's individual work, Playback stories are enacted by a company of actors while the narrator remains in the audience. This structural distinction introduces a degree of observational distance, fostering reflection and a sense of safety, especially when working with vulnerable participants. The facilitator's role also differs: whereas in psychodrama the director functions as a therapist who actively guides the process, the Playback conductor supports both the narrative and the ensemble's improvisational enactment. Crucially, Playback Theatre does not seek to induce catharsis; the goal is not an intense emotional breakthrough but rather the sharing of experiences and the collective engagement with personal narratives. Consequently, the method extends beyond clinical settings, functioning as a tool for promoting dialogue, reinforcing identity, and strengthening community bonds across diverse social contexts (Bielańska 2002: 22).

This emergent form rapidly developed across several mutually reinforcing levels. On the artistic level, Playback Theatre can be understood as a form of postdramatic performance, which eschews

linear narrative, scripted dialogue, and classical dramatic structures. Instead, it presents an improvised, collective creative act rooted in the lived experiences of participants (Carlson 2015). On the therapeutic level, it establishes a safe space for processing personal narratives, strengthening identity, and enhancing agency, while simultaneously functioning as a communal ritual with transformative potential. At the social level, Playback Theatre functions as a tool for engaging marginalized individuals and groups, facilitating dialogue, promoting integration, and affirming subjectivity through storytelling and its public witnessing. This hybrid character—combining artistic practice, therapeutic engagement, and social action—confers particular transformative power. As Rea Dennis observes, Playback performance constitutes a "ritual framework" in which participants undergo a liminal transition and "experience transformation in witnessing the enactment of their story" (Dennis 2004: 25).

Although Playback Theatre performances are improvised, they follow a clear and recognizable structure (Bielańska 2002: 21). Each performance begins with a warm-up led by the Conductor, a member of the ensemble experienced in group facilitation. This phase employs a range of exercises and techniques designed to cultivate an atmosphere of trust and openness, enabling participants to feel comfortable sharing their stories. Next, a member of the audience—the narrator—is invited to recount a personal narrative, which may relate to the theme of the performance or emerge from the narrator's current experience. During this exchange, the Conductor helps to identify key events and emotions that will form the basis of the scene.

Afterward, the actors and musicians of the ensemble (the Playbackers) enact the story, following the form selected by the Conductor: "As forms can be systematized as short, medium, and long, the performance should begin by making use of short forms and then evolve to longer ones. The most typical short forms are fluid sculptures and pairs, and through them performers can address several aspects present in the shared stories. Furthermore, using a relatively short time interval, several stories might be listened to at the beginning of the performance. In most of the forms, the use of body

expression and symbolic representation is welcome"[7] (Gonzales et al. 2024). Music is an important element of Playback Theatre, accentuating the mood and emotional tone of individual scenes. During the enactment of stories, their emotional core often becomes visible and—subject to the narrator's consent—may be modified, for instance, through an alternative ending. As the performance progresses, audience engagement deepens, and the shared experience of the narrative fosters empathy and strengthens group cohesion.

Although strong emotions may be stirred in Playback Theatre, the primary aim is not catharsis; rather, it is to allow participants to view their experiences from a reflective distance. Creating a theatrical space in which personal stories are enacted by others is crucial, as it enables the narrator to gain a new cognitive and/or emotional perspective on their own story. The essence of this practice lies in co-creating meaningful reflection rather than eliciting emotional release. While Playback Theatre was not originally conceived as a therapeutic intervention, both its structure and participant experiences reveal significant therapeutic potential: "Several other elements, known as the 'common factors,' like the empathetic presence of others, feelings of belongingness, social support, perspective taking, emotional expression or others more connected to group psychotherapies, like universality, altruism, instillation of hope and interpersonal learning, among others, can be identified in PT (Playback Theatre) contexts, especially in the cases of groups that attend multiple sessions" (Gonzales et al. 2024).

As Rea Dennis observes, participants in Playback Theatre continually move between a liminal space and everyday reality. This "back-and-forth" movement encourages critical reflection on what happens on stage in relation to their own experiences: "This results in audience members continually renegotiating their relationship to the values and ideas implicit in the form, particularly that of participation, and the mixing of the personal/public selves. The reflective experience extends beyond the formal performance frame" (Dennis 2004: 9).

7 Forms employed in Playback Theatre improvisation include Narrative V, Tableau, Chorus, the Three-Sentence Story, Scene/Story, and others.

Playback Theatre and trauma: Psychological and cultural dimensions

In Poland, the first Playback Theatre group, Ole, was established in 2016 in Kraków by Ludmiła Litwinienko—a Ukrainian psychotherapist, psychodrama trainer, pioneer of Playback Theatre in Ukraine, and director of Playback Theatre Reflection (Otrazheniye) in Kyiv. Since 2018, Ole has operated under the name Playback Self 3.0. In the same year, in collaboration with the Centre for Foreigners in Warsaw, the group carried out a year-long project, *In the Footsteps of Children*, working with children of migrants and refugees living in Warsaw. A second Polish Playback Theatre ensemble, HeyNow, is composed of psychotherapists and regularly conducts workshops and sessions with live audiences in Kraków. However, we would like to draw particular attention to projects that focus on working with refugees and employ the democratic and empowering dimensions of Playback Theatre: "The role of personal story is often extrapolated as a chance to reclaim voice and as such enable the participants to establish legitimacy in the spirit of democracy. In the refugee sector, there is also scope to reinforce the promise within such events for an encounter with difference and for inclusion in civil society" (Dennis 2007: 355). The role of Playback Theatre in work with refugee groups appears to be especially significant. It provides participants with the opportunity to express themselves through storytelling and to share difficult or traumatic experiences within a safe and supportive environment, thereby facilitating the restoration of agency.

In discussing trauma, we understand the concept not only in the psychological sense—as a process linked to disruptions in identity, safety, and meaning-making (Herman 1992)—but also from a cultural perspective. As Jeffery Alexander writes, "cultural trauma occurs when members of a collective feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (Alexander 2004: 1). Both perspectives underscore the impossibility of processing trauma in isolation. Herman argues that a communal response must entail not only recognition but also the attribution of responsibility and the remediation of harm (Herman 1992). For Alexander,

trauma becomes *cultural* when the community acknowledges it as central to its identity and assumes moral responsibility for addressing it (Alexander 2004: 1).

Two approaches to community building: Ukrainian Playback Theatre and Playback Theatre Esperanto

Transforming an individual personal narrative into a collective stage experience, enacted in a ritualized and symbolic form, enables the processing of emotions and experiences that may have been repressed or left unresolved. The simple act of telling one's story, often requiring considerable courage, followed by its enactment on stage, becomes a symbolic reclaiming of control over one's personal narrative for individuals who have previously encountered silence, neglect, exclusion, or stigmatization. In the context of the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine, the significance of Playback Theatre takes on an additional urgency and depth. Many Ukrainian practitioners of this art form have found themselves in situations of forced migration, often having to rebuild their work in another country without a permanent ensemble, without a shared language, and without institutional support. Playback Theatre, by nature rooted in locality, community, and mutual trust, has itself experienced a form of displacement.

In this new context, its therapeutic, community-building, and integrative functions have become even more pronounced, both for Ukrainian artists and for the individuals with whom they work: refugees, migrants, and members of local communities. Playback becomes an inclusive practice that amplifies previously overlooked or marginalized voices, while simultaneously serving as a source of identity formation, a site for collective reflection, and a tool for social integration and transformation. For Ukrainian refugees—artists and participants—Playback Theatre not only facilitates the processing of trauma but also provides a space of resistance against symbolic violence, exclusion, and loss experienced through forced migration.

These objectives can be observed in the work of two local Krakow-based groups. The first is the Ukrainian Playback Theatre

in Krakow,[8] founded by Veronika Proniakina, a trainer and actress from the Kharkiv Playback Theatre Living Mirror (Zhive Dzerkalo). The ensemble is composed of Ukrainian refugee artists who, after the outbreak of the war, sought to create a space of closeness, dialogue, and community for those forced to emigrate. As noted by Vlad Zernov, a Playback Theatre trainer, theorist, and facilitator of a youth Playback Theatre studio in Krakow, Playback Theatre has become for the Ukrainian émigré community not only a space of individual safety, but above all a site of communal sacrality: a practice devoted to preserving memory, identity, and belonging (Zernov 2025). The experience of forced displacement involves not only the loss of one's home, separation from loved ones, and the daily challenges of uncertainty, but also the risk of a gradual erosion of cultural identity. Adjusting to life in a new country often requires conforming to the norms of the host society, which may lead to the suppression of language, customs, and values. In the absence of support from institutions or the local community, this process can be especially acute and detrimental (Zernov 2025).

In this context, Playback Theatre becomes a form of resistance and a deliberate practice of caring for memory, language, and social bonds—a space in which identity can not only endure but also evolve. One of the key conceptual principles of the Ukrainian Playback Theatre in Krakow is the exclusive, consistent use of the Ukrainian language. This represents a deeply symbolic and identity-affirming gesture. In a war in which language has become a site of conflict, the choice of Ukrainian as the sole language of the stage constitutes an act of cultural resistance. As Olena Kalashnikova, accredited Trainer of Playback Theatre, Co-founder and Board Member of the Ukrainian Playback Theatre School, actress, and leader of Playback Theatre Vakhtery, emphasizes, for many forcibly displaced individuals, speaking Ukrainian—even if they previously used Russian as well—becomes a way to reclaim and reinforce their personal and cultural identity (Kalashnikova 2025).

Within Playback Theatre, this carries particular significance: the language in which a story is told shapes emotions, imagery, and

8 "Ukrainian Playback Theater in Krakow," https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100090088677056 (accessed 29 July 2025).

relationships, and thus becomes an integral part of transforming trauma into a sense-affirming experience. The use of Ukrainian enables expression and creates a communal space rooted in culture, memory, and the struggle for survival. It becomes a shared code that connects individuals in collective contemplation of what has been lost, what is uncertain, and what remains possible. In this sense, language functions not merely as a narrative tool but as a constitutive element of communal cohesion, helping to create a secure environment for articulating, processing, and integrating traumatic experiences in the context of resettlement.

However, it is important to recognize that this choice brings certain tensions. While the exclusive use of the Ukrainian language promotes a sense of safety and agency in the group, it may simultaneously risk distancing the community at large. This paradox—whereby a tool that empowers the group internally may inadvertently reinforce its marginalization externally—remains largely unresolved within this practice. Maintaining the internal cohesion of the group becomes the priority, even if it limits opportunities for integration into Polish society. Whether this dynamic acts as a facilitator or a limitation depends on participants' individual goals and their stage of integration. Individual narratives begin to coalesce into what Vlad Zernov calls a collective narrative: participants become aware that "this is no longer their pain—it is ours, for their pain is also mine" (Zernov 2025). Personal suffering becomes recognizable as a shared experience, fostering a sense of communal identity.

Perhaps this is why the Ukrainian Playback Theatre in Krakow does not predetermine the theme of its performances. What experiences participants choose to share—and how far they wish to go—is never imposed. Each participant has complete freedom to choose which story to tell—speaking to whatever feels most significant in that moment. Even without a predefined theme, narratives of war, displacement, separation, and longing surface again and again. They arise spontaneously from the collective experience of a community living in the shadow of trauma. Through these recurring motifs—home, war, separation, loss, and hope—participants collaboratively construct a shared narrative, which enables them to regain a sense of belonging.

Because of this openness, the theatre becomes a space for authentic, unrestrained communal reflection, where every voice can be heard, whether it expresses suffering, hope, or the everyday challenges of life in exile. The first performance of the Ukrainian Playback Theatre in Krakow took place on March 12, 2023, at Scena Supernova. Since then, performances have been held relatively regularly in the form of intimate sessions. Each gathering follows a similar structure—typically, five to seven stories are told by audience members and subsequently enacted on stage by the actors. The events are open to all and free of charge, though prior registration is required. Attendees may also support the initiative through voluntary donations. The principal aim, as stated by the ensemble members, is to create a stable communal space for Ukrainians living in Krakow, where experiences can be shared, mutual support can be nurtured, and a sense of home, however provisional, can be reclaimed.

While the Ukrainian Playback Theatre engenders transformation through linguistic and cultural homogeneity, a second Krakow-based ensemble adopts a fundamentally different approach. Playback Theatre Esperanto was launched in 2024. Its founders—Anastaiya Kishko, Mariya Vasilevskaya, and Tina[9]—intentionally chose a model distinguished by linguistic openness and a more universal vision of community building. Unlike the Ukrainian Playback Theatre, which is oriented toward the needs of the Ukrainian refugee community and operates exclusively in Ukrainian, Esperanto embraces multilingualism. The theatre's name is deliberate, invoking Esperanto as a symbol of transnational communication, equality, and the ideal of understanding regardless of cultural boundaries.

Performances are conducted in Ukrainian, Russian, and Belarusian—the languages spoken by ensemble members and their audiences. As noted earlier, the choice of language is inherently political: in a context marked by identity tensions and national conflict, the ensemble prioritizes integration and shared experience among people from different cultural backgrounds rather than constructing community around a single national narrative. The performance space is thus inclusive and oriented toward dialogue and empathy. The ensemble is composed of individuals with migration experience

9 Name withheld at the request of the artists.

(in addition to the founders, these include Natalka Morhun, Katsiaryna Ivanenka, Tetiana, and Vadzim[10])—emigrés from various countries united by a desire to build relationships, share experiences, and tell stories within a safe and supportive environment.

This fellowship is formed not through ethnic identity but through shared values of respect, empathy, and curiosity about others. One distinguishing feature of Playback Theatre Esperanto is the manner in which the ensemble formulates the themes for individual performances. To date, three performances have taken place, each preceded by an announced theme—unlike other Playback groups that rely on a fully spontaneous format. Previous events have centered on themes such as *"For the First Time," "Krakow Is…,"* and *"In a Hurry."* Although these themes appear neutral, they are highly capacious, inviting a wide range of personal stories—from lighthearted and humorous to deep and introspective. Their openness ensures that participants are not directly confronted with expectations to speak about trauma, war, or forced migration, though such narratives often emerge spontaneously.

This strategy—working with everyday, ambiguous, and open-ended themes—creates a safe space that encourages participation without pressure. The theme *"For the First Time,"* for example, might refer to the first day in a new country, but it could just as easily recall a first date, a first time performing on stage, or a first winter without snow. In this way, stories reveal what is shared and universal without being bound to frameworks of suffering. In contrast to theatres that work explicitly with migration- or war-related trauma, Esperanto constructs a narrative community around experiences of daily life, regional identity, relationships, and movement—with an emphasis on connection rather than difference. It is precisely these open, multi-layered themes that allow participants to build a shared field of meaning while still expressing individual experiences. As a result, the theatre fulfills its integrative function—not as a space solely for recounting "refugee stories," but as a place where one can experience oneself as a human being, not only as a migrant.

10 Name withheld at the request of the artists.

Sustaining tensions: Playback Theatre as an integrated practice

In analyzing Playback Theatre practices, it is also important to consider one of the key works on socially engaged art by British art historian Claire Bishop—*Artificial Hells*. Discussing the most successful forms of participatory (or "relational") art, Bishop emphasizes that in socially oriented artworks, the primary material consists of participants' experiences, and the participants themselves become co-creators of the content (Bishop 2012: 284). The creative sphere thus becomes a form of lived practice. Yet the evaluation of participatory works necessitates the integration of both ethical and aesthetic criteria, reflecting their "double ontological status: it is both an event in the world, and at one remove from it" (Bishop 2012: 284). For Bishop, such art "is not a privileged political medium, nor a ready-made solution," but rather "as uncertain and precarious as democracy itself" (Bishop 2012: 284).

Although Playback Theatre does not constitute participatory art in the classical sense—participants contribute content but do not perform—it powerfully exemplifies Bishop's notion of a "mediating third term": an intermediary element that simultaneously connects and differentiates participants. The theatrical enactment of a story serves precisely this function. The narrator's account is acknowledged and honored, yet transformed through the actors' bodies and interpretive choices. The transformative potential of Playback Theatre does not stem from resolving the tensions among its pedagogical, therapeutic, artistic, and social dimensions, but from sustaining these dimensions in a dynamic and mutually reinforcing relationship.

Conclusion: Playback Theatre as a pedagogical response to exile

Examples from two Krakow-based ensembles—the Ukrainian Playback Theatre and Playback Theatre Esperanto—illustrate how this form of theatre can make use of divergent strategies in response to the varied needs of refugees and migrants. In the context of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the trauma of exile is not merely the consequence of physical relocation; it also involves the sudden loss of continuity in one's life, community, and sense of security. In such circumstances, cultural practices that support the recovery of

agency and the re-establishment of social relationships acquire particular significance. Playback Theatre, through its structure of listening, storytelling, and communal witnessing, facilitates precisely this type of process: not a return to a "former" identity, but the gradual reconstruction of identity in a new place and in response to new challenges.

In both cases, Playback Theatre acts as a conduit for transformation—personal, emotional, and communal. It is a practice rooted in trust, empathy, and attentiveness, while simultaneously carrying critical and political potential. In the contexts of war and forced displacement, the recovery of voice—both symbolic and literal—constitutes an act of reclaiming agency. Although Playback Theatre does not resolve conflicts, it functions as an educational space that cultivates the capacity to remain oneself while fostering community bonds in a new environment. In this way, it fulfills its role as a pedagogical tool for reconstructing identity in times of profound displacement.

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