

Katarzyna Kułakowska

Institute of Art, Polish Academy of Sciences

ORCID: 0000-0002-3673-4394

Katarzyna Kalinowska

The Educational Research Institute

ORCID: 0000-0003-2657-6107

Olga Drygas

Institute of Art, Polish Academy of Sciences

ORCID: 0000-0003-0850-4193

Michał Bargielski

ORCID: 0000-0001-7448-4923

**INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNITY CRISES
IN A PANDEMIC:
THE SOCIAL THEATER OF AMBULATORY CARE**

**Kryzysy jednostki i wspólnoty w pandemii.
Ambulatorium teatru społecznego**

Abstract: This article offers a preliminary diagnosis of Polish social theaters with regard to the crises of the individual and the community during the Covid-19 pandemic. The interpretive framework is Lidia Zamkow's concept of the theater of ambulatory care, which allows us to locate the activity of social theaters in the context of Michel de Certeau's tactics and Jack Halberstam's low theories. The theater of ambulatory care recognizes the needs of individuals and communities in a pandemic crisis and reacts to them in different ways. We distinguish and describe three ideal types of diagnoses and the resulting treatments that theaters of ambulatory care use in a pandemic: therapy, conjuring, and revolution. The article is based on materials collected during two studies: a funded research project on the anthropological and social activity of the Węgałty Theater, carried out at the Institute of Art of the Polish Academy of Sciences, and a survey among theater staff during the pandemic, initiated by the Zbigniew Raszewski Theater Institute in Warsaw. (*Trans. K. Kulakowska*)

Keywords: social theater, pandemic, crisis, individual, society, community, low theory, theater of ambulatory care

Abstrakt: Artykuł dotyczy działalności polskich teatrów społecznych w czasie pandemii Covid-19. Ramą interpretacyjną jest koncepcja teatru-ambulatorium Lidii Zamkow, która pozwala umiejscowić aktywność teatrów społecznych w kontekście działań taktycznych Michela de Certeau oraz niskich/słabych teorii Jacka Halberstama. Ambulatorium teatru społecznego rozpoznaje potrzeby jednostek i społeczności w pandemicznym kryzysie i reaguje na nie w różny sposób. W artykule wyróżnione zostały trzy typy idealne rozpoznań i wynikających z nich kuracji, które teatry-ambulatoria stosują w pandemii: terapeutyzowanie, sztukmistrzostwo i rewolucja. Podstawą analizy są materiały zebrane podczas dwóch badań: grantu dotyczącego antropologiczno-społecznej działalności Teatru Węgałty realizowanego przez Instytut Sztuki PAN oraz badania pracownic i pracowników teatrów w pandemii zainicjowanego przez Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszewskiego w Warszawie.

Słowa kluczowe: teatr społeczny, pandemia, kryzys, jednostka, społeczeństwo, wspólnota, niska teoria, teatr-ambulatorium

As the Węgajty Theater¹ was launching an appeal for Easter food donations for homeless people locked away in quarantine in a hostel in the city of Olsztyn in northeast Poland, Warsaw’s Międzypokoleniowy Chór Ruchowy (Intergenerational Choir of Movement) continued, via Zoom, rehearsals they had started before the pandemic. With its activities coordinated by the Strefa WolnoSłowa² Foundation, the Choir aims to support those over (and under) fifty, keeping them active during lockdown. In July 2020, the Choir appeared at the Skaryszewski Park in Warsaw, which was hosting an open-to-all performance of choreography – part dance, part gymnastics – that members of the Choir had perfected separately, each in their own home. They had come together, close at last, almost shoulder to shoulder, although social distancing rules still applied. Their motivation – the desire to lift the spirits of their audience – also underlay the social media activities of the Klancyk Improv Theater:³ a group of people who are “always in the mood for jokes and pranks.” Their *Codzienne trudności* (Everyday Difficulties) podcast, and their *Kartka z kalendarza* (Page from

¹ The Węgajty Theater was founded in 1986, in a village of the same name, by husband and wife Waclaw and Erdmute Sobaszek. Till this day, the Sobaszeks’ barn, in the northeast region of Warmia, is home to a theater steeped in Poland’s folk tradition. The couple breathe new life into traditional forms of drama, related to the four seasons, and they uphold the custom of festive peregrinations: at Easter, they go from door to door with an Alilujka (see footnote 43). They sing carols on Christmas, and celebrate Mardi Gras to mark the transition into Lent. Owing to the subject matter of their performances, and the nature of their activities, the Węgajty Theater can be regarded as anthropological theater, a place of social and cultural experimentation. See <http://teatrwegajty.eu>.

² Set up in 2012, the Strefa WolnoSłowa Foundation explores the boundaries between art and civic intervention. The name of the Foundation is an untranslatable pun: “strefa wolnościowa” means a duty-free zone; “Strefa WolnoSłowa” means “free word zone,” implying freedom of speech. Since 2015, the Foundation has collaborated with the Powszechny Theater in Warsaw, where it puts on its own productions and runs Stół Powszechny (Communal Table), a café and workshop space. Productions by Strefa WolnoSłowa feature Polish people from diverse backgrounds; the group draws on true stories and the experiences of real people to address topical issues, and encourages audiences to take an active stance towards social problems.

³ Klancyk was founded in Warsaw in 2006, which makes it Poland’s oldest improv theater. Writers, musicians and actors are invited to perform with Klancyk; their words and music provide members of the group with improvisation material. See <https://klancyk.pl>.

a Diary) series, both used laughter as a means of alleviating the drudgery of home isolation. Klancyk reminded their audience, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, that “time still passes, it’s just that we’re not moving all that much,”⁴ and encouraged them to come together to celebrate, among other things, Hamburger Day (28 May), World Speed Control Day (16 April) and Getting Back in Touch After Many Years Day (21 May).

The pandemic is yet another crisis social theater must cope with. Crises drive the creative energy of those working outside the framework of stable and secure mainstream institutions. For these groups, emergencies become a mode of being, defined by a certain dynamic and certain values. Thus, rather than threaten their expression, crises stir and inspire independent creatives, prompting them to respond. Champions of emergency, they do not regard a crisis as a temporary state, assessed based on what will happen once it comes to an end. “A crisis is valuable because it is characterized by a (paradoxical) stable instability, the certainty of uncertainty, being ever open to flux.”⁵

This is because social theater is a theater of change, in a dual understanding of the term: it not only responds immediately to any changes to society, but at the same time, these changes are the goal it sets itself. “It is a theater that facilitates individuals, groups and communities in finding their own ways to meet their own needs, improve their social functioning, and eventually overcome unhappy situations.”⁶ Theatrical means that are applicable beyond the stage become social theater’s main instrument: this kind of theater uses theater to reach beyond theater.⁷ Its main aim is to work for the benefit of the local community, in the broadest understanding of the term: a close-knit group with a strong sense of belonging, which manifests itself in the group’s ability and willingness to do things together. Social theater gives preliminary diagnoses: it looks at situations and events, analyzes them and seeks to establish their causes. Remedial measures are put forward as a result of such diagnoses; these measures are cures,

⁴ Klancyk (@Klaaancyk), “Co dzisiaj warto robić,” Facebook, April 23, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/Klaaancyk/posts/10163444477500207>.

⁵ Dariusz Kosiński, *Teatra polskie. Historie* (Warszawa: PWN, Instytut Teatralny im. Z. Raszewskiego, 2010), 486. Also cf. the (markedly different) English version: Dariusz Kosiński, *Performing Poland: Rethinking Histories and Theatres*, trans. Paul Vickers (Cardiff: Performance Research Books, 2019).

⁶ Guglielmo Schininá, “Like a Ham in a Temperance Hotel: Healing, Participation and Education in Social Theatre,” in *Dramatherapy and Social Theatre: Necessary Dialogues*, ed. Sue Jennings (London: Routledge, 2009), 38.

⁷ In his remarks on “using theatre to reach beyond theatre,” theatre and performatics scholar Dariusz Kosiński references the work of Tadeusz Kantor (1915–1990) and Jerzy Grotowski (1933–1999). The means of expression used by these two artists, and related (meta)commentaries on the state of the world we live in, have little in common with socially engaged theater (in whatever understanding of the term). See Kosiński, *Teatra polskie*, 206.

conceived of as a procedure: theater is administered to a community which is at once being established and strengthened in the process.⁸

These clinical metaphors bring to mind the insights of actor, director and medical student Lidia Zamkow (1918–1982), who distinguished between two contrasting types of theater: the laboratory, where “scientific research goes on” (without offering any diagnosis of the world as it is), and the ambulatory care center, outpatient clinic, visited day in, day out by “about a thousand potential patients.”⁹ The ambulatory care metaphor encompasses a number of wartime and hospital tropes: at their emotional core, they are temporary, makeshift and transitory. Although the ambulatory care center offers the opportunity to “put one’s thoughts on what goes on around us [...] into words,”¹⁰ the nurses and orderlies working there make no attempt at a conclusive diagnosis, but focus instead on offering preliminary, makeshift insights. This is because adaptability to change is the main forte of the theater of ambulatory care, and flexibility is its virtue. The ambulatory care center is a medical post on the front line, where first aid can be administered before the injured are seen by consultants. According to theater historian and theoretician Joanna Krakowska, “irrespective of the shape it takes in artistic terms, the concept of theater of ambulatory care entails recognition of its temporary and makeshift quality, and its readiness to serve.”¹¹ The social practice of theater consists in actions imbued with care and tenderness, and released by unlocking the potential shown via collective methods. This is not metropolitan or mainstream theater: destined to remain local, it will stay close to its community, for which it feels a sense of responsibility. While laboratory theater takes on classic literary works, theater of ambulatory care remains constantly on the move, fueled by subsequent crises as it comes up with, and implements, one remedy after another.

Thus, one can say that, from the point of view of social theater, crises (including the crisis that is the current pandemic) are like sparring partners: they give social theater a boost and help it grow. This time, however, the crisis in question is extremely complex: the pandemic has caused damage to many aspects of life in society. Covid is a grenade whose huge blast power has a direct impact on everyone, including members of theater groups. As Rebecca Solnit has observed,

⁸ To grasp the full nature of social theater, it would be best to amalgamate the two terms used to describe it in English-language sources: “social theater” and “applied theater.” A combination of the two gives us “socially applied” (or “applicable”) theater. See Philip Taylor, *Applied Theatre: Creating Transformative Encounters in the Community* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2003).

⁹ Lidia Zamkow, “Nie uznają teatru bez tekstu,” interview by Krzysztof Miklaszewski, *Scena*, no. 1 (1971): 5.

¹⁰ Lidia Zamkow, “Moje mądre przyjemności,” *Polska*, no. 3 (1968): 31.

¹¹ Joanna Krakowska, *PRL: Przedstawienia* (Warszawa: PIW, Instytut Teatralny im. Z. Raszewskiego, Instytut Sztuki PAN, 2016), 206.

“the word ‘crisis’ means, in medical terms, the crossroads a patient reaches, the point at which she will either take the road to recovery or to death.”¹² Thus the pandemic can be seen as an obstacle, a challenge, an opponent or even a deadly enemy; a disruption to the continuity of creative work and a serious threat to the community, which is the focus of social theater’s activity in both its creative and day-to-day aspect. For theater, the current situation is both a growth opportunity and a threat to its wholeness. What is of interest to us, however, is not so much what the pandemic can do to present-day theater, as what kind of partner (or opponent) the pandemic will find in social theater.

The ambulatory care mode in which social theater operates makes its insights into the reality of the pandemic impossible to ignore. History has shown that social theater’s instincts are often right. Ways of alleviating the impact of local and global crises proposed by this strand of theater make it easier to adapt to challenges; to expose taboos and introduce buried issues into the social store of images; to defuse social tensions or, conversely – if need be – to arouse public debate, sharpening its focus around topical issues. Peregrinations – a custom once observed by the Gardzienice Theater, and maintained at Węgajty till this day – are one example of how social theater operates: the crux of such occasions is that actors and local inhabitants come together, side by side. During peregrinations, instruments peculiar to theater are not used for artistic ends: they are there to restore human relationships. Poland’s politically engaged alternative theater in the early 1970s provides a different sort of example: productions defied the established social and political order, and thus they offered an up-to-date diagnosis of the world as it was. As one of “the most sensitive social seismographs,”¹³ student theater was known not just as an emerging theater: it was commonly referred to as theater of the young intelligentsia¹⁴ – at a time when the impact of that class on social reality was paramount. Theater of ambulatory care, in whatever guise, makes a real difference to society and expands the boundaries of discourse: its community-based activities usually being unassuming rather than spectacular, it nonetheless steps boldly into the thick of it, taking a stance on the issues of the moment.

¹² Rebecca Solnit, “The Impossible Has Already Happened: What Coronavirus Can Teach Us About Hope,” *Guardian*, April 7, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/07/what-coronavirus-can-teach-us-about-hope-rebecca-solnit>.

¹³ Konstanty Puzyna, “Rola społeczna teatrów studenckich,” in *Syntezy za trzy grosze* (Warszawa: PIW, 1974), 169, <http://www.encyklopediateatru.pl/ksiazka/409/syntezy-za-trzy-grosze/strona/177>.

¹⁴ Wojciech Dudzik has highlighted the ever increasing scope of the term “alternative theater” in his article “O teatrze alternatywnym,” *Konteksty* 49, no. 2 (1995): 74.

When theatrical diagnoses and remedies are seen to be effective, they are frequently absorbed by the mainstream, leaving theater with no choice but to look for even more unorthodox paths. According to sociologist Aldona Jawłowska, “although cultural dissenters seek to reject culture in all its aspects, defiance is a cultural phenomenon peculiar to the very culture which is being called into question.”¹⁵ Jawłowska seems to imply there is a connection, or even generic unity, between dominant and alternative cultures. The insights offered by theater of ambulatory care are often accurate, and suitable to the ailments of the contemporary world precisely because this type of theater shares its roots with the dominant culture.

What exactly is the crux of the “ambulatory care” mode of operation? Well, the crisis brought about by the pandemic generates ever new needs, to which theater of ambulatory care responds in a temporary and makeshift manner, by experimenting and coming up with new forms and new content... only to then abandon them immediately in order to test out new solutions. This mode of seeking a cure bears a striking resemblance to the struggle of medical personnel treating Covid-19 patients in hospitals; meanwhile, scientists are working away in their labs to come up with an effective vaccine and/or medication. There is an analogy between the tactics of doctors and those deployed by creatives working in social theater. Both groups are on the front line: therefore, both opt for tactical, makeshift solutions, “tailor-made” to fit the moment and the circumstances, and effective in so far as imagination – the fantasy of the *bricoleur*¹⁶ – does not fail those who implement them. Michel de Certeau has described tactic as an “art of the weak,” which

operates in isolated actions, blow by blow. It takes advantage of “opportunities” and depends on them, being without any base where it could stockpile its winnings, build up its own position, and plan raids.¹⁷

¹⁵ Aldona Jawłowska, *Drogi kontrkultury* (Warszawa: PIW, 1975), 103.

¹⁶ According to Claude Lévi-Strauss: “the ‘bricoleur’ is still someone who works with his hands and uses devious means compared to those of a craftsman. The characteristic feature of mythical thought is that it expresses itself by means of a heterogeneous repertoire which, even if extensive, is nevertheless limited. It has to use this repertoire, however, whatever the task in hand because it has nothing else at its disposal. Mythical thought is therefore a kind of intellectual ‘bricolage’ – which explains the relation which can be perceived between the two. [...] The ‘bricoleur’ is adept at performing a large number of diverse tasks; but, unlike the engineer, he does not subordinate each of them to the availability of raw materials and tools conceived and procured for the purpose of the project. His universe of instruments is closed and the rules of his game are always to make do with ‘whatever is at hand.’” Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, trans. George Weidenfield (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 16–17.

¹⁷ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 37.

Though this may be a weakness, there may be method in it, and a certain unintrusive wisdom; not unlike Lévi-Strauss' untamed thinking,¹⁸ or Clifford Geertz's local knowledge.¹⁹ This is what makes the world, as seen by those working in social theater, so interesting. What does alternative theater make of the current situation? What are the filters through which it views the world? What are its proposed remedies for the social and emotional impact of the pandemic?

Preliminary insights offered by theater of ambulatory care make for a very interesting category. They are not based on indisputable diagnoses, borne out by numerous studies – diagnoses of this kind could only be provided by laboratory theater. Nor do they result in administering reliable, crisis-tested treatment patterns. Theater of ambulatory care offers first aid – a dressing and pain relief – rather than targeted therapy. Insights offered by this type of theater resemble early stages of treatment: timewise, they come first; in functional terms, they are essential. The diagnoses and cures offered by social theater come about as a result of its relationship with the world: creatives encounter a community which has a strong sense of its own subjectivity, and whose needs determine the goal and scope of activity. In addition, creatives are faced with an upheaval, or rather upheavals: a health emergency and an economic, social, emotional, and political crisis. The driving force behind these crises is impersonal, but it has agency. New ideas, new prospects and new vistas emerge from this trilateral encounter between an artist's sensibility, the needs of a community, and an emergency.

In her piece on holding on to hope in the face of the new virus, Rebecca Solnit has likewise stressed how peculiar this process of emergence is in a crisis. She points out that, etymologically, “emergency” “comes from *emergence* or *emerge*, as if you were ejected from the familiar and urgently need to reorient.”²⁰ When the human community is suddenly forced to adjust to a new situation, theater of ambulatory care comes to the rescue – trained to operate in constant flux, born out of uncertainty lurking “in the background, as it does in human existence.”²¹ This type of theater is driven, in its here and now, by operating “in a u-topian light”²² – a mode of operation fueled by critical consideration of the current state

¹⁸ See Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*.

¹⁹ See Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

²⁰ Solnit, “The Impossible Has Already Happened.”

²¹ Philosopher Jolanta Brach-Czaina uses the metaphor of the background to describe the nature of the world: “The background is matter from which shape emerges. [...] It is chaos, in that there is nothing distinctive about it, and the very fact of distinction is an act of separation from the background.” Jolanta Brach-Czaina, *Szczeliny istnienia* (Warszawa: Dowody na Istnienie, 2018), 97.

²² Paul Celan, “Meridian: Speech on the occasion of receiving the Georg Büchner Prize,” Darmstadt, 22 October 1960, in *Collected Prose*, trans. Rosemarie Waldrop (New York: Routledge, 2003), 51.

of things,²³ and by maintaining a hopeful outlook on the future – although, as philosopher Jolanta Brach-Czaina has observed, the hope rests upon “what can possibly emerge from the background.”²⁴

Meanwhile, Michel Foucault has pointed out that “emergence is always produced through a particular stage of forces.” Foucault drew on a contention by Nietzsche, who defined emergence (*Entstehung*) as “the moment of arising”: the moment when an idea merely takes root.²⁵ Thus, if we bring our attention back to what goes on in the social theater of ambulatory care, we will see that no analysis of the concept of *Entstehung* will provide us with a comprehensive diagnosis of reality; instead, it will only offer preliminary insights. All it will do is expose the play of the forces comprising a crisis: “this interaction, the struggle these forces wage against each other or against adverse circumstances, and the attempt to avoid degeneration and regain strength by dividing these forces against themselves.”²⁶ Where, then, does it hurt, and what are social theater’s recommendations for alleviating the observed symptoms?

Pandemic emergences identified by social theater are either perceived in the context of what members of a crisis-ridden community feel as individuals, or, in much broader terms – within the spectrum of the social and political issues preoccupying the community in question. This is because ambulatory care centers, as we know them, are highly specialist: they are staffed by paramedics of different métiers, using a variety of means and instruments as they come to their patients’ rescue. Nonetheless, the theater’s urgent response team have a common goal, which is “to make people happy.”²⁷ Theaters think of “ideal communality” in utopian terms: in other words, they regard the adjective “ideal” as synonymous with “appropriate” or “suitable,” rather than “unreal,” “impossible” – quite unlike Max Weber’s ideal types, a cognitive instrument used by academics. This distinction highlights yet another difference between laboratory theater and theater of ambulatory care. The utopian nature of the latter – in other words, the fact that its gaze is fixed on a prospective better world – is not

²³ See Dorota Sieroń-Galusek, Łukasz Galusek, *Pogranicze: O odradzaniu się kultury* (Wrocław: Kolegium Europy Wschodniej, 2012), 48.

²⁴ Brach-Czaina, *Szczeliny istnienia*, 97.

²⁵ Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in *Language, Counter-memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 148–149.

²⁶ Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy,” 149.

²⁷ “The point of working in the arts is to make people happy. I mean it,” said academic Grzegorz Godlewski, when interviewed about the ideas underlying social activity within the arts. “The point is to provide people with whatever they need to get more out of their potential.” Grzegorz Godlewski, “Potężne zbiorniki znaczeń,” interview by Dorota Hall and Tomasz Rakowski, (*op.cit.*), no. 3–4 (2005): 7.

a figment of something that does not exist, but rather a journey, an incessant journey towards what might be moving further off, might be unattainable, or achievable only in glimpses, but what is nevertheless real.²⁸

Understood in this manner, the utopian quality inspires hope that the treatments offered by social theater will prove effective.

From our point of view – and in keeping with Weber’s original idea – the ideal type is a theoretical construct, a cognitive fiction meant to help us study, and understand, the reality of social theater.²⁹ During the pandemic, we have talked to numerous creatives working in social theater. Our interviews were conducted as part of two distinct research projects: a study of the anthropological and social activity of the Węgajty Theater³⁰ (and thus those who collaborate with it) – this was possible thanks to a research grant coordinated by the Institute of Art, Polish Academy of Sciences. The other scheme, launched by the Theatre Institute in Warsaw, was called *A Study of Theater Workers in the Pandemic*. Based on our interviews, conducted as part of these two programs, we have identified three ideal types of actions, which demonstrate what has emerged from the point of view of theaters of ambulatory care from the background of the pandemic. The first two types – the therapeutic approach and conjuring – are related to the crisis of the individual, while the third – revolution – is linked primarily to the crisis of the community.

RESPONDING TO THE CRISIS OF THE INDIVIDUAL: THERAPY OR CONJURING

“Let’s stay alert” – this was Marek Kościółek’s main message as he addressed his fellow theater workers to mark International Theater Day. Kościółek, leader of the Krzyk Theater in the village of Maszewo in north-west Poland,³¹ went on to add: “Alertness is needed today more than ever before, and it should focus on those closest to us,”³² – and there can be no doubt they are crisis. As Marta Mi-

²⁸ Krzysztof Czyżewski, “Jestem człowiekiem małych liczb,” interview by Grzegorz Godlewski, *Nowe Książki*, no. 11 (2008): 5, <http://www.encyklopediateatru.pl/artykuly/62179/jestem-czlowiekiem-malych-liczb>.

²⁹ See Max Weber, “‘Objectivity’ in Social Sciences and Social Policy,” in *Methodology of Social Sciences*, trans., ed. Edward A. Shils and Henry A. Finch (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2011), 49–112.

³⁰ Research funded by Poland’s National Science Centre, no. 2017/26/E/HS2/00357.

³¹ The Krzyk Theater was founded in 2002 in Maszewo by Marek Kościółek. Krzyk productions are manifestos; they stand up for people and ideas. Its stage work aside, Krzyk is also a theater society, collaborating with the people of Maszewo on a number of projects, which are both about art and things that matter to the community. See <https://www.facebook.com/teatrkrzyk>.

³² Teatr Krzyk (@teatrkrzyk), “Zachowajmy czujność,” Facebook, March 27, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/teatrkrzyk/posts/2811053935616372>.

kula from the Kana Theater³³ in the north-western city of Szczecin has observed, “We are in the midst of a crisis which is a great enigma.”³⁴ She has compared the pandemic to a certain kind of trauma: having survived it, we think we are returning to normal, but in fact the way we live does not have much in common with normality. Mikula again:

You think you’re already back to normal, but it’s only after a fair bit of time that you realize this isn’t really how you normally operate. Some things do reach you from beneath the surface, but you focus on staying active. And, on the one hand, this disrupts your usual rhythm and eats up a lot of your energy; on the other, this is a time when certain buried issues, certain weaknesses emerge, and their work begins.

Faced with this diagnosis, theater of ambulatory care offers just one remedy: as empathy and reserves of protectiveness are put to work, one needs to look at the mental wellbeing of an individual who is part of a community. According to members of the Kana community, “At the moment, our main task is to give ourselves time; and not just any sort of time: the kind of time where weakness is inherent.” The care provided to individuals in this “time of weakness” takes wildly divergent forms: from attempts to form a therapeutic relationship – which would enable individuals to work through the trauma of the pandemic – to creating a sphere of oblivion, which would provide respite from the ubiquitous fear around us, and offer a bit of perspective; whether through laughter, taking delight in form, or a radical change of subject. “My hunch is that we shouldn’t speak about what has happened,” says Helena Radzikowska from the Paphema Theater.³⁵ “People should be allowed to forget, rather than forced to return to those things, comment on them and mull them over,” adds Radzikowska, implying that what people need most these days is entertainment; and that theater is there “to distract them, lift the burden off their shoulders; quite simply, they need to be able to let their hair down as they come face to face with the actors.”³⁶

³³ Dariusz Mikula, Marta Mikula and Paula Rudz, interview by Katarzyna Kulakowska, Warsaw–Szczecin, July 15, 2020.

³⁴ Kana is an alternative Theater and Arts Centre, founded in Szczecin in 1978. After the death of founder Zygmunt Duczyński in 2006, the ensemble have continued both their theater work (putting on highly original productions and organizing theater festivals, at home as well as abroad) and work in the arts in the broadest sense of the term (supporting independent creatives in Poland’s alternative scene). See <http://kana.art.pl>.

³⁵ The Paphema Theater was founded in 2014 by four students in their final year at the Puppetry Art Department of the National Academy of Dramatic Art: Paulina Moś, Helena Radzikowska, Pawel Rutkowski and Mateusz Trzmiel. Paphema looks at literary classics through the lens of contemporary sensibility, and combines the means used by actor-based theater with the inexhaustible language of the theater of the physical form; and marries humor and ironic detachment with serious thoughts on the world we live in. See <https://teatrphema.pl>.

³⁶ Helena Radzikowska, interview by Katarzyna Kulakowska, Warsaw, July 15, 2020.

“Whatever happens, don’t think!” urges one of the actors appearing in *PeKiN*, a production Paphema put on as early as August, “Let’s have fun! Farmer, laborer, middle-class, whatever! Vodka is an egalitarian political system,”³⁷ – this is how the actors, graduates of the Puppetry Art Department of the National Academy of Dramatic Art in Białystok, encourage their audiences to have a good time. The ensemble’s chosen field is theater of the physical form, and they offer audiences a sort of highbrow entertainment: full of humor, and yet serious in its approach to the world around us. A production about the Palace of Culture and Science in Warsaw – which was bequeathed in the early 1950s by Joseph Stalin, and is now “a splinter in the heart of the city, the metropolis’ tight-lipped one [...], a gift, a burden, and an entity”³⁸ – could not have been further from the realities of a capital city during a pandemic. Thus it offers a moment of respite as audiences party with top communist official Bolesław Bierut or take swimming lessons in the Palace’s famous pool – at the same time, it is an opportunity to give serious thought to both the resentment and nostalgia Polish people tend to feel when they think about communism and, indeed, the period of political transformation that followed.

“It’s very difficult to provide high-quality entertainment and take a stance on the ‘here and now,’” says Radzikowska: “It’s possibly the hardest thing there is.” Conjurers very deliberately distract their audiences from current issues, and entice people with their, perfectly mastered, conjuring: be it theater of the physical form, or improv, which is all the rage at the moment. In addition, conjurers are highly skilled practitioners of laughter therapy. As one tongue-in-cheek remark by Klancyk Theater put it, “The new reality we live in makes it very difficult to stay in control of time. Is it Monday today, Wednesday or Saturday? We can’t really tell because we’re still wearing the same tracksuit bottoms.”³⁹ The pandemic is set to be a permanent feature of Klancyk’s online schedule, but it will be presented in a different form; as an anxiety-ridden topic domesticated by wearing a tracksuit, or by being able to nap with impunity while working from home. Another “benefit” of the pandemic (and the ensuing lockdown) is that it inspires a sense of gratitude towards home appliances. Klancyk bard Piotr Szczęsny Sikora composes hymns of praise to, for instance, the (usually) underrated Hoover. “We’re slowly re-emerging from our homes. But that’s no reason to forget the friends we have made during lockdown”⁴⁰ – this is Klancyk’s view of people’s freshly forged bonds with house-

³⁷ A quote from a production of *PeKiN* by Agata Biziuk, directed by Agata Biziuk, Jewish Theater in Warsaw, November 28, 2019.

³⁸ Biziuk, *PeKiN*.

³⁹ Klancyk (@Klaaancyk), “Nasza nowa rzeczywistość...,” Facebook, April 9, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/Klaaancyk/posts/10163444424510207>.

⁴⁰ Klancyk (@Klaaancyk), “Powoli wynurzamy się z domów,” Facebook, May 10, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/Klaaancyk/posts/10163655385445207>.

hold appliances or pot plants. It was only in lockdown that their needs came to be acknowledged and taken into consideration. “You almost died, pretty plant,” intones Sikora, full of remorse, “I hadn’t been watering you like I should have.”⁴¹

The period of re-emerging from our homes and coming back to reality – still dominated by the coronavirus, and yet increasingly domesticated, more and more commonly known as “the new normal” – prompts social theaters, whose activities are focused less on entertainment and more on providing aid, to ask themselves key questions about the future forms of their work with local communities. “Do we help people get used to the situation, or do we perhaps create some sort of detachment, and tell them about the dangers [the pandemic brings]?” – this is the dilemma the Kana Theater had to face when they put together the program of their annual *Spoiwa Kultury* (Bonds of Culture) festival. Usually held during the summer holidays, this time it was postponed until late autumn. In 2020 festival explored the boundaries of human fear, which in recent months have been drawn and redrawn in a rather chaotic manner. Some people found the changing restrictions and different forms of isolation reasonable, while others saw them as ill-considered. Marta Mikuła observes that “when it comes to fear, people have set their boundaries in different places; meanwhile, the reality is that we need to work together.” She goes on to wonder: “how does one find a place where one can give oneself, and others, permission to talk about this fear at all?,” if reality is unlikely to provide us with such a place, given the widespread expectation that people should “bounce back?” This is the reason why, in all its activities, Kana seeks to “explore the issues of presence and absence, proximity and distance”; and use instruments peculiar to theater to establish safe – and, most importantly, shared – spaces where one can talk about one’s fear, and thus lay it bare and curb its power – all the greater when fear is experienced in isolation. The Kana Theater team got to know the power of fear during lockdown, when they convened online workshops with young audiences. The result of these sessions was an – undoubtedly therapeutic – “tale of isolation and the pandemic.” According to the authors of the piece, it was made up of:

several stories, very much alike, told through the prism of individual solitudes. Each person was going through something similar, but felt completely isolated in their feelings [...]. The discrete solitudes came together to form a communal statement.

The Węgałty Theater took a similar view of the crisis of the individual during the pandemic: it is a feeling of loneliness which can be alleviated by upholding a sense of community during lockdown. These days, the idea of a “theater that

⁴¹ Klancyk (@Klaaancyk), “Dziś Piosenka Piotra,” Facebook, May 17, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=247179163184697>.

people need” is one of the cornerstones of the work Węgajty do. Their activities involving residents of a care home in nearby Jonkowo are just one example of how this idea is put into practice. “Our first Skype rehearsal! Went swimmingly!”⁴² is how Waclaw Sobaszek kept his followers up to date on social media, even though elderly actors Irena Anacka and Jan Jendrycki had had no previous experience of the online platform. Likewise, the Sobaszeks had never used it before to conduct a rehearsal. While direct contact remains the essence of their work in theater, they put their reservations about any form of mediation to one side, as they sought to support, in every possible way, their nearest and dearest, whose advanced age made them particularly vulnerable to coronavirus, and thus doubly isolated in the pandemic. A “theater people need” was needed more than ever before.

As it turned out, just a few days previously, the Węgajty Theater was needed for a different sort of thing altogether: like every year (though this time in much smaller numbers), they visited nearby homes, observing an old local custom known as wołoczebne or Alilujka (Hallelujah).⁴³ The barking of village dogs merged with traditional songs and the drawn-out sound of the ligawa (a horn-like instrument best-known in northern and eastern Poland and which is more than a meter tall and points towards the sky), all heralded the approach of Easter “carol singers.” Before the sound of the accordion and fiddle joined the song, and a barking dog, the hosts, who had been looking forward to the musicians’ visit all day, came up to the gate to offer their visitors hard-boiled eggs (Poland’s traditional Easter breakfast begins with family and friends sharing pieces of boiled egg as they exchange wishes); “they were grateful for the genuine solidarity, and the simple human warmth, shown by the visiting theater.”⁴⁴ Still, the visits were socially distanced, in keeping with the restrictions in place during the pandemic.

⁴² Teatr Węgajty (@teatr.projektterenowy), “Pierwsza próba nowego spektaklu,” Facebook, March 17, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/teatr.projektterenowy/posts/2532317420343937>.

⁴³ The Alilujka peregrination (also known as “the wołoczebne peregrination”) is a vanishing tradition of “Easter carol singing,” practiced in northern and eastern Poland. In keeping with the custom, the “carol singers” visit nearby homes on Easter Monday; in return, the hosts offer them a snack, usually some of Poland’s Easter staples, such as hard boiled eggs or sausage. The singers and local people all sit down to a communal feast the following day. The Węgajty Theater has been upholding this tradition since 1990, walking from door to door in the village of Dziadówek on the northeastern outskirts of Poland. Apart from “Easter carol singing,” Dziadówek also maintains the tradition of an Easter dance, hosted by one of the residents, and open to all their neighbors.

⁴⁴ Marek Kurkiewicz, “Zbiórka żywności, czyli kiedy teatr potrzebny jest potrzebny,” *Gazeta Świętojańska*, May 20, 2020, <http://gazetaswietojanska.org/kultura/pomorze-kultura/zbiorka-zywnosci-czyli-kiedy-teatr-potrzebny-jest-potrzebny/>.

One preliminary insight offered by theater of ambulatory care is that social distancing is the greatest threat to an individual's mental wellbeing, an emblem of sophisticated callousness in social relations. According to members of the Kana group,

The malicious thing about this pandemic is that people respond to other crises – social or political – by coming together. Whatever we do, we are in it together, building a community, reinforcing our floodbanks with sandbags. Working together is our remedy. But at the moment, coming close to someone is a potential risk. This makes people extremely wary of the world around them, and of other people.

As academic and civic rights campaigner Inga Iwasiów has stressed, in their “sanitised” guise people become “biological beings, only intent on protecting themselves and their families – to the extent that any person outside this circle will be a threat, and we’ll give up [interacting with other people].”⁴⁵ If we do not want this version of humanity to prevail, social theaters are needed as the necessary “link”⁴⁶ on our way back to the “new normal”: a link which ensures that bonds do not suffer as we look after our health.

Staying connected is vital for small, local communities, whose access to the arts is often severely limited. Marek Kościółek argues that

if there is grassroots activity in a community; if there is space for people to come together to forge real bonds – the community has some real leverage. Theater, and the arts in general, are instrumental in making this happen.

This is why, in the (post)pandemic thaw, Kościółek's Krzyk Theater “begins with things that can bring people together.” One of these is *Skrzydła dla Mam* (Letting Mums Fly), a series of workshops for stay-at-home mothers from the Maszewo region, held over the summer and combining theater, psychology and education. The idea came about as a response to a need that was there even before the pandemic: providing adults with the skills they need to get a better grasp of the world their children live in. This need became even more urgent in a crisis triggered by lockdown. Family problems and rifts in relationships were laid bare; seemingly minor insults and conflicts were exacerbated; salt was rubbed into wounds – and all this calls for theater that can treat the wounded family-cum-community. What is needed is a link between children and adults; after all, this may not be the only time when they are compelled to stay at home together. Theater of ambulatory care strives, therefore, to undo

⁴⁵ Inga Iwasiów, “Czerwone szpilki nie znikną,” interview by Violetta Szostak, *Wysokie Obcasy*, no. 32 (August 8, 2020): 19.

⁴⁶ Marek Kościółek, interview by Katarzyna Kułakowska, Warsaw – Maszewo, July 22, 2020.

this element of coercion and transform being together across generations into a joyous and urgent act of will.

Human relationships are the essence, and main theme, of the work of the Naumiony Theater,⁴⁷ based in Ormontowice in Upper Silesia, western Poland. The vast majority of the Naumiony ensemble were particularly vulnerable to coronavirus because of their advanced age. The theater thus had to act immediately, and find a way to reconcile their refusal to isolate the oldest members of their group and the need to overcome the very real threat of falling ill, or succumbing to loneliness. In keeping with government regulations, the ensemble deployed a variety of means, theatrical and otherwise, to ensure everyone in their multigenerational “extended family” was safe and well – physically and mentally – and had food supplies.

The Węgajty Theater Easter Food Donation Appeal, mentioned in the introduction, was a similar sort of event: an instance of responding immediately to a crisis as and when it is diagnosed. The appeal was a gesture towards those most in need – homeless people from an Olsztyn hostel. At the same time, it was a way of energizing the local community and getting them involved: the people of Jonkowo are “the loveliest neighbors Węgajty Theater could wish for,” and Waław Sobaszek took to his personal Facebook page to thank them “for an abundance of excellent natural food, free of chemicals and obtrusive plastic and packaging.” As Rebecca Solnit has observed, “Sometimes it’s wise to move rapidly from danger; sometimes it’s altruistic to gather supplies to share.”⁴⁸ Apart from being an illustration of Solnit’s words, the appeal launched by the Sobaszeks has yet another dimension to it: it is an art performance and a creative manifesto. Husband and wife set out on their “Easter carol singing” journey north in a minibus plastered with the words “Food Appeal.” In addition, as Marek Kurkiewicz, a friend of the Węgajty Theater (and himself a member of an alternative ensemble, the 3.5⁴⁹) has observed, the journey made people more aware of the plight of creatives who had lost all their income during the pandemic – “and suddenly what they need isn’t attention, but food. Quite simply, they need it to survive.”⁵⁰ This is what happened to the members of the 3.5.⁵¹

⁴⁷ The Naumiony Theater in Ormontowice is an amateur theater established in 2004. Its productions are inspired Upper Silesia’s history and traditions.

⁴⁸ Solnit, “The Impossible Has Already Happened.”

⁴⁹ The 3.5 Theater was founded in 2012 under the auspices of the Sztum Arts Center in northern Poland. The following year, it moved to the nearby town of Dzierzgoń, where it still works with the local community. The 3.5 is socially engaged, “a theater of things which matter to people.” See <https://teatr3i5.pl>.

⁵⁰ Kurkiewicz, “Zbiórka żywności.”

⁵¹ See Marek Kurkiewicz, “Życie codzienne w czasie zarazy: Teatr 3.5,” interview by Piotr Wyszomirski, *Gazeta Świętojańska*, March 23, 2020, <https://gazetaswietojska.org/polecane/zycie-codzienne-w-czasach-zarazy-teatr-3-5/>.

Theaters working with prisoners had utterly different challenges to face, and different needs to respond to. Obviously, inmates were isolated even before the pandemic: however, Covid exacerbated their loneliness, as a blanket ban on visits was introduced on 19 March 2020. “Prisons and theaters were the first to close, and they will probably be the last to open, certainly in their usual form,”⁵² says Agnieszka Bresler, founder of the Kobietostan (Womenstan, a pun on the suffix “-stan,” meaning “land”) Collective⁵³. Like the Jubilo Foundation,⁵⁴ the Kobietostan Collective was completely cut off from its ensemble without any warning and, although it had the funds it needed, work in its usual form had to be suspended. Looking for new means of communication proved to be the greatest challenge: widely available online platforms, which would have been the most obvious solution, were out of the question in a prison setting. Jubilo coped by exchanging actual letters with inmates. As for Kobietostan, after a long struggle, two project co-ordinators finally received permission to enter the prison. As Bresler has put it, “the pandemic has shown us what the crux of our project was, what needed saving – and that was relationships.” Paradoxically, the creatives’ redoubled and manifest efforts to save their relationship with inmates made that relationship even stronger. A sense of separation, now shared by both sides of the relationship for the first time (as one group was locked away behind bars and the other at home), became their communal experience. Bresler says:

The guys would often call me from inside. They said jokingly that now we knew what it was like for them, every day; now we’re the ones who aren’t allowed out of the house, and we’re being told what we are and aren’t allowed to do.

The therapeutic approach and conjuring are two different cures for individual problems; distinct ways of coping with the difficult emotions which have made the pandemic and lockdown such a major challenge. With both options, the bond between a creative and their community turns out to be the healing formula. As the renowned psychiatrist and existential therapist Irvin D. Yalom has put it, “it’s

⁵² Agnieszka Bresler, interview by Katarzyna Kułakowska, Warsaw–Wrocław, July 9, 2020.

⁵³ The Kobietostan Collective is a group of female creatives and social activists, whose work is all about women and for their benefit. Behind Kobietostan lay a refusal to accept the fact that women from disadvantaged backgrounds are pushed to the margins and denied a voice. Founded by Agnieszka Bresler, the collective stands for equal rights, and the empowerment of women who are left out of mainstream society. See <https://www.facebook.com/kobietostan>.

⁵⁴ The Jubilo, an international group comprising actors and musicians, was founded in Wrocław in 2011 by Daniel Han and Diego Pileggi. The Jubilo Foundation was established in 2013 and, the following year, began working with inmates from a prison in Wrocław. The collaboration, which has continued till now, was Jubilo’s response to prisoners being excluded and consigned to the margins of society. See <http://jubiloproject.com/en/>.

the relationship that heals.”⁵⁵ Theaters of ambulatory care specializing in either therapy or conjuring are keenly aware of this. As they foster close and caring relationships, they press on with their para-theatrical work, notwithstanding the restrictions brought about by the pandemic.

REVOLUTION: A RESPONSE TO A SYSTEMIC CRISIS

Those theaters of ambulatory care which see the pandemic primarily as a crisis affecting communities on a systemic, national or even global scale, tend to recommend a different sort of remedy. Where they work with individuals, theaters of ambulatory care administer treatment in the form of relationships; however, where they look at ideas, social contexts or political issues, their recommended therapy tend to focus on shaping crisis discourse, speaking out on matters of importance, and pointing out systemic weaknesses. The purpose of all this is not so much to devise an alternative course of action, as to demarcate the path to a revolution.

As Alina Gałązka of Komuna Warszawa⁵⁶ has put it, venting her disappointment:

this crisis could have caused a rethink of how things were [in alternative theater]. There was a point when one really could have reflected on whether everything was going in the right direction. Sadly, I don't think any of our so-called policy-makers want to give it any thought.⁵⁷

When it comes to Komuna (and other theaters that take a political stance), asking “how things are” is less about individuals (and when it is, then only indirectly): it pertains, first and foremost, to a community, examined from a perspective that transcends the local context, or the context of any one group. In their systemic identification of the threats posed by the pandemic, revolutionary theaters of ambulatory care focus on saving the community, understood in much broader terms than those of theater and its audience/participant group. It is quite common for this type of theater to take up non-governmental activities, in the spirit of opposition and antagonism. Theirs is a politically engaged theater, with politics understood as “a sphere of debate on what kind of community and what kind of public life we

⁵⁵ Irvin D. Yalom, *Love's Executioner and Other Tales of Psychotherapy* (New York: Perseus Books, 2012), 112.

⁵⁶ Komuna Warszawa was founded in 1989 by director, musician and fine artist Grzegorz Laszuk as an “anarchist community of action.” One of Poland's leading avant-garde theaters, Komuna's experiments combine performative arts, video installation and music. Usually written from scratch, their productions address social and political issues, seeking new forms and means of expression. Other ensembles are invited to perform at Komuna; exhibitions and concerts, talks and lectures are all organized. See https://komuna.warszawa.pl/_mainen/.

⁵⁷ Alina Gałązka, interview by Katarzyna Kułakowska, Warsaw, July 14, 2020.

want; what we find acceptable and with what provisos; and what we disown or seek to eradicate.”⁵⁸ Theaters which fit this description do not regard the crisis of the pandemic as a source of new dangers, but rather as a sort of lens focusing the difficulties which were been there. That is why revolutionary theaters of ambulatory care are spending the pandemic carrying on developing the themes they had pursued before – the only difference is that they do it using whatever language and gestures are available during lockdown.

Having joined forces with the Studio Theater, Komuna asked creatives to contribute simple statements about the current situation, as part of their Kwarantanna (Quarantine) Project. Komuna made no secret of the fact that theirs was primarily a welfare scheme, designed to offer financial support to creatives who, in the new circumstances, were no longer able to work. Therefore, the resulting series of video performances, is, on the one hand, an important contribution to the debate on the precarious nature of independent creative work; on the other, the project offers genuine financial support – though it amounts to yet another Band-Aid solution, given that a reform of the arts funding system remains unattainable. This issue was addressed directly in *Przydałoby się* (I Could Use It)⁵⁹ by director Weronika Szczawińska and actors Piotr Wawer Jr. and Maciej Pesta. “Could you use twelve hundred zlotys right now?” Szczawińska asks Pesta on the phone. “Yeah, I sure could” Pesta replies. We can see his mouth and his sad gaze on the screen of Wawer and Szczawińska’s smartphones, as the pair spend lockdown together.

Teatr Ósmego Dnia⁶⁰ (The Eighth Day Theater), Poland’s legendary alternative group, has likewise taken to providing patronage during the pandemic. Like Komuna and Studio, the Eights have been carrying on with their usual work: against a background of systemic underfunding of the arts in Poland, the Eights offered to support off-theater. They called on creatives to submit funding applications: the winning productions would be staged as part of the OFF: PREMIERY / PREZENTACJE (PREMIERES / PRESENTATIONS) festival, once restrictions had been eased. This kind of support was vital during the pandemic, especially to emerging

⁵⁸ Paweł Mościcki, *Polityka teatru. Eseje o sztuce angażującej* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2008), 16.

⁵⁹ *Przydałoby się* by Pesta, Szczawińska and Wawer jr., directed by Weronika Szczawińska, premiere: April, 2 2020 (on Facebook), produced by Studio Theater, Komuna Warszawa, <https://www.facebook.com/events/503732920318656/permalink/507158299976118/>.

⁶⁰ Teatr Ósmego Dnia is Poland’s best-known theater group. Rooted in countercultural student theater of the 1960s, it was founded in 1964 by Lech Raczak and Tomasz Szymański who studied Polish at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. The Eights’ politically engaged productions were scathing, ironic commentaries on the realities of the then People’s Republic of Poland; and members of the ensemble were repressed by the authoritarian state. Today, the Eights are a legend of Poland’s alternative theater, a symbol of engaged theater, throbbing in rhythm with major social and political events. See <http://teatrosmegodnia.pl/en/>.

ensembles, for whom opportunities to earn a living in the theater have all but dried up. “It’s a huge blow to all those only just starting out,” says director Anna Smolar, “I can see the brutal impact this situation has had on some in our circle. They are at the start of their professional lives, and already they have very little elbow room.”⁶¹ “If I had known there was going to be a pandemic, we wouldn’t have founded Kobietostan,” admits Agnieszka Bresler, “It would have been easier to survive had we stuck to the organizations we were once affiliated with.”⁶² According to Martyna Dębowska, who is part of the alternative scene in Wrocław, “there were no guidelines for NGOs and alternative theaters. We were left to our own devices.”⁶³ When the state fails to offer independent creatives any support that will actually suit the way they earn a living, grassroots funding campaigns launched by theaters of ambulatory care become a thoroughly tender enterprise, in the sense of the term recently highlighted by Olga Tokarczuk. According the 2018 Nobel Prize winner, “tenderness is deep emotional concern about another being, their [“its” suggests “tenderness’s”] fragility, their unique nature, and their lack of immunity to suffering and the effects of time.”⁶⁴ Not only were her words used as a motto for the Teatr Ōsmego Dnia call for applications, but they also appear to be the best way of summarizing similar aid schemes.

Laying bare the state’s weak points, exacerbated by the pandemic, can in itself be soothing. The recent experiences of the Naumiony Theater demonstrate as much: the work of the ensemble boldly addresses such issues as Upper Silesian history, much to the inconvenience of the authorities. The theater is firmly embedded in its mining community; and working almost next door to a coal mine, closed due to a high number of Covid cases, has obviously spurred the Naumiony ensemble to speak out regarding what, politically, has always been a thorny issue. Members of the group and their families have been directly affected by the decision to close the pit during the pandemic, and the closure has reopened old wounds and brought back the pain of unfulfilled promises. In addition, it has pitted various groups within the community against each other, aggravating latent antagonisms: people have been divided into culprits and their victims, those under threat and the threatened – all of which has been fueled by a media narrative presenting Silesia in general (and mining communities in particular) as a “red zone,” standing out on the map of Poland. At the time of writing, the Naumiony Theater were working tirelessly on exploring these issues in as much depth as possible.

⁶¹ Anna Smolar, interview by Katarzyna Kułakowska, Warsaw, June 1, 2020.

⁶² Agnieszka Bresler, interview by Katarzyna Kułakowska.

⁶³ Martyna Dębowska, interview by Katarzyna Kułakowska, Warsaw–Wrocław, July 7, 2020.

⁶⁴ Olga Tokarczuk, “The Tender Narrator,” December 7, 2019, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2018/tokarczuk/104871-lecture-english/>.

What actually emerges when the three forces – theater, the community and the pandemic – coincide? The answer to this question depends primarily on an particular ensemble’s chosen perspective. One set of images will emerge for creatives working at the micro-social level – in other words, those working with individuals. Those taking a more global perspective will be sensitive to altogether different concerns. At the micro-level, what one notices is loneliness, an assortment of fears, and a yearning for relationships, community and contact. At the macro (socio-political) level, one becomes aware of the challenges brought about by the pandemic; issues needing systemic change, and capable of triggering a revolution. During the pandemic, emergences take the form of either human drama or a crisis, be it local or global. From a microscale perspective, this entails broken bonds, and on the macroscale – world systems with feet of clay. In the former situation – a trilateral combination of creative / pandemic / the need to be part of a community – the choice of remedies is determined by the creative’s relationship with their community. In the latter, the choice of treatment depends to a greater extent on the theater’s relationship with the forces at play in a crisis, or the community’s relationship with their way of life during the pandemic. Preliminary diagnoses provided by social theater are closely linked to the semantics of emergence: in order for something to finally emerge, the tension between the forces clashing in the process needs to be defined. When social theater tackles the pandemic, the clash occurs between three, rather than two, such forces. This is because social theater is as embedded in its community as it is in its art. Systemic relations between the sides involved in the clash, and the clashing forces, are ever-changing, and the process itself can never be completed, cannot conclude in providing a lasting and robust diagnosis.

The analyses and interpretations of the pandemic’s fluctuating emergences generate “low theories.”⁶⁵ The concept of low theory acknowledges “knowledge from below” and makes it part of its system of thought. The term “knowledge from below” encompasses all forms of “naive knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity,”⁶⁶ devised both communally and on the fringes of the community. Underlying this approach is the exploration of alternative definitions, as “low” status entails working against dominant rules “that stand outside of a conventional understanding of success.”⁶⁷ Social theater will always remain a theater of failure, where failure is understood as “a refusal of mastery, a critique of the intuitive connections within capitalism between success and

⁶⁵ Judith “Jack” Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

⁶⁶ Michel Foucault, “Two Lectures,” in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 82–83.

⁶⁷ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 2.

profit.”⁶⁸ This kind of theater never stops observing, defining its goal, in line with Solnit’s insight that “one of our main tasks now [...] is to understand this moment, what it might require of us, and what it might make possible.”⁶⁹

To be able to grasp the ever changing relationships within larger structures, we need to turn our attention, and give some thought, to local experimentation, the act of beginning from scratch over and over again; a sort of Band-Aid strategy, the makeshift quality and symptomatic treatment offered by the theater of ambulatory care. However, whatever the strategy chosen by a particular group, the principles introduced by social theater at the time of writing, as well as the remedies it recommends in its outpatient clinic, are determined by caring for the local ecosystem and the community which shapes that ecosystem – and determine them in turn. In this ecosystem, exchange relies not on completing the circle, but on a never-ending spiral of mutual interaction, based on neighborliness: an essential quality in normal circumstances, but vital during a pandemic.

Translated by Joanna Blachnio

⁶⁸ Halberstam, 11–12.

⁶⁹ Solnit, “The Impossible Has Already Happened.”