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# Withdrawal from the City

## Searching For the Source of Valentinas Masalskis's Creative Work

### Abstract

In psychology of creativity, there has been a growing need to explore not only the individual world of the artist, but also the broader context of creative work, such as the influence of the environment on creativity. By combining the methods and insights of theater studies and psychology, this article raises the question of the impact of urban and non-urban environment on the theater artist and explores the phenomenon of “withdrawals” of Lithuanian actor, director, and pedagogue Valentinas Masalskis. The article is based on qualitative research: case study analysis,

with in-depth interviews as a method of data collection. The research resulted in selection of four meta-themes that emerged from the interviewing material: “city is bustle,” “to withdraw in order to come back,” “I am no one without others,” “beyond aesthetics,” with the theme of withdrawal as the essential axis. The analysis of these meta-themes in phenomenological perspective revealed how withdrawals help Masalskis to realize his vision of the theater. For Masalskis, withdrawals are the way not only to produce a new performance, but also to go further—to deepen anthropological reflection, to develop pedagogical methods, to discover unusual perspectives, to strengthen ethical principles, and, finally, to search for the source of creativity in a calm and focused manner.

### Keywords

city, environment, theater, creativity, Valentinas Masalskis

### Abstrakt

**Wycofać się z miasta: W poszukiwaniu źródeł pracy twórczej Valentinas Masalskisa**  
W psychologii twórczości coraz częściej akcentuje się potrzebę badania nie tylko indywidualnego świata artysty, ale także szerszego kontekstu pracy twórczej, między innymi wpływu środowiska na kreatywność. Autorki artykułu łączą metody badań teatralnych i psychologicznych, by postawić pytanie o wpływ miejskiego i pozamiejskiego środowiska na artystę teatralnego na przykładzie doświadczenia „wycofywania się” litewskiego aktora, reżysera i pedagoga Valentinas Masalskisa. Podstawą artykułu są badania jakościowe: studium przypadku, w którym wykorzystano swobodne wywiady pogłębione jako metodę zbierania danych. Analiza materiału umożliwiła wyłonienie czterech meta-tematów: „miasto to zgiełk”, „wycofać się, by wrócić”, „jestem nikim bez innych”, „poza estetyką”, których wspólnym mianownikiem jest idea „wycofywania się”. Interpretacja wyników badań w perspektywie fenomenologicznej pokazała, w jaki sposób wycofywanie przyczynia się do realizacji wizji teatru Masalskisa. Praktyka ta pomaga Masalskisowi nie tylko tworzyć nowe spektakle, ale także pójść dalej – pogłębiać antropologiczną refleksję, rozwijać metody pedagogiczne, odkrywać nowe punkty widzenia, wzmacniać zasady etyczne, a także skupić się na poszukiwaniu źródeł kreatywności.

### Słowa kluczowe

miasto, środowisko, teatr, kreatywność, Valentinas Masalskis

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Humanity has been experimenting with different lifestyles in the city swirl for more than six thousand years. Although hundreds of times cities have been predicted to collapse for failure to hold in their density and artificiality, they have been growing tirelessly. “Today, the world’s cities have grown by 200,000. The same will happen tomorrow, the day after tomorrow and all the days to come.”<sup>1</sup> Psychologists have even identified a direct relationship between the pace of life and the population: it turns out that there is a link between the walking speed and the population size.<sup>2</sup> The city is a place of attraction for creative people: “Creative individuals are drawn to cities and places where they can afford to work (they receive the support) and in turn contribute to the city and local economy.”<sup>3</sup> In addition, researchers have found that the larger the city, the more productive each resident.<sup>4</sup>

In the West, theater has always been closely related to the urban culture and urbanization processes since its emergence in the polis of Athens. The relationship between the city and the theater in different epochs and countries reflected “the parallels between aesthetics, social institutions, and politics.”<sup>5</sup> The location of the theater has formed certain conventions of both the creative process and the perception of the performance, models of creative and spectator behavior. As directing emerged at the end of the nineteenth century, theatrical place and space began to be seen not only as a guarantor of smooth stage communication, but also as a restrictive convention. The first directors-reformers of the twentieth century began to experiment with stage space and theatrical locations. From time to time, they managed to “escape” from the theater building and create in the nature or in the countryside, away from the city. The examples of Jacques Copeau, Jerzy Grotowski, Eugenio Barba, Peter Brook, and Tadashi Suzuki evidence the effectiveness of a withdrawal from urban culture. Today, many

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<sup>1</sup> Ben Wilson, *Metropolis: Miesto istorija—nuo senovės iki šiandien*, trans. Tadas Juras (Vilnius: Kitos knygos, 2020), 13.

<sup>2</sup> See Marc H. Bornstein, “The Pace of Life: Revisited,” *International Journal of Psychology* 14, no. 1/4 (1979): 83–90, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00207597908246715>.

<sup>3</sup> Mark A. Runco, *Creativity: Theories and Themes: Research, Development, and Practice*, 2nd ed. (London: Academic Press, 2014), 222, <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-410512-6.00015-1>.

<sup>4</sup> See Luis M. A. Bettencourt et al., “Growth, Innovation, Scaling, and the Pace of Life in Cities,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 104, no. 17 (2007): 7301–7306, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.0610172104>; Luis M. A. Bettencourt et al., “Why Are Large Cities Faster? Universal Scaling and Self-Similarity in Urban Organization and Dynamics,” *The European Physical Journal B* 63 (2008): 285–293, <https://doi.org/10.1140/epjb/e2008-00250-6>.

<sup>5</sup> Edgaras Klivis, “Perrašomos vietos: Topografija, identitetas ir politika žiuolaikiniame Lietuvos teatre,” *Meno istorija ir kritika* 4 (2008): 172, <https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12259/32928>.

artists take part in workshops or residencies outside the city. Of course, this is also influenced by cultural policy and funded mobility programs; however, there is more to this phenomenon than the artists' desire to travel and gain new experiences. The dynamics of creativity in the city and beyond its boundaries has a direct connection with the creativity of theater artists and with the development of performing arts in general.

When one investigates the creative biographies and goals of the theater artists who have practiced such “withdrawals,” one common idea emerges: not only to look for a new theatrical language, but also to expand the boundaries of theater perception, to give meaning to the artistic activities, providing them with the functions of personal development, self-development, and building deep interpersonal relationships. Historically, the phenomenon of withdrawals from the city can be attributed to the movement of theater laboratories. In her book *Alchemists of the Stage: Theatre Laboratories in Europe*, Mirella Schino defines theater laboratory as “a theatre which refuses to be only art and whose radical research forges new conditions with a view to changing both the actor and the spectator.”<sup>6</sup> Analyzing the examples of the famous studios of the twentieth century, from Konstantin Stanislavski and Vsevolod Meyerhold to Jerzy Grotowski and Eugenio Barba, the author concludes that the main purpose of the experiments carried out in the theater laboratories was related not only to theatrical language, its form and style, but also to the actor, seen not just as an artist but above all as a representative of a new human being.<sup>7</sup> In other words, in addition to aesthetics, the artists who founded the laboratories were also concerned with the purpose, mission, and meaning of the theater.

In Lithuania, professional theater was formed under the influence of the desire to preserve national identity and uniquely interpret the European and Russian theater innovations of the twentieth century. Radical experiments have never been a part of its identity: “Lithuanian theatre, which has traditionally avoided simple aesthetic experimentation . . . , is more used to resisting, to raising moral questions, and to searching for spiritual ideals.”<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, for a long time, the most important theatrical phenomena took place in the largest cities, where

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<sup>6</sup> Mirella Schino, *Alchemists of the Stage: Theatre Laboratories in Europe*, trans. Paul Warrington (New York: Routledge, 2013), 274.

<sup>7</sup> Schino, *Alchemists of the Stage*, 10. See also Bryan Brown, *A History of the Theatre Laboratory* (New York: Routledge, 2019); Maria Shevtsova, *Rediscovering Stanislavsky* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Andrei Malaev-Babel, ed., *The Vakhtangov Sourcebook* (London: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> Audronis Liuga, “Lithuanian theatre in Transition: Names and Generations,” in *Contemporary Lithuanian theatre: Names and Performances*, eds. Ramunė Marcinkevičiūtė and Ramunė Balevičiūtė, trans. Judita Gliuberzonaitė and Aušra Simanavičiūtė (Vilnius: Teatro ir kino informacijos ir edukacijos centras, 2019), 10.

intellectual and creative energy was traditionally concentrated. Moving the attention-grabbing theater phenomenon away from the largest centers required a tremendous creative force, a magnetic personality capable of bringing together the community of like-minded people and followers who would unconditionally believe in their leader. This is the case, for example, with the post-war history of the town of Panevėžys, where the young director Juozas Miltinis, who created a kind of theater “sect,” turned this remote place into a mecca for theater professionals and lovers of the entire former Soviet Union. Miltinis changed this town (a place formerly known for its distillery has now become a vibrant cultural center), and this secluded space that has become an oasis of almost fanatical devotion to the profession has undoubtedly stimulated the artist’s creativity.

It should be noted, however, that there are not many such examples in the past history of Lithuanian theater. Today, on the other hand, many theater creators are practicing “escapes” from the city for various projects and common cultural policies encourage different partnerships, often in alternative spaces. The present research explores the case of the famous Lithuanian theater artist Valentinas Masalskis (born in 1954)—actor, director, and pedagogue, who spent a large part of his professional life in a small town near a large city. Its aim is to reveal the influence of the urban and non-urban environment on his creative work by combining the perspectives of theater studies and psychology.

While working in Vilnius, Masalskis for some time used to live in the town of Vievis, thirty km away from the capital city, and currently spends part of his private and creative life in Kuliai, a town in western Lithuania, near Klaipėda. Although the artist himself says that his choice was mostly motivated by practical reasons, looking into his perception of theater and professional goals, and their connection with personal growth, it might be assumed that the decision to live—and sometimes to create—away from a large city satisfies his important professional and personal needs. Both theater scholars and critics had noted Masalskis’s “feverish empathy for his profession,”<sup>9</sup> as well as his tendency for introspection and his potential to attract searching artists through his work. “He is able to create the energetic field around him that limits, separates, distinguishes his performances (whether he performs or directs) as a unique, separate theater unit.”<sup>10</sup> Masalskis chooses a repertoire characterized by great intellectual tension: works of Peter Handke, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Thomas Bernhard, Tankred Dorst, Ursula Ehler, John Logan, and others. He is involved in

<sup>9</sup> Daiva Šabasevičienė, *Valentinas Masalskis: leškant teatro* (Vilnius: Tyto Alba, 2010), 9.

<sup>10</sup> Šabasevičienė, *Valentinas Masalskis*, 14.

a wide variety of artistic work: he practices solo performance, participates in productions by Krystian Lupa or Árpád Schilling, and directs performances featuring young actors and students (the actors who completed his acting courses at the Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre have established two independent troupes in Klaipėda).

## Research Methodology

The influence of the city and other environments on the creativity of theater artists is a poorly researched topic. Although a great deal of research has been devoted to the theatrical place and space itself, scholars mainly study the socio-cultural meanings of space, using the theoretical approaches of anthropology, phenomenology, cultural studies, new historicism, and urban studies. For example, in his book *Places of Performance: The Semiotics of Theatre Architecture* (1989), Marvin Carlson analyzes the importance of the city environment for the spatial meanings of the performance. However, according to Stanton B. Garner,

given the obvious centrality of the city to theatrical culture (and vice versa), it is remarkable how little attention has been paid to the functioning of theater within the urban landscape and how little consideration is given to the parameters of theater as a specifically urban institution and practice.<sup>11</sup>

Jen Harvie's work *Theatre and the City* is one of the few examples that discusses theater as part of urban processes. Analyzing the relationship between the theatre and the city (specifically, London and New York) from the perspectives of cultural materialism and performative analysis, Harvie seeks to deepen the concept of theater as an exclusively urban practice and explore the representations of cities in dramas, the material circumstances of theater creation in the city, and how they affect the meanings generated on stage.<sup>12</sup>

Qualitative approach—case study analysis<sup>13</sup>—used in this research allows a thorough description and examination of the phenomenon in question. Several in-depth interviews with Valentinas Masalskis were conducted and analyzed

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<sup>11</sup> Stanton B. Garner Jr., "Urban Landscapes, Theatrical Encounters: Staging the City," in *Land/Scape/Theater*, eds. Elinor Fuchs and Una Chaudhuri (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 96.

<sup>12</sup> See Jen Harvie, *Theatre and the City* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

<sup>13</sup> Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods*, 6th ed. (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2017).

by a theater scholar and a psychologist, using their professional knowledge and competencies. Data analysis followed qualitative research methods and a phenomenological perspective.

During the first interview, Masalskis was given one broad question about his creative experiences in city and non-city settings. He was asked not to rush and to share his experiences and insights. Then, some clarifying questions were given. The researchers decided not to use the opposition “city–village/nature/province” to allow the interviewee himself to define the opposite of the city based on his experience. Subsequently, an additional interview was conducted to acquire further the research data; during this interview, the artist was asked to expand on and clarify the themes of interest. The additional interviews allowed for refining of the obtained meta-themes, agreeing on the importance and connections of the themes with the interviewee, as well as deepening the obtained insights.

The following four meta-themes were identified in the process of the in-depth analysis of Masalskis narrative and metaphors: “city is bustle,” “to withdraw in order to come back,” “I am no one without others,” “beyond aesthetics.” The *theme of withdrawal* with its various aspects was selected as the essential axis, as it proved to be central and highlighted in all interview themes, and best combined all the results of the research. After demonstrating how these meta-themes were derived from interviews by looking for threads and patterns in organized transcripts excerpts, research results will be discussed in the broader context of the relevant theoretical concepts.

## To Withdraw in Order to Understand: City Is Bustle

Masalskis started recounting his experience by drawing a clear distinction between city and non-city environments and defining his relationship with the urban world. First, he determined the opposition city–countryside: a city does not change, it remains the same, while nature is constantly changing. Within this opposition, non-city (nature, village, forest, mountains) is described as mysterious, romanticized, mystical, “the world of elves and gnomes.”

The city man is dependent on a certain rhythm; therefore, the city is always very the same for me. It only starts to change when the weather improves, and people go out in the streets. Then, I see diversity through the abundance of people, through their activities. For me, the city is always very beautiful at 4–5 a.m., when it is just waking up. Then it is very promising. It washes. At 9 a.m., it becomes very official, such a “tie-city,” when men with ties, nicely dressed and

good smelling people, appear on the streets. We enter a promising life where you can be anyone you like. Then, at 10–11 a.m., the city starts to get serious. At noon, it is the same again. The market, shopping and walking start in the afternoon, and bohemia—in the evening. If you go into the forest, you will see it differently each time. Due to the shadows, because some beast would pass by.<sup>14</sup>

The city cultivates creativity, gives intelligence, sophistication, yet the artist is born in the nature, observing its laws.

As I understand, a person becomes an artist not in the academy. He acquires education, develops intelligence, becomes educated and well-read there. But a child becomes an artist—the one who says that a crow is green because he may have seen that crow, no matter that painted one—becomes at about 5–6 years old—when he begins to develop as a human being. He sees the injustice of the world that excites him as a child. For example, he had just watched a butterfly on a beautiful flower, and a flying bird pecked it. Or he saw how a cat caught a bird in his sight . . . He saw the injustice of existence.

It is as if different forces are present in the countryside and in the city: the city imposes a structure, even requires it, and in the non-urban environment, that structure—profound and archaic—already exists. According to Masalskis, the city inevitably affects a human being. A city dweller has a lot to do; however, their activities are short-lived, they are driven at a great pace, “the city quickly eats everything.” The modern city is also associated with the technological and media world, which can be particularly engaging and distracting.

The city provides an opportunity to be creative, competitive power, and that is very good. It is also the driving force that pushes us forward. But it is only for the strongest, and the weak becomes the one who serves the city. That fast-paced life gives birth to a hybrid human being who is fake. A hybrid is one who has nothing real, a “half human being”: half an intellectual, half an actor, half a singer, half a philosopher, half a psychologist, half a teacher . . . As if he has everything but is not fully committed.

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<sup>14</sup> Excerpts from transcripts of the interviews presented in the article are thematically organized and translated by RB and AJA. In their interpretation of the interview material, the authors of the article respect the way the artist chooses to symbolize his lived experience through the language.



The city is a culture of impression. Masalskis also notes that the city atmosphere makes it easier to focus on the negative aspects of life in the creative work. Remembering the period of working in Kaunas in the 1990s, he says:

it was enough to go to the store, go through Liberty Avenue, and I used to be full of negative things. I could gather them from everything: a saleswoman, a passer-by, a strange-looking person. As I say to my actors, your source is human misery, pain. But when I had to find some idealism, it was incomparably harder. You have to distance yourself, shut up, get into books, watch some very simple wonders of the natural world, just look at the forest or the fire for an hour. It is difficult to find the meaning of existence, it is difficult to perform the role of an idealist.

Summarizing his observations about the city, Masalskis became increasingly convinced that the urban culture, combined with the tools and activities of the media and technological world, is like big bustle. As an artist, he must necessarily find a relationship with that bustle, because otherwise it could become a threat to his creativity and identity. Masalskis manages to do this only by regularly withdrawing himself from the city.

### **To Withdraw in Order to Come Back: Creativity Spring**

For Masalskis, withdrawal is necessary: providing distance, allowing to concentrate and to see the essence. What to withdraw from? From noise, people, everyday routine.

We have the ability to distance ourselves and get back into the noise of the city again. As Ortega y Gasset has said, in order to talk about a forest, you have to move away from it, because . . . you will not see the forest through the trees.

The artist emphasized, however, that it is equally important to go back to the city and present one's work there: the impetus is given when you want to show the work you have created. This constant change of distance seems to be an essential part of his experience, defining his relationship with the center (in this case, the city), which always attracts back. The artist clearly understands that despite the importance and pleasure of withdrawal he will need to go back and show the work to the public.

If you have something to give away, you go to the city, if you don't, don't go. When you have made something, take it, show it. Share with others. All art, all our creative works are basically for sharing with others. We would share rather than prove something.

The city is the place of settlement . . . You reflect on some kind of art with your community . . . but you have to bring it to a common cultural cauldron to make it a part of it, because if you don't participate in it, it will be a riot . . . The city is needed. It needs to be brought to and given to. It needs to be constantly given to. And then, withdraw again. To give and withdraw.

Currently, Masalskis is working not only in Klaipėda and Vilnius, but also in Kuliai—a Plungė district town. He emphasizes that he enjoys living in a small town, but near a big city. It allows maintaining the necessary distance—being in city and non-city at the same time—and constantly playing with diverse perspectives, changing the focus. It seems that there is a constant “tickling of thinking”: the rhythm of withdrawals and returns helps to “chew over” the experiences, to reflect on them, to be able to “distance oneself from that noise and get back into it,” thus preserving and stimulating one's creativity. This rhythm, however, cannot become an artificially applied technique: “No need to make out a system, a dogma of that.”

Summarizing the observations about the changes in his creativity that take place after withdrawing from urban environment, Masalskis notes that their value can only be fully understood and verified upon returning to the city. Withdrawal requires a return. There is a constant spring-like pulsation: a balance of creativity and productivity, and a tribute to the world's creative cauldron.

### **To Withdraw in Order to Meet: “I Am No One Without Others”**

While talking about human relationships, the artist highlights two different situations: withdrawal from the city and everyday life as a personal experience of loneliness or as gathering with a creative group.

Movement away from your city can be interpreted as movement into your inner world. There is a tendency to associate this movement with greater self-immersion, based on experience of loneliness. This can be described as a deep and intimate presence with oneself. However, Masalskis does not want to get caught up in loneliness. After the trip to the inner world, he feels the need to



Valentin Masalskis with his students, 2021  
Klaipėda Youth Theatre

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return to the society, to share the insights he has gained. “The biggest secret is the loneliness in the nature, because there is no secret on the Internet.”

Masalskis is convinced of the importance of collaborating with other artists. He sees a community as the embodiment of creativity, admiring such figures as Juozas Miltinis, who managed to turn the town of Panevėžys into the creative center. Masalskis kept mentioning other world-famous theater artists, whose ability to bring communities together is for him a very important result of their work.

I am not alone in Kuliai. I wouldn't have done anything without other people. Other people are the driving force, I just used my experience—the experience of Vilnius—knowledge. People I interact with came here with me: pianist Rokas Zubovas, composer Nijolė Sinkevičiūtė, scenographer Renata Valčik . . . I would only be a rural intellectual who walks around the village and talks about some of his thoughts, if I were alone. . . . Alone, we can do nothing at all, only through synergy, the synergy of all our communication.

He claims that when a creative group is isolated from the city and from the usual activities, the relationship between the team members develops in a new manner. In the experience of a shared retreat, there is a harmonious cooperation, which is quite clearly opposed to the concept of competitive human relations established in the city. Separation makes it possible to achieve a different, more emotionally supportive and less tense, even playful atmosphere that is not only productive but also satisfying. The artist emphasizes that these connections start “infecting” the others and spreading further, turning a small spot into the center of attraction.

Therefore, first I must create a social environment . . . I, as a leader, must create conditions where work is respected. We can even call it a sect. We can call it a theater sect. And we create conditions where there is respect for work, not lying, truth, not being late . . . The values that are important to us, in order to respect each other and not lose our dignity.

All in all, Masalskis emphasizes that withdrawal can lead to new connections, both in social sphere, and in one’s inner world. In isolation, new stronger connections are being formed, which later result in new creative projects. Moreover, these connections can provide an inspiring example of creativity and productivity for both local people and other artists.

## **To Withdraw in Order to Develop: Beyond Aesthetics**

Withdrawal (both individually and in a group) often brings a lot of new insights that are not directly related to creative work. As a theater artist and as a teacher of future theater professionals, Masalskis has created and developed a unique concept of personality which is informed by this experience. He sees a human being as a very dynamic, ever-changing individual affected by the environment.

You are not here. You are made by parents, cultural environment, homeland . . . home . . . the environment greatly shapes identity . . . it is not bad to admit that you perform everything . . . it seems to you that maybe not, but you do perform.

The artist emphasizes the process of lifelong becoming. Therefore, it is especially important to understand the full impact of the environment and its influence on a distinctive personality of a creator.

As one becomes a human being, so one becomes a theater, and that becoming takes place throughout the whole life. And even after life. . . . I say, I'm not human, I just want to be one. And that desire makes me human. Not that I want to and am. Because if I already am—it is the end—a note is placed on you. I tell the students that there is no end to it, that it is all up to you. And they believe it . . . and they get motivated . . .

In the interview, Masalskis often returns to defining the city dweller as a hybrid personality because of the many distractions. This observation makes withdrawal necessary to become more cohesive and fully involved in the ongoing process, whether it is creation or communication.

And when you step away from the center . . . you can start to observe more freely, to analyze more freely . . . Therefore, this is withdrawal, not so much in a physical sense . . . but when you are able to withdraw and see what is going on in the world from the side. This is especially important for a young people, because their confusion is endless. It is not imposing your opinion, but letting them see that something might not be right.

Seeing withdrawal as an opportunity to search for one's own identity, Masalskis believes that such an experience is particularly valuable for young artists: to learn to withdraw in order to gain a deeper understanding of your place in the world, your purpose, and your identity. This is what Masalskis sees as the basis of his pedagogical work, where ethics plays a significant role.

Being in the center, you no longer know if it is your own or imposed opinion. It is in this context that you start creating mainstream art. And you can't even look from the side. . . . I can't come to perform from hogweed, . . . it's impossible . . . That is why I teach students that they need to prepare for work in advance.

All aspects of theatrical activity—creative process, pedagogy, and community building—are perceived by Masalskis as an opportunity to spread both his vision of theater and worldview. He believes that by fostering love for theater and cultivating the responsibility of creators, he elevates theater to a new quality.

Now I understand that as a mission. Now, when I have gotten old. The most important task for me is not to let young artists become cynical. Because I have seen many priests who hold Mass with disbelief in God, musicians who play

with disbelief in music. So, I see a lot of actors coming to the theater not believing in the art of theater and not having anything to say to the audience . . . I tell everyone that theater is terrible, it is very selfish, it is a center of gossip, hatred, dislike, selfishness, disgust, bohemia, but at the same time theater is wonderful, loving, respecting people, respecting art . . . The point is what kind of theater you will create.

According to Masalskis, the formation of community is both a condition and an outcome of theatrical work. In this way, theater becomes a unique method of improving society.

We need to create a theater community where the search for the truth we want to convey to the audience starts. It is very important to find a purpose, such as serving a topic you are dealing with, in that community.

Withdrawals allow Masalskis to look for the sources of creativity by delving into man and the world individually or together with like-minded people, rather than by rebelling and destroying. “We don’t know where the source of creative work lies. It is not necessary to go against the current, it is necessary to look for the source from which that current flows.”

To sum up, it might be argued that for Masalskis, withdrawals not only serve to produce a new performance, they also allow to go further—to explore the human being, to discover unknown perspectives, to strengthen ethical principles, and, finally, to search for one’s source of creativity in a calm and focused manner.

## Discussion

The research showed that withdrawal is one of the most important instruments in the work of Valentinas Masalskis. Reflecting on the idea and experience of withdrawal, he primarily associated it with withdrawal from the city. His approach to the city is quite critical, but by no means underestimating the opportunities the city offers. Breakthroughs and bursts of creativity emerge in a new environment; however, their value can only be fully understood and verified when the artist returns to the city. Thus, the creative development is ensured by the constant dynamics of withdrawals and returns, the visual expression of which could resemble a compressing and stretching spring. The artist needs the city as a space of endless choices and possibilities, and the city needs the artist because his creativity enriches its identity.

The results of the analysis of meta-themes that emerged from this interview can be interpreted in the context of various contemporary cultural theories. The rhizome concept by Deleuze and Guattari can be used to explain the correlation between place and self-perception.<sup>15</sup> The city environment can be defined as a rhizome—diverse, hybrid, labile, and incomplete. It also affects the experience of the artists creating in the city—this was confirmed by the interviewee. Meanwhile, the non-city environment is rooted in: clearly defined self-perception, identification with specific values and attitudes, stable social structures. While it is common to assume that diversity provokes creativity, i.e., the nature of the city encourages creativity, it can also be argued that a temporary withdrawal from the city and immersion into a homogeneous environment stimulates creativity even more, as the experience of difference in perspectives encourages a broader perception.<sup>16</sup>

The four identified meta-themes allow for not only a better understanding of Masalskis's approach towards the influence of those withdrawals on creativity, but also offer a new opportunity to look into his artistic world. Masalskis has an ambition and an inner need to create a complex theatrical system, that includes philosophical, ethical, and psychological aspects, rather than detached works of art.

Thus, withdrawal makes it possible to ask poignant questions about the identity of an artist and meaning of their work. For example, in his “Letter from the South of Italy,” Eugenio Barba, an Italian director who has worked in many countries, described the experience of living and rehearsing for two months with a small troupe of actors from different states in a small village in central Sardinia.<sup>17</sup> According to Barba, when the artists work in a building with the name “theater” on the door, their work seems to be understandable and justified. But what happens when those doors are closed? Barba asks:

It is a challenge; if we are actors, if we have chosen this condition, how can we demonstrate it? And again, what does our condition become in these new territories? Will we be like mountebanks who entertain? Like propagandists?

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<sup>15</sup> See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

<sup>16</sup> According to the researchers, when exposed to an unusual environment, an individual becomes more open, more tolerant of ambiguity. Following Chi-Ying Cheng's research, it might be argued that someone who defines their identity as a complex, rather than homogeneous, has a higher level of creativity. See Chi-Ying Cheng, Jeffrey Sanchez-Burks, and Fiona Lee, “Connecting the Dots Within: Creative Performance and Identity Integration,” *Psychological Science* 19, no. 11 (2008): 1178–1184, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2008.02220.x>.

<sup>17</sup> See Eugenio Barba, *Theatre: Solitude, Craft, Revolt* (Aberystwyth: Black Mountain Press, 1996).

Like missionaries? How can we justify the fact of being there, strangers and different, doing what we do?<sup>18</sup>

By bringing like-minded individuals together, Masalskis seeks to rethink not only the professional issues, but also the purpose and meaning of theater, attributing the function of personal development to it. It is natural that the further he goes, the more he develops as an artist and as an educator. Based on the “beyond aesthetics” meta-theme, it should be noted that Masalskis is interested in theater as a tool for research on human nature. His idea of the theater is close to the artists of theater-laboratories, who, in addition to aesthetic goals, also raised questions about the purpose and meaning of creative practices. Thus, withdrawals allow creating a new community with a shared goal and mission.

It might be concluded that creativity is most effectively stimulated by the dynamics of withdrawals and returns, rather than by the retreat from the city itself. It encourages the maintenance of greater mental flexibility which, as psychological research has shown, is one of the conditions for creativity. According to Mark A. Runco, flexibility allows us to avoid engagement in routine and beliefs and helps to take diverse viewpoints into consideration.<sup>19</sup>

Withdrawals allowed Masalskis to refine his vision of the theater focused on the ideas of humanism, dedication to work and community, and based on a unique approach to the human being as an ever-changing and environment-affected entity. By withdrawing from the city and from the past versions of himself, by remaining in constant motion between the center and the periphery Masalskis manages to find an inexhaustible source of creativity.

## Conclusions

The initial question regarding the influence of the city and non-city environment on Masalskis's creativity provided an impulse to consider the meaning of the withdrawal phenomenon in his artistic career. This study aimed to reveal how withdrawals help Masalskis—as the actor, director, and pedagogue—to realize his vision of the theater. Stimulating his imagination and creative energy, the practice of changing his environment not only results in new performances

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<sup>18</sup> Barba, *Theatre: Solitude, Craft, Revolt*, 115.

<sup>19</sup> Runco, *Creativity*, 35.



and other theatrical works, but also shapes his anthropological reflection and principles of pedagogical activity.

The analysis of the nature and dynamics of Masalskis's withdrawals enabled evaluation of his creative principles. The examination of four meta-themes that emerged as a result of the interviews demonstrates that while withdrawal from the city is productive, it only becomes meaningful upon returning to the city. The research confirmed that the impact of the environment on the creativity of the theater artist is a highly complex issue that requires interdisciplinary approach, in this case combining the methods and insights from art and theater studies and psychology. The research also presupposed the need for a more detailed theory of creativity in the field of theater, which could be met by further research.



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