Creative Therapies at The Young Theatre Festival in Valle, September 23rd – 28th 2024

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Abstract

The 7th International Festival of Young Theatre, held in Bale (Croatia) from September 23rd to September 28th, 2024, brought together more than 120 artists, students, and professionals worldwide. Through modules of creative workshops, lectures and performances, participants explored this year's festival theme: "The Roots", which permeated all festival activities. A new feature of the festival program is a thematic module dedicated to creative therapies, which offers hands-on therapeutic workshops. Eminent professors and creative therapists introduced psychotherapists and educators to new tools and strategies for improving mental health functioning.

The organizers of this art and science event are the Academy of Arts and Culture in Osijek with the support of the University of Split, the Municipalities of Bale Valle, Tourist Board Balle – Valle, and Mon Perin d.d. The festival is held in the fairytale-like medieval town of Bale.

The Young Theatre Festival traditionally builds international bridges between participants who, by transforming themselves, bring new values and knowledge to their professional environments.

Keywords*: international youth theatre festival, creative therapy, art therapy*

Introduction

Introduction

For the seventh year in a row, the festival of young theatre has been held in the medieval town of Bale in Istria. The organizers of this international art and science festival are the Academy of Arts and Culture in Osijek, the University of Josip Juraj Strossmayer in Osijek, with the support of the University of Split, the Municipality of Bale -Valle, Tourist Board Bale-Valle, and Mon Perin d.d. The festival "affirms that new knowledge from all spheres of science refines art, adapts it to the spirit of the time in which it is created, transforms and excels it" (from the festival program, 2024). The event aims to promote and support young artists and their need to acquire, upgrade and perfect their knowledge and skills through experiential education. Experiential workshops allow participants to feel, build, understand, and integrate new knowledge with their creative powers.

Contributors are internationally distinguished professors and practitioners from the Academy of Freiburg (Germany), East Carolina University (USA), Nova Southeastern University, College of Psychology (USA), Theatre and Film Faculty of the Babes-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca (Romania), Institute of Art, Design and Technology of Dun Laoghaire (Ireland), University of J. J. Strossmayer in Osijek (Croatia), Faculty of Philosophy Split, University of Split (Croatia), University Sjever (Croatia), and University of Juraj Dobrila, Pula (Croatia).



Figure 1 Festival poster

"Participants explored the theme 'Roots' through creative processes, answering the questions: Where do we come from? And where do we strive? While culture and art are always solid landmarks," Prof. Robert Raponja, PhD, the mentor of the Festival of Young Theatre, introduced us to the theme.

A rich program offered creative workshops divided into six thematic modules. "The Festival of Young Theatre in its beginnings had only acting workshops, then it expanded to workshops of design in theatre, then nutritionism, and from

this year it has an entire trajectory related to mental health.", said one of the artistic directors of the festival, prof. dr. art. Jasmina Pacek, univ. spec. art. therap. „This is a big and necessary step because the workshops are not for mental health professions exclusively, rather they are inviting the interdisciplinary corelation between mental health and other professions."

"Each module had a focus area and a specific program. Module number one focuses on improvisational theatre and movement. The second module focuses on creative writing, design and visual theatre. The third module is dedicated to self-care and self-awareness through mindfulness and creative therapy. Module four introduces puppetry and the artistic shaping of puppets, while module five deals with eco-nutritionism, traditional medical products and natural cosmetics. The sixth module is dedicated to people of the third age", said Prof. Katica Šubarić, PhD. one of the artistic directors of the festival.

Along with Prof. Katica Šubarić, PhD and Prof. Jasmina Pacek, PhD, univ. spec. art. therap. (AUKOS), the festival crew consists of the scientific directors, assoc. Prof. Ana Kurtović, PhD. (FFOS) and prof. Daniela Čačić Kenjerić, PhD.



Figure 2 Opening of the festival

(PTFOS), with the mentorship of Prof. Robert Raponja, PhD. and Prof. Nikola Koceić-Bilan, PhD. (University of Split).

In this article, we will focus on experiential workshops in the fields of dance and movement therapy (assisted by Prof. Sanela Janković Marušić, RDMP), visual theatre (Prof. Jasmina Pacek, PhD, univ. spec. art. therapy), art therapy (Associate Prof. Mercedes ter Maat, PhD, ATR-BC, HLM), and gestalt and expressive art therapy (Associate Prof. Timea Marušić Hren, PhD. and Darko Hren, PhD), which are described below.

Description of creative therapy workshops

Dance and movement therapy workshop

"Roots", Assist. prof. Sanela Janković Marušić, RDMP

Sanela Janković Marušić, a dance and movement therapist, introduced participants to awareness and experience of the body as a tool for contact with oneself and the possibility of contact with one's roots. Starting with the concept of grounding as the ability to become aware of the present moment through the experience of body weight in contact with the ground, participants engaged in breathing as a strategy of self-regulation and body movement.

Through three-hour workshops, participants were introduced to a new segment every day. By studying the here-and-now, the grounded state, by mapping the body's anatomy to connect with their body as a safe place, and by experiencing authentic movement, the participants could become fully aware of experiencing their body. A technique of dance and movement therapy, Authentic Movement (AM), taught participants to listen to internal impulses and bodily sensations that serve as an impetus for movement in the presence of another person who witnesses and supports that movement. Guided by imagination, the participants embarked on a journey into a specific time period of their own choosing, gui-







Figures 3 - 5 Dance and movement workshop

ded by an inner experience. Art therapist Magdalena Rubeša described the experience as follows: "We embarked on a search for the inner landscapes of the body by listening to the sensations of the body and immersing ourselves in spontaneous movement, opening a channel of bodily memory, which reveals an individual inner reality like a landscape. By immersing ourselves in the creative process of movement and dance -- in relation to others - we uncover symbolic body language that provides valuable insights into ourselves, our beliefs and inherited patterns. Those beliefs and habits can then be redefined, changed and put into a new context in the present. Conscious movements as patterns of mental content can now be shaped and directed toward a desired goal. The workshop Space and Growth, after this experience, touched on the functional aspect of the movement of the body according to the Bartenieff principle and focused on the spatial design of movement as well as on the dynamic components of movement. The workshop aimed to raise awareness of certain movement qualities and thereby provide space for growth."

Costumography in visual theatre

„From material to symbolism of the character", Prof. Jasmina Pacek, PhD, univ.spec.art.therap.

To provide a more sustainable creative environment, the workshop leader, art therapist and costume designer uses the art therapy concept of the Expressive Therapeutic Continuum (ETC). The workshop began with exploring materials and textile techniques (at the kinesthetic and sensory level). The participants created shapes and became aware of the feelings that occur during the process (at the perceptual/affective level), and finally, found the symbolic meaning and the stories behind the characters they've built (at the cognitive/symbolic level).

"The workshop had an art therapy approach. It's common for art teachers to be art therapists in the world, and this positive trend is coming to us. So, I decided to combine my two fields of expertise and offer costume design students a different approach to the design process that is normally very stressful. Designers must be creative on demand, always ready to design "the next big thing", work in highly competitive environments, endure long hours in an endless mental cycle of obsession with ideas, meet high customer expectations and survive in an industry based on judgement and approval. My workshop at this year's festival responds to these challenges to provide a more stimulating and sustainable creative environment by changing the design process using the Expressive Therapeutic Continuum (ETC) methodology. ETC has proven to be a useful approach that examines multiple levels of creative and thought processes. Conducting the creative process through all levels of ETC, provided that sufficient time/ energy is allowed for each component







Figures 6 - 8 Costumography workshop

of each level, stimulates all brain functions, while making the design process an attractive space for personal growth and development. Learning this process leads to a stable physical, mental and emotional state, giving designers a self-regulating way to successfully deal with the challenges of modern markets with an emphasis on the importance of self-care", said Jasmina Pacek, the workshop leader.

Art therapy workshop

„Mindfulness art therapy for self-care", Prof. Mercedes ter Maat, PhD, ATR-BC, HLM

Mercedes ter Maat, an art therapist and professor with more than 30 years of experience, led workshops on mindfulness art therapy for anyone who wants to improve self-awareness and self-care. The five three-hour workshops helped the participants improve their awareness, attention and concentration, presence, composure, and calmness through mindfulness meditation and art therapy. Participants created artworks that helped them gain insight through personal self-exploration, including recognizing their qualities and safe place.

Group processing and sharing experiences from the process followed each session of mindfulness art therapy.

Vesna Matić, an art therapy intern, participated in the workshops and shared her experience: "The workshops of mindfulness art therapy enriched my art therapy experience through participation



Figure 9 Mindfulness workshop

in practical work and learning how directing consciousness to presence in the here-and-now, without judgement and with acceptance, can reduce stress and cultivate calmness in everyday life. We made a visual diary in the first session, which we used throughout the week and after the festival. The process of making a visual diary has spurred awareness of ourselves because it has been infused with creative work and reflection as a result of self-exploration through the art therapy process. I was particularly struck by the work on "Emotional Landscapes", where I used mindfulness art therapy to touch people, experiences, and life events that had a strong influence on me.

In the final workshop, we embarked on a tour of Bale and found materials from the environment (branches, leaves, etc.), with the help of which, after guided meditation, we created a work that represented what we wanted to build in the community. Ultimately, the application







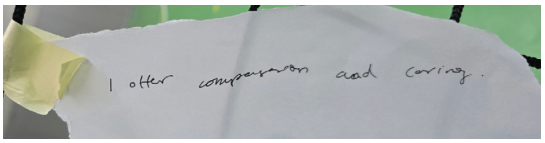
Figures 10 - 12 Mindfulness workshop

of mindfulness art therapy has shown me a method to explore my inner world -- moments of pleasure as well as those difficult emotions-all this with guidance that calls us to mindful presence and compassion for ourselves, but also for the environment. Presence, acceptance and curiosity have become our tools for facing everyday challenges."

Gestalt and expressive arts workshop

„Stvaranje i svjesnost",
Prof. Timea Marušić Hren,
Phd. and Prof. Darko Hren, PhD

Through five three-hour sessions over five days, the workshop allowed participants to explore their processes of consciousness using various creative techniques and knowledge from gestalt psychotherapy and expressive art therapy. Expressive art therapy uses multiple art forms to invite us to express ourselves authentically through movement, painting, sculpture, word, sound, voice, and our conscious and unconscious parts. All the workshops were linked as a whole, with each session representing a part of the participant's journey that group members decided to embark on, go through in their unique way, and share the experience with the group at the end. Through the practice of mindfulness, the awareness of opposites through movement and imagery, the awareness of experiences that we carry in our bodies, and the letting go of all that burdens us









Figures 13 - 16 Gestalt workshop



Figure 17 Closing of the fes festival

and hinders our free expression, and we have come to our creative powers to which we have devoted special attention. “I’ve always had an aversion to expressive therapy, and with that same aversion, I came to the workshop of Professor Hren and his wife, Professor Timea. However, I became increasingly infused with and intrigued by their workshops, which were very creative and accessible. For example, during a workshop where we expressed ourselves with tempera, paste, and colour, I experienced the effectiveness of such expression for the first time. The workshop was primarily introspective and touched me deeply. It also gave me an understanding and respect for expressive therapy,” shared Nando Breski, a graduate student in psychology at the University of Split.

Conclusion

For the seventh year in a row, the Festival of Young Theatre brings together young and experienced artists and this year, it establishes a link with creative therapies by opening a module of experiential workshops on art therapy, movement and dance therapy, and expressive art therapy. The festival brought together international lecturers and artists from the USA, Germany, Ireland, Romania and Croatia, and more than 120 people attended the festival. The Festival of Young Theatre creates a dialogue between art and the world around us. Offering high-quality, engaging workshops opens up great opportunities for interdisciplinary cooperation Participants gained new experiences and self-knowledge and learned to use new tools in their professional work. They shared knowledge and experience with people from similar professions and created new interdisciplinary partnerships.