
THEATRE FROM THE PASSAGE – (ARTISTIC) VALUES AND (SOCIAL) PROFIT

ELENA KNOPOVÁ

Institute of Theatre and Film Research, Slovak Academy of Sciences

Abstract: Using Theatre from the Passage as a concrete example, the author presents a closer look at theatrical production engaging people with disabilities (mainly those diagnosed with Down's syndrome). She focuses on the historical development and the tendencies of this theatre, which was once an institution working voluntarily with amateur actors and is nowadays a professional community theatre with a stable ensemble. The existence of this kind of theatre raises new issues which the present paper draws attention to. What is the status of theatre working with people with disabilities in contemporary Slovak society? Is such theatre considered part of the cultural creative industry? What kind of (artistic) values and (social) profit does such theatre yield? Is it art or is it therapy? What is the status of community theatre in the professional theatre context? This theme is also interesting because of the fact that Theatre from the Passage has created its own system of art education for people with disabilities and has made a feature film, documentary film and four TV documentaries. Its production is disseminated via the Internet, but its role has so far been thought of as significant in terms of its humane values rather than as satisfying the demands and the needs of modern society.

Theatre from the Passage could be considered a type of alternative theatre characterised by its search for artistic innovation as well as for the meaning and the function of theatre (not only in the arts, but also in culture and life). It interconnects its artistic production with its inner workings, looking at actors as individuals, and these days its activity has acquired a scope beyond just therapeutic purposes. It is the first professional theatre in Slovakia which began working with mentally disabled people (those diagnosed with Down's syndrome). It now has a profile as a community theatre with stable artistic and administrative bodies. Almost every year these bodies prepare new productions that are included into the theatre's repertoire and staged regularly. Their performances can be seen on the domestic scene in the City Theatre–Theatre from the Passage, but also on numerous tours abroad. In Banská Bystrica it is in its 17th theatre season and features performances not only with an authentic artistic statement but also with a strong social dimension. During the time of its existence, the theatre has expanded from an amateur and irregularly operating troupe led by volunteer enthusiasts to becoming an art organisation with a professional character. The theatre develops its activities in multiple directions (theatre, film, festivals, working with the public and for the public, various workshops and workshops involving art therapy linked closely to theatrical procedures, general education or developing theatre skills) and has expanded its target audience to include other disadvantaged groups as well as the general public. It has come a long way since its birth.

The formation of Theatre from the Passage was primarily the result of a great initiative taken by the puppet theatre actor Viera Dubáčová. She drew her inspiration

About Popolvar as You Don't Know Him (O Popolvárovi ako ho nepoznáte) premiered on 29 June 1995, written and directed by Viera Dubačová. In the photograph: Beáta Poláková, Peter Hudec and Zuzana Šebestová. Photograph: The Archive of Theatre from the Passage.



from her short-time experience acquired in two projects. These were organised by the Puppet Theatre at the Crossroads, of which she was a member. The first project, Theatre without Barriers, was a reaction to the fact that schools needed to start the incorporation of children with disabilities. The second project, Mini-Festival of Tolerance '95, was a presentation of theatres involving theatre makers with impairments. The changes that took place in society, theatre and also her private life after 1989 encouraged her to think about artistic work that would combine the humanistic dimension with social profit. She considered the interconnection of these two functions (the artistic and the social) to be the purpose of theatre. While engaging artistically, she also found it essential to produce non-artistic output, in this case, to achieve the social impact of theatre work. However, strengthening the social dimension of theatre was only subordinate to her effort to make an artistic statement. What she considered essential was to put an emphasis on working with people with disabilities as if they were equal partners and to support the idea of their equal status within society as well as to reinforce this perception in the artistic and general public.

In 1995 Dubačová met Jana Suraová, a manager, and Juraj Hruška, their first future sponsor, to ask them for help in supporting her vision – a theatre project engaging people with mental disabilities.¹ The original intent was to create a noncommittal

¹ The interest in working with marginal groups or making theatrical productions dedicated to paediatric patients is symptomatic to many puppet theatre artists in Slovakia.



Pictures (Fragments of Life) premiered on 12 June 1998, written and directed by Viera Dubačová. In the photograph: Ľubica Tureková. Photograph: The Archive of Theatre from the Passage.

play involving a group of people that could be described as socially disadvantaged in terms of the little attention and solidarity they received from society.² The team started to cooperate with a group of cognitively disabled people diagnosed with Down's syndrome who had been placed in the Residential Care Home on Lazovná Street, Banská Bystrica. Thus arose the first play: *About Popolvár as You Don't Know Him* (Slovak: *O Popolvárovi, ako ho nepoznáte*), which was originally supposed to be the result of this cooperation. Eight people, who were at that time still only amateur actors, performed in this first production. The play was a simple story with a fairy-tale feel to it which referred to the existence of real evil within the people around us. Today it could be said that over the course of time the metaphoric and the poetic language employed in the first play have become the "poetics" of the ensemble. During the rehearsal period a strong mutual bond between the actors and the director was created, which created the ground for cooperation on future projects. As Viera Dubačová comments:

Maturing emotionally was the initial impulse for establishing the theatre. It really was my original plan to only stage one play. I had no idea that one day there would be a theatre that would have to go the Way of the Cross to reach its current shape. In the process of its build-

² The original idea of rehearsing a play with elderly people placed in a social care centre proved difficult to execute due to their physical and mental health condition.



Comebacks premiered on 10 September 1999, written and directed by Viera Dubačová. A group photograph. Photograph: The Archive of Theatre from the Passage.

ing, I realised what it means to create a civil society in practice. One has to be responsible for oneself, for others and thus for the whole society. That is what we were attempting to fulfil by creating the theatre. [...] We are trying to educate our actors and integrate them into everyday life. After these years I can see that they have learnt to tell their stories more openly for society to understand. They do not only perform for their own pleasure. They are trying to make society more open in their relationship towards all people with disabilities. That is our primary mission: educating on the inside as well as on the outside.³

The theatre operated under a civic association of the same name, Theatre from the Passage, which was established in 1996 with the eight mentioned actors being the core of the acting ensemble. Already back then the statutes of the theatre stated “theatre production” as its creative programme and main occupation. Viera Dubačová became the long-term artistic director of the theatre and was significantly engaged in shaping the theatre ensemble, repertoire and the administrative and service background for the actors of Theatre from the Passage. It is also thanks to her that we can now talk about a creative plan for the development of this theatre.

Initially the actors had been placed in institutional care and driven to rehearsals

³ FAJČÍKOVÁ, Kveta – DUBAČOVÁ, Viera. *Nie sme žiadne večné deti* [Interview]. In SME.sk, Kultúra (27 March 2008). Available at <<http://www.sme.sk/c/3795650/nie-sme-ziadne-vecne-deti.html>> [accessed 17 May 2011].



Footlights in Passage premiered on 26 November 1999, written and directed by Viera Dubačová. In the photograph: Igor Adamec and Miriam Kujanová. Photograph: The Archive of Theatre from the Passage.

on a regular basis. The rehearsals used to take place in the cellar space of a residential building, but it soon became necessary to find new premises as well as assistants that would take care of the actors.⁴ Dubačová was well aware that it was essential to create an environment in which mentally disabled actors could grow and professionalise. This implied that they would be provided with free access to education, assistance on a daily basis and the possibility of integration into the ensemble's work activities. Gradually maturing, her primary vision has undergone changes and has in its complexity brought a whole range of new needs and issues. Dubačová states that "[...] all I had was a vision of our actors not being institutionalised. A vision of their being part of theatre, getting remuneration, rehearsing, performing and living freely. [...] At that time I had no idea that we would have to provide for every aspect of their lives."⁵

The theatre rented three rooms from the city council in the historical centre of town and therefore at least had a classroom, a small improvised studio and a bathroom at their disposal. However, they did not have a theatre space where they could play regularly or any functional management that would take care of the promotion and sales of the theatre's performances. The first four years were more or less all about rehearsing. Even the few shows the theatre did put on were performed mostly

⁴ The initial costs were covered by a grant from an American foundation called Foundation for Civil Society.

⁵ SUDOR, Karol – DUBAČOVÁ, Viera. *Úradníci k nám pristupovali ako k čarodejníciam* [Interview]. In SME.sk (2 Jan 2007). Available at < <http://www.sme.sk/c/3073582/viera-dubacova-uradnici-k-nam-pristupovali-ako-k-carodejniciam.html> > [accessed 16 May 2011].



America after Kafka premiered on 17 September 2004, dramatised by Philip Boehm and Anna Grusková, directed by Philip Boehm. In the photograph: Ján Kinčes, Peter Hudec and Marek Majeský. Photograph: The Archive of Theatre from the Passage.

on tour. At this stage the core of the theatre's activity could be described as artistic activities with a strong therapeutic impact. In the beginning Theatre from the Passage had claimed allegiance to the movement of art and drama therapy. The director and the assistants managed to accomplish an improvement in the health condition and the creative development of the mentally disabled actors thanks to several methods. Using playful techniques of cooperation, the actors participated actively in the production of plays, and they acquired knowledge and skills in the field of artistic processes and theatrical devices. It was also thanks to this kind of guidance that they were motivated to develop their social skills and aptitude for various forms of acting and gather experience in matters they had not been familiar with.

For almost a whole decade, the theatre operated on the basis of single grants from the Ministry of Culture of the Slovak Republic, which were, however, insufficient when it came to covering the operating costs. Other income came from loans, endowments from foreign foundations, sponsor contributions, donations from the actors' family members and from the theatre employees. Even though they were constantly dealing with financial issues, the troupe managed to grow creatively. The initial plan to do one play a year was exceeded. They started travelling and performing in public, and they organised the Art Therapy: Art on the Margin international theatre festival, which met with a positive response.

After some time, the process of the actors commuting from the Residential Care Home every day proved counterproductive. It brought about a number of logistic and psychological issues. Thanks to their systematic work the actors started to become

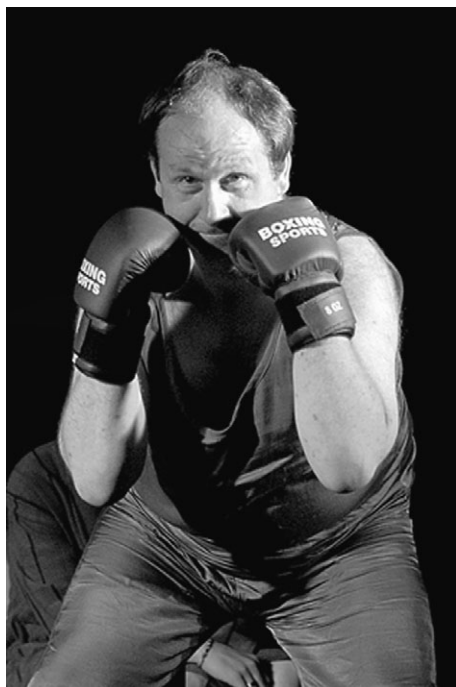


Tarzan premiered on 27 October 2005, written by Hana Galetková and Monika Gerbocová, directed by Monika Gerbocová. In the photograph: Mojmír Podlipný and Ivan Chmelko. Photograph: The Archive of Theatre from the Passage.

aware of their own identity and their integrity within society, their family and the group itself. Contrary to their former isolation in institutional care, their situation improved, as their self-determination was moving them away from the fringe of society. Additionally, at that time the institutional system did not really correspond with the efforts for the progressive development of people diagnosed with Down's syndrome. It was necessary to bust the many myths about this condition (for example, the myth of people with Down's syndrome being eternal children) and about the possibilities, abilities and the mental maturity of the mentally disabled both in the professional medical and educational spheres as well as among the public. Gradually Dubačová gathered a team of theatre makers, professionals and young volunteers (mostly university students majoring in arts or social work) who further studied and were re-trained in the required fields. She even trained many of the volunteers herself. Influenced by their foreign contacts and the functional models of some kindred theatres in the Netherlands and Belgium, the team started to search for ways in which theatre production could become the life and living (i.e. regular job) of mentally disabled people. Thanks to a large grant from the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family in 2003, the team managed to build and open a new establishment in a reconstructed building. The Day Unit of Theatre from the Passage and the Sheltered House (a small multifunctional centre) made it possible for the actors to leave the Residential Care Home and devote themselves to theatre without time restrictions. Since the Day Unit and the Sheltered House were both related to the theatre, its employees could adapt to the special needs of the actors, respect their physiological peculiarities and adjust the work-related duties, rehearsals and creative meetings accordingly. The theatre became

a provider of both social services and education. They created their own education system for mentally disabled actors (the first of its kind in Slovakia) which also started to serve as an example for foreign theatre makers of a similar orientation. The Day Unit was a facility that provided the actors not only with meals, but also with comprehensive schooling and education preparing them for independent life, employment and the development of vitally important skills. The schooling consisted of general knowledge-oriented classes (Geography, History, Biology, Reading, Writing, Arithmetic, the Basics of Social Interaction and Etiquette, and Communication) and of classes focusing on the development of artistic skills (lessons in acting, music, body movement, visual arts and vocal qualities). In contrast to standard schools, the pedagogical approach was based on partnership. The interconnection of education and creative theatre workshops in particular brought good results. The plays of Theatre from the Passage were created through the mediation of authorial and team production. On the basis of improvisation (initially, the actors extemporised acts on the assigned topics; later on, they themselves proposed new ideas), a distinctive work of art emerged, bringing about undeniable aesthetic qualities. By means of combining interactive communication, acting exercises and the consequent production of the play, the actors were progressively developing their own creative thinking and strengthening the unity of their group, a compact unit with a sense of responsibility and team work. The path that Theatre from the Passage took and that could be termed “from art therapy to community” emerges somewhere here.

Even though community theatres are nothing new in today’s world, Dubačová has become the pioneer of community theatre here in Slovakia.⁶ She does not perceive her project only in the context of artistic work with the mentally disabled. She has characterised it as a theatre involving a socially and aesthetically kindred group of people with the same opinions who take part in activities in the interest of the given



Little Heaven premiered on 22 June 2006, written and directed by Zuzana Ferenczová and Barbara Kastner. In the photograph: Mojmír Podlipný. Photograph: The Archive of Theatre from the Passage.

⁶ A well-known personality in the sphere of community theatre is Augusto Boal from Brazil, who is considered the father of community theatre. He arranges internships and training courses, and tries to educate people in the field of artistic community work all around the world. It is also worth mentioning the Sering Theatre in Antwerp, which tries to solve the tense situation between two Moroccan ethnicities (Arabs and Berbers).

community, for it or with it, and engage themselves in dealing with the issues that emerge. Besides others, community theatres have always aimed to raise the public awareness of marginal groups (and vice versa) and incorporate them in cultural, social and economic affairs. With this in mind, Dubačová was trying to build up the form of Theatre from the Passage, while often meeting with distorted opinions and views on the institution of community theatre as such:

People often have an inaccurate idea of what community theatre really is. They mostly narrow their views to it being artistic work with the mentally disabled, but its scope is much broader. It is the artistic production of a certain community of people with mutual relations who feel and think alike. It does not always have to be a minority group, even though we often meet with this interpretation. Community theatre can take on three forms: doing theatre with the given community, for the given community or for its benefit. All three are very important since they let us learn more about the community and its ways of thinking and life.⁷

The aim of Theatre from the Passage has always been a two-way integration: the integration of its members into society and everyday life and the integration of society in relation to the mentally disabled.⁸ Essentially their goal is to break barriers, stereotypes and mutual isolation – the isolation of people with disabilities from society as well as the isolation of the public from people with impairments or those who are “different”. The theatre proceeded in this spirit also while organising the biennial Art Therapy Festival and its educational special editions held in between, designated for people interested in art therapy and community work. The emergence of these events was the result of an interest in a more intensive learning about various forms of art therapy and theatre anthropology on the side of the public.

For illustration we can provide short descriptions of the individual workshops. They took place in 2008 as part of the Educational Special Edition of the Art Therapy Festival (4x4 Workshops). The workshop “A Vulnerable Hero” focused on discovering the physical nature, vulnerability and beauty of an ordinary man playing his role with an emphasis on MIM physical acting.⁹ The instructor was Monika Haasová, an actress, director and dancer. The workshop “Joy of Sound” was led by the English artist and musician William Longden and focused on music as a medium for personal and social transformation and the search for the natural musicality that dwells in everyone. The Czech theorist, critic and literary manager Jana Pilátová led a workshop entitled “A Theatrical Anthropology”, which focused on the coordination of different people by means of theatrical exercises, improvisation, the creation of

⁷ FAJČÍKOVÁ, Kveta – DUBAČOVÁ, Viera. *Nie sme žiadne večné deti* [Interview]. In SME.sk, Kultúra (27 March 2008). Available at <<http://www.sme.sk/c/3795650/nie-sme-ziadne-vecne-deti.html>> [accessed 17 May 2011].

⁸ The Slovak theatre scholar Nadežda Lindovská noticed that community theatres are essentially purpose-built and follow significant extra-aesthetic objectives. However, this does not prevent them from achieving noteworthy artistic results if the odds are favourable. She even perceives them as a contemporary postmodern variant of agitational theatres, but the vision of an engaged theatre has, unlike Proletkult (Platon Keržencov: *Creative Theatre*, 1918), returned to us in a new form cleared of proletarian elitism. LINDOVSKÁ, Nadežda. *Redefinícia divadla?* In: *Slovenské divadlo*, 2008, Vol. 50, No. 3, pp. 323-324.

⁹ MIM dramaturgy rests on musical, dynamic and visual principles rather than literary and linear ones. MIM is a mentality and involves finding new motional, spatial and visual forms of expression. The body is an instrument for the existential search for an attitude towards the world and the worlds around us.

Femme Fatale premiered on 24 April 2008, composite authors, directed by Katarína Mrázková. In the photograph: (back) Miriam Kujanová, Ľubica Berthová and Dana Snopková; (front) Ľubica Tureková, Lýdia Rybárová and Mojmír Podlipný. Photograph: The Archive of Theatre from the Passage.



authorial scores and their transformation into dialogues and teamwork. These activities aimed to help explore the possibilities of theatrical expression through creativity and overcome social, physical and mental barriers. Jerzy Grotowski's and Eugenio Barba's working styles were the initial inspiration. The last workshop, "Body and Motion", was led by the dancer, therapist and dance teacher Dušana Štrbáková. The goal was to understand the basics of dance therapy and to develop the skills of participants to communicate through motion.

The theatre staff also participated in the founding of the DOM non-profit organisation, which provides sheltered housing for the disabled. They also founded the Supported Employment Agency (Agentúra podporovaného zamestnávania) that helps disabled people to find employment. To set an example, they employed a hearing-impaired graduate from the Janáček Academy of Music and Performing Arts as a drama teacher. He later founded his own theatre (Silent Sparks) for the hearing impaired.

The theatre was again threatened by bankruptcy and closing down in spite of its outstanding results in the field of artistic creation and education and in terms of its popularity with the audience. However, this critical situation was solved by the Ministry of Culture of the Slovak Republic in 2005 with a grant and by integrating the theatre into its subsidised organisation with a documentary character. The theatre has been part of the Community Theatre Centre (Centrum pre komunitné divadlo) of the Theatre Institute in Bratislava for five years. This solution was a chance for its survival and temporary development. At the same time, this solution was also restrictive



A Miracle Flying behind the Curtain premiered on 15 December 2008, composite authors, directed by Viera Dubáčová. In the photograph: Peter Gregor, Juraj Hraško and Vladimír Ďurka. Photograph: The Archive of Theatre from the Passage.

in character and not very conceptual or sustainable as both institutions worked in a different way and had different goals. Furthermore, Theatre from the Passage also required specific extra services. It was obvious that this temporary solution was only another phase in the development of the theatre on its way to complete independence and regular funding. This was achieved in 2010 when Theatre from the Passage became a city community theatre funded from regional sources as an art institution. Thus ended the process of the establishment of this new artistic organisation, which in addition to running various projects also cooperates with partners all over the world.

Nowadays the City Theatre–Theatre from the Passage is a professional community theatre, and the only theatre in Slovakia which works with mentally disabled people. It combines cultural, artistic and social fields and employs 14 mentally disabled actors and 15 other employees that work in three closely interconnected organisations (Theatre from the Passage, the Day Unit¹⁰ and the Sheltered House¹¹) which provide assistance and educational, artistic and operational necessities.

The Day Unit is primarily an educational centre. The employers have created a programme of lifelong and further education for disabled people and actors. The current programme is composed of several educational modules: Communication, Computer Skills, Tea Room, Bible Stories, Social Skills, Citizenship Education, Lan-

¹⁰ The Day Unit is an improved variation of day-care centres.

¹¹ The Sheltered House is a current variation of sheltered housing which corresponds with the current legislative terminology in Slovakia. It provides accommodation for four mentally disabled people and two assistants. They daily prepare themselves to deal with various life situations and live an independent life – they get about the city, do the shopping, prepare food, learn to take care of themselves, tidy up and visit cultural and social events, sports and relaxation centres, eating establishments, etc.



Protected Territory premiered on 21 May 2009, composite authors, directed by Viera Dubačová. In the photograph: Miriam Kujanová, Ján Kinčes and Peter Vrťo. Photograph: The Archive of Theatre from the Passage.

guages, Relaxation and other courses according to current needs. When we take present trends into consideration, the fact that the actors have mastered work with various computer programmes, the Internet and basic English is very important. It enables them to be part of an open, knowledge-based and mobile society, and it reduces the extent of their discrimination and disadvantage.

Talking about the professionalisation, the personal development of actors and questioning of certain social clichés, Viera Dubačová said that a major improvement can be seen in actors' communication skills. They are now more relaxed in communication in all walks of life, and they have also developed a sense of belonging to a team:

In the morning we have our rituals. We meet in the tea room and talk about our problems, dreams and thoughts. Teachers come later on and bring new experiences to classes, and our actors also give them something in return. Openness is very important to us. Our system of education is based on the fact that the instructor is a partner rather than a teacher. Our instructors told us they were grateful for working with us.¹²

The system of art education for actors has also improved. A rehearsal of a new play is integrated into the process of learning. A new pilot programme started this year. The actors are taught about theatre from the perspective of its historical de-

¹² SUDOR, Karol – DUBAČOVÁ, Viera. Úradníci k nám pristupovali ako k čarodejnícom [Interview]. In SME.sk (2 Jan 2007). Available at <<http://www.sme.sk/c/3073582/viera-dubacova-uradnici-k-nam-pristupovali-ako-k-carodejniciam.html>> [accessed 16 May 2011].



From the Diary of a Carriage premiered on 27 November 2002. A feature film directed by Ján Štrbák. In the photograph: Dušana Štrbáková and Miriam Kujanová. Photograph: The Archive of Theatre from the Passage.

velopment. All instructors work with actors on the first theme: “Ancient Theatre”. Individual subjects complement each other, and theory is connected with practice. The actors have lessons in ancient fine arts and literature and the history and theory of ancient theatre and drama. They learn about forms of artistic artefacts and analyse them, and they also learn how to use this knowledge in practice. They recite and declaim verses, and play etudes aimed at mastering acting techniques and extracts from ancient plays following genre characteristics. The final result is meant to be their own play with a theme inspired by ancient drama and elements typical of this period.

In this way the repertoire of the theatre can be enriched. The actors have so far produced 21 plays under the direction of university-educated directors: *About Popolvar as You Don't Know Him* (*O Popolvárovi ako ho nepoznáte*), *Trial Room*, *Bridegroom for Lady Mouse*, *Pictures (Fragments of Life)*, *Comebacks*, *Footlights in Passage*, *Conversations, City*, *From the Diary of a Carriage*, *Diagnosis: Desire*, *Tarzan*, *America after Kafka*, *Little Heaven*, *Robinson*, *Femme Fatale*, *A Miracle Flying behind the Curtain*, *Protected Territory*,

Protected Territory premiered
on 10 November 2010. A documentary
directed by Adam Hanuljak.

In the photograph: Ľubica Tureková.
Photograph: The Archive of Theatre from
the Passage.



3xA, *Bladder-Blatherskite and His Friends* (*Mechúrik Koščúrik na vandrovke*), *Stranger*, and *Hamlet and Son*.

At the beginning the preparation of a theatrical production lasted for three or four months. Over time the length has been reduced to two months, which is standard in other theatres. Before the preparation stage they choose ideas and themes and make a script. Inspiration is taken mainly from the everyday life of the disabled, their problems, dreams and desires, which may be very surprising for many of us. Other inspirations are their views and their perception of the world and people and the way they see and find themselves in it:

We were working on a male cabaret show that was supposed to describe the world from a male point of view. The director needed to know how boys themselves view the world. She went to cafes and pubs with them; they watched girls, shops and shop windows, and she learnt a lot from them. Then they sat down, created the stage and started to work on the sequence of the ideas in the show.¹³

As a result, the inner world of the disabled is revealed, which is still only little known in Slovak theatre. Making their inner and outer life accessible and open to the public is very important because it can help question several taboos and artificially produced myths about people with Down's syndrome, their skills and their way of life.

Apart from this, four television documentaries have been made about Theatre from the Passage and have been publicly broadcast by public and commercial television at home as well as abroad. Together with director Ján Štrbák, actors produced the feature film *From the Diary of a Carriage* (2002).¹⁴ Another feature film is a documentary entitled *Protected Territory*, which captures their tour across the USA. It was screened in a lot of film clubs and is also planned to be released on DVD.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ The film was shot in Čierny Balog as a sequence of the improvisation of 15 mentally disabled people. Their work consists of theme naming, inducing the situation, starting the shooting and improvisation. The actors were not playing made-up characters but rather themselves in situations that they had agreed on in advance: e.g. "Where is the locomotive?" "I have no signal on my mobile," "I have seen a UFO," "Some small things are large now and vice versa," etc.

The theatre has organised three biennial international theatre festivals of community theatre and attended international festivals, shows and workshops in Denmark, Finland, Lithuania, Latvia, Germany, Portugal, France and the USA. There remains the question of how Theatre from the Passage and its work with the disabled are perceived in the field of the creative industry and professional performing arts and what it actually brings to society.

If we accept the simplified claim that the creative industry includes culture (from fine arts and dramatic arts through to mobile phones) and is basically based on the appreciation of intellectual property, we must also realise that it can contribute to the development of a knowledge-based society. This type of society should automatically become aware of the potential hidden in the connection of the aesthetic and other functions of the arts, including theatre. If we apply this to the concrete example of Theatre from the Passage, we find that the result of their work is the development of the education and creative skills of the disabled that enhances both their employability and self-employability. Apart from this, the theatre is a model solution to the social exclusion¹⁵ of the mentally disabled, which seriously threatened cultural diversity and societal solidarity in the past. On the other hand, besides bringing an aesthetic quality, the artistic work of disabled actors contributes to the creation of their social identity.

Despite all of these arguments, the Slovak public and professional theatrical community are still careful and conservative in considering Theatre from the Passage and its work as professional. This fact was pointed out by Dubáčová in several interviews:

We have noticed a considerable change since our first play was performed. We have an audience in Banská Bystrica and can make tours around Slovakia. But sometimes we have to meet representatives of cultural centres and persuade them to take us and convince them that they will see a normal professional theatre and not just some small stage forms when a few disabled actors come to the stage and raise sympathy. We want to persuade people that our theatre guarantees an artistic experience.¹⁶

It was difficult because we had to talk the audience into coming and seeing our first productions. Then we started to play for secondary schools and universities, for young people. Now we have some die-hard fans who regularly visit our performances. But it was step-by-step work that took much time because we had to educate our audience. This is very important.¹⁷

Artistic qualities are often questioned because of the non-artistic activities of the community and the therapeutic effects of playing on the mentally disabled. Not even

¹⁵ This is a process when individuals are pushed to the edge of society and cannot participate in it because of their disease and discrimination and because of a lack of a basic capacity and opportunities for lifelong education. This moves them away and isolates them from jobs, income and opportunities for education as well as from society, the community and their activities.

¹⁶ FAJČÍKOVÁ, Kveta – DUBÁČOVÁ, Viera. Nie sme žiadne večné deti [Interview]. In SME.sk, Kultúra (27 March 2008). Available at <<http://www.sme.sk/c/3795650/nie-sme-ziadne-vecne-deti.html>> [accessed 17 May 2011].

¹⁷ SUDOR, Karol – DUBÁČOVÁ, Viera. Úradníci k nám pristupovali ako k čarodejnícom [Interview]. In SME.sk (2 Jan 2007). Available at <<http://www.sme.sk/c/3073582/viera-dubacova-uradnici-k-nam-pristupovali-ako-k-carodejniciam.html>> [accessed 16 May 2011].

THREE QUESTIONS FOR THE ARTISTIC DIRECTOR AND PR MANAGER OF THEATRE FROM THE PASSAGE, EVA OGURČÁKOVÁ, 9 MAY 2011

Elena KNOPOVÁ

1. How do you in general perceive Theatre from the Passage as well as theatre with mentally disabled actors in the context of Slovak professional theatres (from an artistic and institutional point of view)?

A community theatre of this type has a specific position not only from the point of view of its institutionalisation, but also because of its specific role among Slovak theatres. For many years, our theatre and its activities were perceived as a secondary form of work with the mentally disabled in both social and cultural contexts. It took several years for the theatre to be perceived as a meaningful cultural and educational institution on the Slovak artistic scene as well as in the whole society. Despite the presence of foreign influences, a conservative perception still prevails in all genres of contemporary Slovak art. This is even more so in the artistic work of the mentally disabled. Our theatre group has participated in several festivals and tours abroad (USA, Latvia, Denmark, Poland, Germany, etc.), where we successfully presented our production. However, in Slovakia it took a long time for people to see our community theatre as a professional one, and this process still hasn't been completed. Some changes are visible though, and Theatre from the Passage is slowly gaining an equal position among Slovak professional theatres. The production of our theatre is still developing, and we are open even to contemporary dance and performing arts.

2. In your opinion, what values does (or might) such a type of theatre bring (with its own production as well as its presence as a community theatre in a society which is still getting used to such a cultural phenomenon)?

As an artistic and educational institution, the theatre brings new moral and artistic challenges to society. In the sixteen years of our theatre's existence, many people have had the opportunity to see the results of our work with mentally disabled actors. This work consists of the development of personal qualities and artistic creativity through acting. Acting is seen as a means of the individual expression of the actors in which their emotional and social state is presented. A theatre of this type broadens the knowledge of society about people with a mental handicap. I believe that mutual interaction offers opportunities to improve their everyday life and self-realisation. With its own production, the theatre brings new stimuli for the perception of artistic representation, which is often enriched by the specific personality of each actor. That is why the audience can experience natural interaction with the actors.

The theatre also raises new questions which are still overlooked by society because of some moral dilemmas or other reasons for indifference. These include, for example, the question of the sexuality of the mentally disabled and the possibility of their self-realisation outside specialised institutions which do not present an adequate environment for a decent life. The artistic value of the theatre and the quality of artistic representation are still being discussed. The opinions about these issues vary significantly.

This community theatre is not just a declaration of some creative and artistic literacy of the mentally disabled; it also gives a moral dimension to a society plagued by ethical opportunism and many other problems. The questions which are intentionally or unintentionally raised by Theatre from the Passage bring new challenges and opportunities for self-reflection for the whole society.

3. In your opinion, what benefits might such a type of theatre and its production bring? What added social value do you bring in comparison with traditionally conceived theatres? What is the importance of a community theatre for society? For example, why should we try to support and maintain the existence of such a theatre?

The theatre has attracted a relatively large audience not only at home but also abroad. As it is a theatre with mentally disabled actors, it creates an unusual atmosphere full of the joy of everyday life as well as other emotions which are seen in a different way in each show. The audience is in direct contact with the actors, who are familiar almost to everyone in Banská Bystrica. The theatre organises many educational activities for secondary schools and universities. That is why the young generation strongly supports us. Young people voluntarily participate in the activities of the theatre, for example, during festivals, shows, etc. The theatre has gained many fans in the town who return regularly. They come to see the shows also thanks to a lively and very friendly atmosphere.

Translated by Karolína Zemánková

authenticity, a different kind of sensibility, the value of self-reflection and sympathy as a real feeling, which can be perceived as something valuable, are sufficient qualities for this kind of theatre to be considered seriously or at least as an interesting or a poetic theatre ensemble. It looks as if some theatre scholars and audience still distinguish aesthetic areas of performing arts from non-aesthetic areas, although it has long been known that individual theatre functions have always been in a dynamic relationship and have adapted to current social values. For example, therapeutic effects can be a means of achieving a higher artistic quality. Learning can be a natural and even desired complement to creative ambitions. And we must realise that current professional theatre overlaps with society and also other art areas. So why is this right questioned with community theatres and the theatrical productions of the disabled? Apparently, we should think about a redefinition of theatre that would accept its multiple forms and would treat them with seriousness and openness.

THEATRE FROM THE PASSAGE – (ARTISTIC) VALUES AND (SOCIAL) PROFIT

Elena KNOPOVÁ

Today the City Theatre–Theatre from the Passage can be regarded as a professional theatre organisation, which, as the first and the only of its kind in Slovakia, works with people with mental disabilities (those diagnosed with Down's syndrome). It now has a profile as a community theatre with stable artistic and administrative bodies. It prepares new productions almost every year that are included into its repertoire and performed regularly. Their performances can be seen on the domestic scene in the City Theatre–Theatre from the Passage and on numerous tours abroad. In Banská Bystrica it is in its 17th theatre season and features performances not only with an authentic artistic statement but also with a strong social dimension. During its existence the theatre has expanded from an amateur ensemble with irregular operations led by volunteer enthusiasts to become an artistic organisation with a professional character. In its activities the theatre interconnects cultural, artistic and social fields. It employs 14 mentally disabled full-time actors and 15 additional staff working in 3 closely related organisations – Theatre from the Passage, the Day Unit and the Sheltered House – which provide assistance and educational, artistic and operational needs.

Theatre from the Passage combines the search for artistic innovation with the search for the meaning and function of theatre not only in art but also in culture and life. They intensely link their own artistic production to the internal life of the theatre as well as to the personalities of the individual actors. The influence of the theatre in today's social context has been shown to be broader than just having therapeutic meanings or functions. The theatre is developing its activities in multiple directions (theatre, film, festivals, work with and for the public, various workshops and workshops involving art therapy in close relation to theatrical procedures, general education and developing theatrical skills) and is moving towards other disadvantaged groups as well as the general public.

Translated by Zuzana Hábková and Kristína Čarnecká