THEATER ARTISTS BETWEEN THE CITY AND THE NON-CITY: THE SPRING OF WITHDRAWALS AND RETURNS

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Abstract

In the West, theater has always been strongly associated with city culture and urbanization processes. By combining the methods and insights of the arts and psychology, the article aims to explore the impact of the city and non-city environments on the work of theater artists, to find out what happens when a creator withdraws from a usual city environment. Qualitative approach – case study analysis – is applied in this research by interviewing two theater artists. The research identified four meta-themes: *move back and forth, together and separately, change of perspective, create a new universe.* Analysis of the aforementioned themes revealed that withdrawal from the city, as from the usual creative space, is useful and productive for the theater artists, but becomes meaningful only when the latter come back to the city. The metaphor of the spring is suitable for describing this process: creativity is most stimulated by dynamics of withdrawals and returns, which determines the change of perspectives and, at the same time, creative states, rather than withdrawal from the city itself. Withdrawal provides impulses for new universes to emerge: both in the aesthetic plane of creation and in the psychological plane.

Keywords: *city, non-city, theater, theatrical place and space, creativity psychology, withdrawal.*

In the West, theater has always been closely related to the urban culture and urbanization processes since its emergence in the Athens polis. Although later there was a tradition of travelling theater troupes, theater life was concentrated in larger cities. In addition, the relationship between the city and the theater in different epochs and countries reflected *the parallels between aesthetics, social institutions and politics* [Klivis 2008: 172]. In his book *The Place of the Stage*, Mullaney [1995] argues that the location of the theater in the city clearly showed the place of the theater in public life, its power and influence. It can be said that when the theater is seen as a threat to public morality and political stability, such as in Shakespeare's London, theater buildings are allowed to be built outside the official boundaries of the city, and when it is perceived as a mouthpiece for universally accepted values and a guarantor of stability, for example, in the European capitals of the 18th century, magnificent urban theaters are housed in the central squares. In any case, since the second half of the 16th century, with the emergence of stationary theater buildings in the Western Europe, a theater, located in one or another point of the city, has become a special place, generating certain cultural meanings. With the onset of the Renaissance, actors used to leave city theaters and return to a nomadic lifestyle just because of epidemics, political upheavals, or to make money. The place of the theater has formed certain conventions of both the creative process and the perception of the performance, models of creative and spectator behaviour. As directing emerged at the end of the 19th 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 began to experiment not only with stage space, but also with theatrical locations. From time to time, some creators used to *escape* from the theater and create in the nature or in the countryside, away from the city. The episodes of Jacques Copeau, Jerzy Grotowski, Eugen Barba, Peter Brook evidence the effectiveness of the withdrawal from the city's culture.

Today, many artists do not miss the opportunity to go to a creativity camp or residence outside the city. Of course, it is also influenced by cultural policy and funded mobility programmes, however, there is more than the desire of artists to travel and gain new experiences behind this phenomenon. 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. Thus, the aim of this article is to reveal the influence of the city and non-city environment on the creativity of theater artists by combining the perspectives of theater studies and psychology.

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, the scholars, using the theoretical approaches of anthropology, phenomenology, cultural studies, new historicism and urban studies, mainly study the socio-cultural meanings of space. For example, in his book *Places of Performance. The Semiotics of Theatre Architecture*, Carlson [1989] analyses the importance of the city environment for the spatial meanings of the performance. However, according to Garner [2002: 96], "*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*". Harvie's [2009] work *Theatre & The City* is one of the few examples that analyses theater as part of urban processes. In this book, the scholar, analysing the relationship between the theater and the city (specifically, London and New York) from the perspectives of cultural materialism and performative analysis, 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 by theater [Harvie 2009].

In recent decades, the science of psychology has paid considerable attention to the phenomenon of creativity, however, the main focus is on the personality, the product being created, or the exceptional (genial) manifestations of creativity [Nordin-Bates 2012]. It is only recently that creativity research has started expanding and three new directions have emerged: collaboration, community and social aspects of creativity has been researched. Furthermore, more attention has been paid to *small c* creativity. Last but not least, the creative process itself rather than a final product has been explored more. Researchers agree that creativity requires a broader approach: social and environmental factors seem to play a crucial role in creativity performance. There is considerable informal evidence that social-psychological factors have a significant impact on the productivity and creativity of outstanding individuals [Amabile 2018: 5–6].

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*" [Runco 2014: 222]. In addition, researchers have found that the larger the city, the more productive each resident is [Bettencourt et al. 2007]. Psychologists have even identified a direct relationship between the pace of life and the population: it turns out there is a link between the walking speed and the population [Bornstein 1979]. There are some questions of whether, despite productivity, the work of theater artists in the city has only advantages. What happens when the artists withdraw from the normal city environment for one or another reason?

Methodology of research

Qualitative approach – case study analysis – used in this research allows a thorough description and examination of the phenomenon of concern [Yin 2017]. The research involved two artists representing different generations and with different experiences. In-depth interviews were conducted with them, data were analysed and interpreted based on the principles of qualitative research. The duration of the interview is about one hour. During the interview, they were asked one broad question about their creative experiences in city and non-city settings. They were asked not to rush and to share their experiences and insights. Then, they were asked some clarifying questions. It was decided not to use the opposition *city – village / nature / province* to allow the interviewees themselves to define the opposite of the city based on their experience.

Both artists had distinctive experiences with creativity in city and non-city environments. The younger research participant had educational, rehearsal and laboratory creative process experiences in non-city environment, however, did not show the completed performance to the audience there. The older research participant had several significant experiences of withdrawal from the city, in addition to regularly conducting artistic projects in various non-city spaces, thus, attracting artists and presenting the completed performances to (local and guest) audiences.

Research results and discussion

While attempting to understand and reveal their experiences in city and non-city environment, the artists relied on different starting points during the interviews. The older research participant started telling his experience by defining a clear distinction between city and non-city environments and his relationship with the urban world. First, it is the determination of the opposition *city – village*. A rural person lives according to the rhythm of the nature, a city dweller – according to the created culture. A city does not change, it is the same, and nature is constantly changing; the non-city (nature, village, forest, mountains) is mysterious, romanticized, mystical, *it is the world of elves and gnomes*.

A city cultivates creativity, gives intelligence, sophistication, and the artist is born in the nature, observing the world and its laws. It is as if different forces are present in the village and in the city: the city imposes a structure, even requires it, and in the non-city environment (e. g., village), that structure already exists, it is profound, archaic. According to the older research participant, the city inevitably affects a human being. A human being has a lot to do, however, his activities are short-lived, he is driven at a great pace, *the city quickly eats everything*. The driving force is competition, creativity comes from competition and the desire to be better.

However, a city is a great space for mediocrity (for example, the path of an average-skilled artist is to travel between cities and re-create a new impression, and to stay in one city, one must be strong). A city is the culture of impression. The interviewee constantly asks the question: is the city only for the strongest or for the average ones too? He also notes that the city offers a lot of negativities in his creation, and idealism in the city is hard to be found. In addition, the research participant is critical of provincialism, stressing that it is not a geographical position, but a spiritual state of stagnation.

The younger participant emphasized the importance of being *out of your city*. This insight was repeated throughout the interview. The research participant highlighted that it is very important for him to leave his daily routine, normal activities and disturbances and immerse himself in the world of work. Despite quite a lot of productive experiences with creative groups in nature, the artist also notices that being in nature itself (especially, when being alone) can also hinder creativity. A forest, a lake, birds can soothe or engage to the level that the work can become unproductive and his state of consciousness – completely disabled. This artist relates productivity with *the environment out of your city*.

However, despite quite different starting points, the following four meta-themes might be observed*: move back and forth, together and separately, change of perspective, create a new universe.* These meta-themes will be based on the research data and the insights of interviewees, and later – discussed in the broader context of the arts and science concepts.

Move back and forth

Both artists emphasize movement from the city. Withdrawal is necessary: repetitive, unusual, distancing, concentrating, allowing to see the essence. What to withdraw from? From noise, routine, people, everyday, usual frames. Often, withdrawal is associated with productivity. However, it is emphasized that it is necessary to go back and present one's work: the impetus is given when you want to show the created work and when the artist already feels that he has something to show. There is a constant change of distance (pulsation), however, the relationship with the center (in this case, the city), which always attracts back, is maintained, thus, the return is important. The artists clearly understand that despite the importance and pleasure of withdrawal (this is often associated not only with productivity but also with depth), they will need to go back and show their work to the public. *An artist is impossible without the city. He has to give to someone.* The older research participant 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. The younger participant notices that he needs the rituals of returning to his city.

After a longer stay in a new workspace, one needs to say goodbye to it and prepare his return to a normal life and work.

Both interviewees emphasize that, despite withdrawing to get saturated, sated, etc., the ultimate goal of creation is always to give away. *When I have something to give away, I go to the city*, says the older participant. *All creation is sharing*. The artists make it clear that the city is not only a place where you want to hang out, work, or just be, but also a place where you want to *give*.

The research revealed that moving out of the city as a normal creative space is beneficial and productive for theater artists for many reasons: distancing oneself from everyday life, daily routine, normal rhythm of life, creative group behaviour patterns, everyday people and established hierarchy to focus on work, to purify the essence, to try new things, to experience emotional uplift. The space, withdrawn to – a village, the nature, or a smaller city – becomes a place where you *load up* and learn new experiences. It is also important that in an unusual place, artists can create their own creative environment, i.e., it is not pre-prepared and adapted for work. According to Thomson and Jaque [2017: 316], "*the quality of the physical environment in which work is rehearsed and performed also directly influences creative output.*" Breakthroughs and bursts of creativity emerge in a new environment, however, their value can only be fully understood and verified when an artist returns to the city. Thus, the creative development of an artist is ensured by the constant dynamics of withdrawals and returns, the visual expression of which could resemble a compressing and stretching spring. The city takes an artist back because the city cannot do without the creativity that shapes its identity, and an artist needs the city as a space of endless choices and possibilities.

It might be that the most effective *escape* from the city or the usual creative space requires leaving not only the place, but also the audience. While creative work in an unusually isolated environment also stimulates creativity, the most significant impetus for the artists' development and creativity is provided by the encounter with *other* audiences. Audiences in small towns and villages with less spectator experience offer a new way of stage communication, referred to as *barter* by Barba [1996: 116].

Together and separately

While talking about human relationships, the artists highlight two different situations: withdrawal from their city and everyday life can be as a personal experience of loneliness or as gathering with creative group. Both artists agree that they would not have done as much with their troupe as they are able to do when they are gone and *closed*. A special connection of unity is created between the performers and the artists or simply the staff members, which is extremely productive, often accompanied by a positive atmosphere. Withdrawing from other people allows building deeper, trust-based relationships that often break down the established

hierarchy. These relationships allow trusting your colleagues more and want to work together. The highest form of satisfaction is when a community starts developing as a result of this work.

Movement from your city can be compared to movement to your inner world. There is a tendency for both artists to associate this movement with greater self-immersion, various experiences of loneliness. This is often described as a deep and intimate presence with oneself. As the older research participant says, *the biggest secret is the loneliness in the nature, because there is no secret on the Internet*. However, after the trip to the inner world, the artist feels the need to return to the society. You cannot get caught up in loneliness, you have to go back to the city, and share the insights you gain. *You cannot do anything alone. I would be like a rural intellectual who walks with a stick and talks about his thoughts ... (..) Separately, we are nothing. Only synergy*.

The research results revealed that by leaving the usual place of creativity with all its conventions, routine and established hierarchy of the creative group, mostly based on the authority of the director, the artists tend to apply more group, collective creative methods. As creativity research has demonstrated, group work is more productive than individual work under the certain circumstances: "*Groups are more creative than individuals when they've worked together for a while; when they share a common set of conventions and knowledge and yet also have complementary sets of expertise... (..) Groups are more creative than individuals when the amount of shared knowledge corresponds to how well the problem is understood*" [Thomson and Jaque 2017: 146]. Of course, it cannot be unequivocally concluded that group or collective theatrical creativity is more valuable than the work of the *auteur* theater. Although recently there has been an active debate on performance strategies and models, on *vertical* and *horizontal* directing (however, this discussion lacks scientific evidence), it is important to note that creative group work is only superior when there are certain conditions: for example, the group should have worked together before, a balance should be maintained between old like-minded people and newcomers (average level of social closeness) [Uzzi and Spiro 2005: 447–504], etc.

By the way, the advantages of creative cooperation are also proved by the trends in the field of scientific production: upon analysing multitude of data, it became clear that the best research is carried out by the groups of scientists [Jones 2009: 283–317]. It is no coincidence that this research on the impact of the environment on creativity is being carried out by two scientists. It is interesting that a part of this research was carried after *escaping* from the usual academic environment and closing in a creative residence on the Lithuanian seaside.

The model of group creativity also challenges the perception of creativity, provokes new ways of perceiving artistic creation, since, according to the Smith and

Newman's research of 2014, *people may show an intuitive preference for creative works made by an individual vs a group* [Smith and Newman 2014: 303–310]. This could be explained by heritage of cultural tradition, reaching as early as the 19th century, when the creative work of individuals, endowed with exceptional talents, used to get the most attention. The research revealed that the city culture is more characterized by individualism, and there is a need to build a community and become a part of that community in non-city environment.

Change of perspective

Withdrawal (whether individually or with a group) changes the boundaries and the perspective of assessing the environment and the relationships. It is emphasized that there is no distinction between work and leisure: the entire being becomes creative or important. It is noticed that the established schedules change, the ordinary items (e. g., telephones, watches) are no longer used. *The most important thing is to get separated from the usual, routine rehearsal process*, says the younger interviewee.

On the one hand, work in your city is highly predictable, even routine and well-established, on the other hand, it can unexpectedly disturb and unbalance. Upon withdrawing, unpredictability becomes different: it is less unbalanced, and more focused and helps to notice unusual things, to pay attention to unexpected details. As if the focus, the angle of view towards the world changes: *In order to talk about the forest, you have to withdraw from it*, says the older artist. Both artists notice a constant game with boundaries and angles of observation of the world, a change of focus. It is as if there is a constant *ticking of thinking*: it is necessary to withdraw and immerse oneself, to *chew* the obtained information, to look at it again, to be able to *distance oneself from that noise and get into it again*. In case of withdrawal with a group, there is a change in the boundaries of the relationship, as if the normal structure breaks down. From the hierarchical relationships that are often established and usually in theater, they become more equal, allowing everyone to get involved. The topics of conversation, communication itself, immersion in the process also change.

When interpreting the obtained results, the city – non-city – city trajectory can be compared with the zooming in and out of the camera. In general, *creativity is a new mental combination that is expressed in the world* [Sawyer 2012: 7]. Among other factors, creativity is determined by the ability to change the angle of view and distance from the object of attention – this is an insight of the Gestalt psychology. Creativity in the city is characterized by hybridity, relativity, decentering, abundance, several objects of attention at the same time (rhizome state), while entering the non-city environment focuses attention on one thing. This phenomenon also correlates with the opposition of the rhizome [Deleuze and Guattari 1980] and arborescent states.

Although arborescent state is often criticized for its narrowness and oppression, it is useful for creativity as an incubation stage in the creative process, which is often a condition for the emergence of a creative insight. Upon returning to the rhizome environment, the experienced artist brings a new experience that encourages the establishment of new boundaries of the creative world.

Considering the way the creativity upon withdrawal was described by the research participants, especially the younger one, and the value and meaning they give to it, various theories of ritual and rituality, the concepts of a festival and festivity, Gadamer's [1987] *art as a game, symbol and festival* could be used for analysis of experience of withdrawal from the city.

Create a new universe

The artists emphasize that separation is not simply useful by itself, it becomes significant when some insights, products, or experience are born of it. *Separation that makes it possible to create a new universe is a success*, says the younger interviewee. It may happen that withdrawal to the nature or to another city will be just a rest and not a fall into creativity. Separation is valuable when the state is reached where one can *fall* into the world of creative work and take a new reality of a work of art out of it. It is a real satisfaction when a new performance is born out of it that you want to bring back to the city and show it to the audience.

Withdrawal (both individually and in a group) often brings a lot of new insights that are not directly related to creative work. Often, these are the insights into different human relationships. In the experience of separation with others, there is a harmonious complementary cooperation, which is quite clearly opposed to the competitive concept of human relations established in the city. Both artists note that in the city, human relationships are more based on competition, and this is the main engine of creativity. 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 artists often called the city man as a hybrid one: it is like a state where you are everything little by little, distracted by constant commitments and affairs. Separation from your our own city, especially in the nature, makes it possible to be more cohesive and more fully involved in the ongoing process: whether it is a situation of creativity or communication. This is an important part of the personal experience – experiencing a new sense of the artist. Furthermore, unexpected or unfamiliar aspects of personality or professional identity are often discovered.

Thus, withdrawal makes it possible to discover several different *universes:* new creations and new sensations. The experienced theater artists have written about the benefits of withdrawal. For example, in his *Letter from the South of Italy* [1996], 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. According to Barba, when the work takes place in a space with the word *Theater* on the door, the work of the artists seems to be justified in advance. But what happens when those doors are closed? "*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? Like missionaries? How can we justify the fact of being there, strangers and different, doing what we do*?" [Barba 1996].

Upon leaving the theater, the conventional creative space, the theater artists find themselves faced with the need to rethink the fundamental questions of the nature of their work: who am I as an actor, what can I give to the audience of this particular place, and finally, what should be the ratio between the creative process and the output? Thus, it might be argued that the place affects the professional identity of artists, their self-perception, mindset, and sense.

The results of the analysis of the last meta-theme can be interpreted in the context of various contemporary cultural theories. The rhizome concept by Deleuze and Guattari [2004] can be used to explain the correlation between place and self-perception. The city environment can be defined as rhizome – diverse, hybrid, labile and incomplete. It also affects the sensation of the artists creating in the city – as can be seen from the results of the research, this was confirmed by the research participants. Meanwhile, the non-city environment is rooted in: clearly defined self-perception, identification with specific values and attitudes, certain social structures. While it is common to assume that diversity provokes creativity, i. e., the nature of the city encourages creativity, a temporary withdrawal from the city and immersion into a homogeneous environment stimulates creativity even more, as the experience of difference encourages a more open perception.[1] In addition, it is important that in an unusual place artists can create their own creative environment – it is not pre-prepared and adapted to the work. According to Thomson and Jaque [2017: 316], "*the quality of the physical environment in which work is rehearsed and performed also directly influences creative output.*"

It might be concluded that creativity is most stimulated by dynamics of withdrawals and returns, which determines the change of perspectives and, at the same time, creative states, rather than withdrawal from the city itself. As psychological research has shown, the ability to be open to different perspectives and

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[1] According to the researchers, when exposed to an environment that is unusual for him, a person becomes more open, more tolerant of ambiguity. Following Cheng's research, it might be argued that the person, who defines his identity as a complex rather than homogeneous, has a higher level of creativity [Cheng, Sanchez-Burks, and Lee 2008: 1178–1184].

mental flexibility is one of the conditions for creativity. According to Runco [2014], flexibility allows us to avoid engagement in routine and beliefs and helps to consider different perspectives.

Conclusions

The research substantiates the recently growing need to explore not only the individual world of the artist, but also the creative context, the impact of the environment on creativity. It can be argued that the question, regarding the influence of the city and non-city environments on the artists' work, has provided impetus to consider and to rethink the fundamental issues related to the creative process. The research identified four meta-themes: *move back and forth, together and separately, change of perspective, create a new universe.* Analysis of the aforementioned themes revealed that withdrawal from the city, as from the usual creative space, is useful and productive for the theater artists, but becomes meaningful only when the latter come back to the city. The metaphor of the spring is suitable for describing this process: creativity is most stimulated by dynamics of withdrawals and returns, which determines the change of perspectives and, at the same time, creative states, rather than withdrawal from the city itself. In addition, withdrawal from the city allows reviewing the principles of working in a group, opens the advantages of collective creativity. It was also revealed that the place of creation affects the professional sense and self-awareness of the artists. In short, withdrawal provides impulses for new universes to emerge: both in the aesthetic plane of creation and in the psychological plane.

The research demonstrated that the impact of the city and non-city influences on the creativity of theater artists is a highly complex issue that could be conveniently explored through an interdisciplinary approach that allows the combination of methods and insights from art history and psychology. The research opened some new questions and presupposed the need for a more detailed theory of creativity in the field of theater, which would be met by further research, potentially based on the methodology of grounded theory.

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