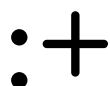


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**Łaźnia Nowa Theatre: Social Change in the Making**

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## **Łaźnia Nowa Theatre: Social Change in the Making**

The following analysis is a report on a study of selected activities of Łaźnia Nowa Theatre in Kraków from the perspective of that institution's potential for generating social change and indirectly contributing to shaping socio-economic development. This study was conducted between March and September 2014 by a team consisting of Krzysztof Malczyk, Łukasz Maźnica, Marek Oramus, Jan Strycharz (all of the Cracow University of Economics) and Dr Barbara Worek (Jagiellonian University).

### **From Łaźnia to Łaźnia Nowa**

Łaźnia Nowa Theatre is an example of the impact stemming from convergence of chance, openness to experimentation, readiness for change and real engagement on the development of a grassroots institution of social change – change taking place using the vehicle of theatre work as a tool for opening people up and activating them. The story of how this venture has developed is an excellent illustration of how cultural activities can kick-start hidden development capital by discerning and understanding it and by systematically breaking down barriers.

The history of Łaźnia began in the mid-1990s in Kraków's Kazimierz district. Importantly, the journey did not begin with the strategic vision of creating an institution of social change. In its initial form, Łaźnia (which was an informal, grassroots movement) was meant to encourage development of alternative approaches to theatre – as a counterproposal to the institutional theatres that were embedded in the fabric of the city (the Stary and Słowacki Theatres, well known throughout Poland). According to Bartosz Szydłowski, who dreamt up the project and remains its leader to this day, it sprang from a spontaneous and chance idea:

It started in the second year of my directorial studies, when quite by chance I went down to check the connection of the sewage pipes in the studio we'd received from the city. At first I think it was a square 240 square-metre hole with no light, only candlelight, but suddenly I hit upon the idea of opening a place there as an alternative to what was being made in Kraków at the time.

Yet the idea of an established theatre changing the social fabric would only be hatched after several years of experiment. In a certain sense this was thanks to a coincidence of the changing circumstances of the

theatre's operation, reinforced by the principle of openness that was an important feature of Łaźnia's mental foundation. We should add that this openness came with the ambition to create a place that, by participation in its activities, strengthened something that one might without hesitation call important development capital – sensitivity to the surrounding reality and the ability to analyse it in depth. Szydłowski, who now directs Łaźnia Nowa Theatre, says 'Łaźnia was and still is today a field of constant experimentation, where fundamental questions can be asked and reacted to with some kind of vigilance, the ambition to analyse and observe'.

Initially, Łaźnia Nowa was not a public place – it operated in a closed circulation of friends and acquaintances, who gave it the energy needed to develop and demarcated the sense of its existence. A certain impulse for opening up to the wider public came with outside investment. The company was seeking an opportunity by opening a bar with a group of enthusiastic young artists. An agreement was reached between the two parties, resulting in the 'hole with no light' being renovated and prepared for staging performances.

A further impulse for the development of the initiative was the nature of its location – in the early 1990s, the Kazimierz district was an empty, unattractive and dangerous part of the city (associated with lower social classes consumed by problems of alcoholism and recidivism).

Szydłowski recalls that his ambitions encountered far-ranging scepticism, as outside observers deemed his vision unrealistic. Yet the history of the development of the place in its early period shows that the idea for Łaźnia was a good fit for the gap of the previously unfulfilled needs of some social groups in Kraków. It also shows an economic watchfulness that we might call the ability to find a balance between cultural activities and obtaining stable sources of funding. In Szydłowski's view:

It is important not only to have a vision of an artistic place, but also to know how to keep it going. What to do to have prospects of development. It was in Łaźnia that the first 'cultural clubbing' took place – there were popular events called 'Uncontrolled Artistic Meetings' where great authorities gave lectures while the beer flowed. They sang Gregorian chants with vodka, [director Krystian] Lupa was there, and various professors, there was a constant debate about lofty matters going on, but in a fairly popular atmosphere.

After several years of operation in Kazimierz, however, Łaźnia's existence was threatened – though it was not a lack of success that was to blame. The district had started to become more attractive for investors, and the cost of renting the premises was to inflate to an extent that rendered it impossible for Łaźnia's funding model to bear the strain. By this time, though, Łaźnia had a number of friends who helped with finding a solution.

The most concrete proposal of support came from the artistic communities of the Nowa Huta district, where the socio-economic transformation of the 1990s did not represent the driving force that it did in Kazimierz, but was rather a cause of spiraling problems. Szydłowski recalls:

First I received a signal from the activist communities [operating] here [in Nowa Huta] that if we were to lose the association and the chance of being in Kazimierz, if we wanted to carry on our work in Nowa Huta, I would get some kind of space. This was a very hard decision, because moving the centre of social life to Nowa Huta meant raising the bar much higher. It was very hard, lots of people didn't cope. On the other hand, not taking on this challenge would have meant the end of Bartosz Szydłowski and, if you like, his artistic path, his creation of places.

Despite the trying circumstances, Szydłowski decided to carry on:

First it was the voices of sceptics that pushed me. Instantly that ignited in me a desire to show that it was possible. Secondly, finding a space in which my wife could immediately see a theatre. That was the first surprise, that it was realistic. That it was possible to get those 400 square metres. And indeed it was a decent, solid place. And the third thing, a very personal one, was that I grew up in Nowa Huta.

I think that was an important moment when I, knowing Nowa Huta and aware that the people here are more 'subdued', put off by the excess of external oppressive narratives that say who they are, what they should do etc., both in the 1950s and 1960s and in the Solidarity era – people are unable to find a place for themselves there, and most of them distance themselves from it.

The first thing I wanted to do was to create a place that wouldn't be like some spaceship that lands with a recipe for how to make everyone happy. I preferred to listen intently to this reality, to give a signal that it was something more important for me than me with my own vision. So that people would believe in the good intentions of creating this place that was created for them, believe that the reality that we function in is better than the one described in the media.

From the outset we wanted it to be created by people identifying that this was their place [...], not somewhere for special occasions, but an everyday, accessible place.

The initiative had travelled a path from an informal activity to the city cultural institution that it is today (subsidised from the municipal budget in 2014 to the tune of over 4.2 million PLN – almost a million euro – for its regular activities and for staging the annual Divine Comedy International Theatre Festival). Although Łaźnia Nowa tapped the resources of its predecessor's output and experiences, it had a somewhat altered mission, adapted to the new social circumstances. Importantly, the board tried to distance itself from these principles or stereotypes, seeking to comprehend its new surroundings and use this to understand its tasks. In this sense Łaźnia Nowa as a cultural institution takes its place in a specific movement building social change from more of a grassroots, bottom-up approach. At the same time, though, it is becoming an interesting case for analysing the impact that cultural activities can have on socio-economic development.

### **'Participations' and 'University of Looking'**

A detailed analysis of Łaźnia Nowa as a cultural actor of social change can be made based on concrete actions. We therefore propose examining two of the theatre's projects, conceived as projects of intervention not in response to strictly cultural needs, but to analysis of the socio-economic

community. Confining the analysis to two projects will on one hand provide a more focused perspective of Łaźnia Nowa Theatre, which handles at least several dozen activities of various types annually. On the other hand, this is the only possible research path that can paint a close-up and detailed picture of the nature of Łaźnia's projects.

The first enterprise, 'Partycypacje' ['Participations'], is a set of activities involving creation of artistic events with the active participation of amateurs. The starting themes, according to the ideas of the project founders, were dictated by current issues associated with the social problems of Nowa Huta and its residents.

The project was divided into three stages, whose content demonstrates an innovative approach to organisation of activities using cultural tools.

**Table 1. Stages of the 'Participations' project**

<i>Name of stage</i>	<i>Description of stage</i>
Recognition	This is a unique form of encounters in the theatre, invoking the tradition of the civic forum and the theatre of Augusto Boal. During every 'Gathering', current problems from the lives of residents of Nowa Huta and Babice Commune were tackled. This canvas was the basis for extended discussions featuring authorities in a given field (lawyers, artists, politicians).
Emanation	Two plays were produced – <i>Mission</i> and <i>Lipowiec Castle</i> – using modern, interactive technologies and by the audiences themselves, the community from the project's natural environment. 'Non-actors' were invited to take part in a series of workshops and rehearsals, with their ideas being developed by professional artists.
Reflection	This stage involved creating solely for the needs of the project a social networking site discussing matters of the project activities and Nowa Huta and Babice Commune life, as well as the organisation of the workshops and work on producing the <i>Lodołamacz. Partycypacje</i> [ <i>Icebreaker. Participations</i> ] magazine.

Source: own elaboration based on project proposal submitted to the Marshal Office of the Małopolska Region.

The project received funding from the Małopolska Regional Operational Programme for 2007–2013, and was realised between March 2012 and December 2013, at a total cost of almost 1 million PLN (almost a quarter million euro).

The second venture we analysed, the 'Uniwersytet Patrzenia' ['University of Looking'] project, also began with a diagnosis of the socio-economic situation, with its objectives connected to triggering the development potential of young people from disadvantaged families from Nowa Huta. As the project documentation states, a strong impulse for this project was provided by 'the fact of low self-esteem, inability to find

oneself among others, lack of opportunity to fulfil one's own needs and objectives, and the conviction that culture and art are out of reach'.

In this project, Łaźnia Nowa was aiming at psychological and civic activation of young people endangered by exclusion by creating an un-typical cultural education programme engaging professional actors and directors. During the work the young participants were also supposed to prepare a statement on themselves and their surroundings and present it to a wider audience.

The project was funded by the Orange Foundation. Łaźnia Nowa Theatre implemented it in partnership with the Kraków Save the Chance Association. Activities took place between January and May 2011, with the project costing around 50,000 PLN (around 11,500 euro).

The choice of these two projects for the analysis was also dictated by the desire to take a closer look at the effects of the specific way of working adopted in these ventures. Both 'Participations' and 'University of Looking' were founded on the fundamental premise of joint work and interaction of amateurs and professional artists. This type of approach to cultural education and civic activities should be regarded as innovative in the context of the application of a very broad scale of cooperation (creating joint ventures which are then partially utilised for commercial purposes). This makes both the results of the cooperation and the mechanics conceived within it interesting.

These projects, we might note, are a good match to the topography of challenges facing the district of Nowa Huta, where the theatre is located. This area, home to approximately 7 per cent of Kraków's population, is affected by the problem of an ageing local population that characterises many Polish housing-block estates. The percentage of people of post-working age here is around 7 percentage points higher than the city average. The phenomenon of social exclusion is also relatively more discernible (than the Kraków average).<sup>1</sup> At the same time, Łaźnia Nowa's activities are part of a wider context of ventures targeted at older people (like 'Participations') or disadvantage youth (like 'University of Looking'). This is the kind of project that public institutions (Nowa Huta Cultural Centre, Nowa Huta Public Library – mostly with campaigns aimed at senior citizens) and NGOs (for example, the Kraków-based Siemacha Association, the Hidden Wings Foundation, working solely in Nowa Huta and targeting its own culture-based re-socialisation activities at young people, or the aforementioned Save the Chance Association, the theatre's partner in realisation of 'University of Looking') are seeking to undertake. What makes the Łaźnia Nowa projects different, however, is that they bring together in one time and place outstanding and recognisable artists (who collaborate with the theatre on a permanent basis on other ventures) and amateurs. The specific details of this joint work and the benefits that it brings are outlined below.

1 Cf. Magdalena Dej, Andrzej Zborowski, "Ocena stopnia zaawansowania zjawisk degradacji społecznej (patologie społeczne, wykluczenie społeczne i ubóstwo), procesy polaryzacji i segregacji, segmentacja rynku pracy w miastach Polski", in: Andrzej Zborowski (ed.), *Demograficzne i społeczne uwarunkowania rewitalizacji miast w Polsce*, Instytut Rozwoju Miast, Kraków, 2009, p. 120; Katarzyna Gorczyca, "Wielkie osiedla mieszkaniowe – diagnoza stanu obecnego, działania rewitalizacyjne", in: Wojciech Jarczewski (ed.) *Przestrzenne aspekty rewitalizacji – śródmieścia, blokowiska, tereny poprzemysłowe, pokolejowe i powojkowe*, Instytut Rozwoju Miast, Kraków 2009, p. 95.

## Research Methodology

### Outline of the 'Participations' and 'University of Looking' projects in terms of key categories of development

#### I Empowerment

The amateur actors<sup>2</sup> who took part in the 'Participations' project had a great deal of space for individual expression and creativity. Their preparations for the performance included improvisation workshops at which they honed their skills under an expert eye. The project participants' reactions to these meetings were very positive. The tasks they were given included mimicking animals as well as lying on mattresses with closed eyes, listening intently to the sounds of drums in order to stimulate the imagination before sharing their thoughts with the others. One woman participating in the project recalls:

I came to the workshop and made a complete fool out of myself. I played a pig. When you had to play a cat, I was a cat. Everything just seemed to open up, all the flaps. The workshop before *Mission* for me was great fun, such an amazing experience that I have goose bumps now when I'm talking about it.

Szydłowski says that 'What we want is for the people taking part in the work to be open to creativity. That might mean minor creativity, but it's important for it to be their own'. The participants' experiences then translated into the rehearsals before the performances, which meant that they needed great improvisation skills. In the words of a professional actor participating in the project, 'The effects of the professional-amateur encounter were most beautiful in the rehearsals when there was no pressure to prepare a show and no audience'.

The initial assumption with the production *Misja* [*Mission*]<sup>3</sup> was that the amateurs would mostly improvise. Following several rehearsals, however, it was realised that the intended effect was not always being achieved. As a result, Szydłowski, the creator of the play, was forced to provide a clearer outline for it and to add directed scenes.

On the other hand, Maria Spiss, the director in charge of *Miłość 60+* [*Love 60+*],<sup>4</sup> was very happy with the degree to which the amateurs coped with acting out the scenes suggested by the audience. This was an

2 The amateurs involved in the project were mostly age 50 and above. They were recruited through casting sessions held for each production. The group (of amateurs) for the 'Participations' project was very diverse, encompassing those who were still working (e.g. one gas worker) as well as retired people. It is impossible to create a uniform, homogeneous template here. For some participants this was the latest in a series of activities, while for others it was a break from everyday life and routine and an opportunity to be open to the world and other people.

3 The play *Mission* (also known as *Mission Film Lovers' Club* [*Klub Miłośników Filmu Misja*]) was the largest component of the 'Participations' project. After the premiere, the production was staged on numerous occasions at Łaźnia Nowa and in revues and festivals in Poland and abroad. The performers in the play were amateur participants in the 'Participations' project and professional actors including Jan Peszek, Radosław Krzyżowski and Krzysztof Zarzecki.

4 *Love 60+* was produced in the spirit of Augusto Boal's Forum Theatre – made by amateurs under the care of a professional directing/production crew. The play told of sexuality after age 60, and was to a large extent based on improvisation combined with audience interaction.

especially significant achievement if we take into account the concerns caused by older amateurs having to present scenes with an intimate, erotic subject matter (for example, an 'orgy out of town'). According to Spiss, they gained much pleasure from playing these roles, partly as a result of the audience's engagement.

The amateurs also had the opportunity to make their own suggestions for changes to the script, which were taken into account in some cases following consultation with the director. From talking to project participants, we learned that they found this influence on the ultimate form of the play very important, and were very emotional in their reactions to criticism of their ideas. A male participant said, 'That's also really great, because we don't feel like people who are rejected and have little value. We're listened to'. Two comments by Szydłowski are pertinent in this regard:

There are discussions, ideas are listened to – even if they are not then used, they are what bring the belief that this is a space of mutual inspirations and listening to one another. For those people I think it was important that they are treated the same as the professional actors.

The amateurs wrote their own monologues, some of which then went into the play. With more experience they begin to comment on other things, but here it's more about them opening up, you have to be careful for them not to enter a certain zone of professionalism – they need to be authentic, otherwise it goes the wrong way.

We can conclude by stating that the organisers of the 'Participations' project tried to get as much as possible out of the amateurs' inner potential by developing their skills in improvisation and teamwork. The focus study we conducted indicates that the activities had a positive impact on the lives of the participants (amateur actors). They declared that the influence of their participation in the project had increased their self-confidence in life situations, allowed them to discover (or often rediscover) a sense of agency in their lives (someone counted on their opinion), and offered them a method of self-fulfilment. The project also demonstrated that it was significantly more effective to gradually hand the initiative to the amateurs. Initially they had problems with externalising their own experiences and playing roles, but gradually, as they gained new skills in working with the professionals, they found it increasingly easier to participate in the preparations for the production as full-fledged subjects with an influence on its final form. The focus interview showed that this change also spread to those around the participants – their friends also began to come to the theatre, supporting the amateur actors and sharing in their pleasure at successful plays.

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The overriding objective of the activities within the 'University of Looking' project, which took place in 2011, was to strengthen the individual self-esteem and inspire the creativity of disadvantaged young



people<sup>5</sup> who participated in the project. In one project organiser's words, 'We were keen to find a format that within educational activities would be a very artistic format open to various kinds of creativeness'.

To do this, the organisers held a series of diverse artistic and socio-therapeutic workshops. These allowed the young people to gain knowledge and basic skills in creative expression and to use acting techniques in their daily lives.

The project participants were positive in their reactions to these activities. The leader of the young project participants said:

That project often comes up in our conversations when we meet. They like to talk about it. Recently one of the girls who took part put a film she made during the workshops on Facebook. Łaźnia also made sure that they each received a CD with materials on it.

According to participants' accounts, initially they were very passive in these activities, as they felt inhibited internally and concerned about ridicule from their peers. Yet this situation changed as the project progressed. The participants – or, more precisely, some of them – began to be actively involved in the workshop tasks. The participants' leader added:

Some of the people were fascinated by various artistic things. They really opened up. They saw that an artist is a normal person, that they too could aspire to that and also do something, create things together.

These words are also confirmed by the twenty-five-minute play *Irkucka historia [Irkutsk Story]* that developed from the project, and was directed by Marta Waldera (one of the artists leading the workshops). This activity, though not planned in the project application, featured the participation of four of the 'University of Looking' participants.<sup>6</sup> The young people's activity also took a form that the organisers had not foreseen. The workshops resulted in conflict situations when the young participants refused to conform with some of the artistic tasks imposed by the leaders. One project organiser recalled:

There was a certain point when they were supposed to put cocoons on, which not everyone liked [...] I expected right away that it might be boycotted, because that's their way of thinking, that nobody can impose anything on them, because it doesn't interest them then.

The high level of non-conformism and rebellion among the participants, and what some respondents described as a failure to understand their perspective on the part of the organisers, forced the latter to increase the participatory aspect in their leading of the workshops. 'To

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5 The young people who took part in the project activities belonged to the sociotherapy community centre managed by the Save the Chance Association, and had had problems with the law. Most had been sent to the centre by the courts, and the project was part of their resocialisation.

6 The play was performed once, following completion of the "University of Looking" project activities.

a large extent we gave them a free hand to create this space,' a project organiser said.

The project participants also recall that from a certain point they began to say outright what didn't suit them in the project, and the theatre staff took note of these comments.

## II Creating a community

A very important aspect of the 'Participations' project was building bonds between the amateurs and the other people involved in making this venture happen (professional actors, directors, etc.), as well as the audience.

The participants' comments suggest that to a great extent taking part in the workshops, joint rehearsals and productions had produced the intended results. A female participant in the 'Participations' project said: 'For me, when I arrived in the new environment, I had lots of acquaintances and friends. There's a whole group of people that I met. Overall for me it's about enjoying life'. Szydłowski said:

The wardrobe lady split the dressing rooms into professional actors and amateur actors – automatically, without anyone noticing – and before the performance [renowned professional actor] Jan Peszek came to me and said, 'It's impossible, we're together the whole time, they can't be in another room'. I think that was an important gesture, and it was important that it came from Peszek.

The director Spiss added:

A few people who came into our group said that they'd really like to be here, because they were alone at home. These were people who've been through various things, often quite dramatic, in their lives. It was clear how pleased they were.

And Szydłowski said:

In the work with the amateurs, apart from the artistic effect, there's also a therapeutic one. Relationships are built with people, and that's an important objective. In *Mission* that came out at every step – wardrobe, rehearsals, discussions.

Joining the 'Participations' project meant that senior citizens could meet new people and start to help to form a new community. They gradually spent more and more time with each other and shared their life experiences. One male participant said:

I worked until I was 70, and then stopped. I came to the theatre here sometimes because I started to like it. Without the theatre things are kind of boring. It just stimulates me to do things. Sitting at home at my age... well, supposedly you can sit like that in old age, but I prefer to be doing something.

According to Spiss, the director of *Love 60+*, one of the elements that might have contributed to strengthening relations between participants was an exercise in the rehearsals before *Love 60+* in which they had to

prepare texts about love, which they later shared among themselves. 'That also built up the community', Spiss said, 'talking about that kind of life topic helped to unite the group emotionally'.

This shows the importance within the cooperation of trust between the amateurs and the director and professional actors. Without this it would not have been possible to forge such strong, intimate bonds.

It proved possible to maintain some of these relations after the project came to a close. Participants say they are still be in touch with one another: they are getting involved in further projects together, attending plays, and sometimes visiting Łaźnia with the sole intention of visiting theatre staff, etc. Spiss cites a good example of the power of the bonds that were formed: one of the amateurs was diagnosed with cancer during the project. Throughout his last months (he died in 2014), when he could no longer get out of bed, the other project participants visited him regularly. The situation of maintaining relations with the professional actors looked somewhat different. A participating professional actor said: "Our meetings are incidental. It's not as if friendships have grown out of it. I think that in our private lives there's a lot that divides us." Szydłowski adds:

For the professional actors, the whole time this is work. You have to remember that these are artistic projects, very much social ventures, with a large risk of failure, and that's a risk for these people. It might turn out that there'll be a few shows and a complete flop. For us it's a certain philosophy of action, but for them the risk is great.

Yet the amateurs' comments show that they were hugely excited about every encounter with professional actors. One female participant said:

I look and I see: Radek Krzyżowski. So I was happy – not artificially, but I jumped on him, hugged him, because we did Oedipus I with Radek Krzyżowski, then there was Oedipus II, then later there was a break and my husband and I acted in other plays, but not with Radek.

The group character of the collaboration meant that there were also occasional conflicts. These usually resulted from the amateurs' fears concerning the theatre management's reaction to the work, as, unlike professional actors, they took all criticism extremely personally. In such situations the director had to demonstrate skills in reconciling all parties, and suggesting a compromise, for example in terms of the amount of involvement of individuals in the play. The director Spiss said:

I came to them [after the reception of the play] and they were all upset, thinking that no one liked it, and the next day when we met again, the emotions come out, there were tears. I had to act, and not like with professional actors. You have to motivate them, tell them they're the best etc. [...] A director's work is hugely psychological – you need the ability to get through to everyone, not to create divisions.

To a great extent, the exchange between the project participants (amateurs) and the actors and directors was limited to swapping experiences and skills. For the professionals, the benefits mostly came from being

open to collaboration with amateurs and the need to adapt to their capabilities. A participating actor said:

I felt naked next to them. It was much harder for me to improvise with them than with another actor. At first I was shy about improvising with them, until I saw that it was a different improvisation.

[Theatre and film director Andrei] Tarkovsky said that an actor has two duties: to be honest and communicative. Training these two skills during the meetings with the actors from Nowa Huta was very intensive, so that was certainly something I got out of it. Honesty, because they demanded honesty on the stage. To be communicative at the same time you had to keep it in check, be with them and take care of them.

And Szydłowski added the observations that:

Amateurs and professionals – being present together on stage – I think that they fuel each other, that there's a kind of reflexive connection.

Actors know that a play has a certain risk potential (speaking about amateurs' mistakes) and accept it, reckon with it. Sometimes amateurs' mistakes help, giving the impulse for a change in the dynamic of the play's tension, various interesting, new things.

In summary, forming bonds between the project participants was one of the most significant factors in deciding on the effects of the enterprise as a whole. The organisers therefore sought to build deeper relations between them and to avoid situations of conflict, which could easily have dashed the attempts to create a tight-knit group. It appears that the attempts to build these links were largely successful.

It certainly would have been impossible to achieve positive results from the preparations for the play without strong emotional engagement from the participants. Although conflict situations were not always avoided, the director's intervention and activation of the whole group were enough to keep them in check and generate an extra dose of positive energy. Spending several hours at rehearsals and the need to rely on others (one actor's weak performance might lead to the whole play being poorly received) imposed de facto mutual trust and made cooperation easier.

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An indirect consequence of the 'University of Looking' project discerned by all respondents was strengthened relations within the group of its young participants. They reported that, though they had known each other previously from meeting together in the sociotherapy community centre, they did not know much about each other. Only working with the theatre and facing the need to be open had strengthened and deepened their relations, as they jointly learned about each other's strong and weak points. The mutual bonds are today very varied, with some of the people remaining in touch. In the view of one project organiser:

Usually nobody thinks about their needs. The very fact of going up and asking about their needs is distinctive [...] It became clear how they are treated at

home, how they treat each other, what the relations are like between them...  
By talking about things they had a fantastic journey, learned a lot about themselves, and were able to say what their needs are now.

Małgorzata Szydłowska, vice director of Łaźnia Nowa, one of the project organisers and Bartosz Szydłowski's wife, remembers the collaboration with young people in 'University of Looking' as being demanding. For many of the workshop leaders, working with this type of group was a new experience. It demanded that they reformulate their standard approach and adapt to a new situation, that is, for differences in their work. Szydłowska cites one situation that she remembers from the project:

Our meetings during the workshops looked like this: this boy came who had problems with accepting the fact that he was adopted [...] and he would come with this large knife, he wouldn't part with the knife, there was no discussion on it... He had cuts all over his head, it was hard to accept it, but at some point in the process it turned out that he was an excellent actor [...] It seemed that he was a suppressed person full of aggression, everything pointed to that, the way he behaved, spoke, and yet with the greatest sensitivity he acted a scene of declaring love.

The participants were positive in their description of working with the theatre staff. Despite the tensions that surfaced at the start of the project, they managed to develop a relationship based on partnership. This led to the staging of *Irkutsk Story*, and in addition, some participants took part in the theatre's next venture, the production, *Nie śpiemy, lecimy* [*We Don't Sleep, We Fly*], which entailed among other things a trip to Crete. Two participants also played extras in the production *Antyzwiastowanie* [*Anti-annunciation*], and one worked in the theatre for a short period.

'University of Looking' was supposed to give its participants – young people with a tough past and problems – the opportunity to find a place in a new community, and to acquire soft 'life' skills, to put it in colloquial terms. The project was enshrined in the broader philosophy of the actions of the sociotherapy community centre, of which the young participants were members. The leader of the young project participants said 'We wanted to bring those young people out of the ghetto, from their closed circle of thinking about the world'.

The research material gives no unequivocal answer to whether this aim was fulfilled. Based on the discussions we carried out, we can say that for some participants it was an important, developing life experience. However, currently they are not in touch with the theatre. Such contacts within the group itself tend to be sporadic and incidental.

### **III Participants' involvement in the joint productions**

To a certain extent, the participants in the 'Participations' project played the role of co-creators of the productions, influencing their final form. During the rehearsals and preparations for the premiere, the creators of the plays were open to the amateurs' ideas, and where possible tried to take them into account. The director participating in the project recalled that '[artist] Oskar Hamerski and I set the structure of the play,

and the actors had a very large influence on the sequences improvised with participation of the audience'. A female participant said:

At our amateur level, if we get a role, we're well aware that the first time you simply read what the director wrote. Later on though, if the first, second, third production happens, it's more flexible and you can draw the audience into your actions and pull them towards you.

Some of the plays staged within 'Participations' were open in nature, assuming the active participation of the audience. Including the audience took place both by blurring the divide between actors and spectators and by allowing audiences to have a real impact on the course of the play. An example of the delivery of these premises came in *Love 60+*, in which the stage was placed in the middle of the auditorium with the audience on both sides, able to give the amateurs specific scenes to act out during the course of the show. Maria Spiss recalled:

In the June heat there were 250 people in the audience. Everyone was hot and sweaty, but super-happy. I had the sense that my actors were floating in the air. The audience entered the interaction really nicely. They had a vote – they were able to decide on certain matters.

The main way in which the amateurs found out about the project was through casting announcements published in local media. Some heard from actors' agencies (prior to joining the project, several of the amateurs had taken part in episodes of a quasi-documentary series filmed in Kraków using amateurs, *WII – Wydział Śledczy* [*Investigation Department*] and *Detektywi* [*Detectives*]). 'It varies', Szydłowski said of the castings:

Casting sessions are held, sometimes someone will themselves apply through word of mouth, often the same people come back, sometimes the author will have his own group – for example [director] Michał Borczuch went into the community of the centre for autistic people and chose a certain group of people for himself.

It's more about searching for a certain energy and turning away people with the wrong expectations. Often the people who come want to be stars, they come to the casting sessions as if for Poland's Got Talent, and that's not what it's about at all. The people we're looking for might be those who've lost something at a certain age and now they're looking for a new space for themselves.

The intention of the project founders was for participation in the workshops and plays to constitute the beginning of wider engagement of various types of social activities for the participants. To date, this has proven possible only to a limited extent. Individual ideas for initiatives have appeared, but none of them has so far come to fruition. However, the theatre is open to supporting amateurs' ideas. In Szydłowski's view:

The encounter is supposed to give them a kind of impetus to take life in their own hands. I would expect them to take the impetus from us, a certain change in their own approach, and to share that further. My impression is that this is what happens.

The interviews conducted with the participants in the project do not indicate unequivocally that its participatory nature leads to the emergence of new local structures, initiatives or sustainability of the venture (the participants putting on their own plays in local community or cultural centres, for example). Where we did observe a continuation of the activities, it was more likely to involve passively attending plays as well as swapping impressions with acquaintances after seeing them. It was only possible to involve some of the project beneficiaries in work on further theatre productions. It is important to note, however, that our direct discussions with the project participants revealed that as a result of the project they were keener to be involved in culture, as well as encouraging their friends to spend their free time in this way. They had had the opportunity to discern entirely new possibilities of personal activity and to uncover their own previously hidden talents. This was a huge benefit of the work of the project.

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The 'University of Looking' project did not envisage an open recruitment component. The participants in its activities were young people who were members of the sociotherapy community centre run by the Kraków project partner Save the Chance Association.

The participatory nature of the project was largely developed over its course. With the accumulation of specific experiences and growth in levels of trust, the partly authoritarian working model (with certain solutions imposed) in the first stage of the project transformed into a model based on strictly trilateral cooperation of the various parties (participants, theatre – workshop leaders, youth leaders) involved in 'University of Looking'. As one project organiser recalled:

We wanted to reverse the roles; the project was supposed to remove the artists from the position of presence in the project, meaning preventing them from marking their physical presence, or interfering, presenting, that is rather creating an environment in which something could happen [...] They felt good in this space, they felt like masters of this situation.

Finally, most of the elements of the project were carried out in close cooperation and on the basis of joint management. The suggestions that came from the young people were respected and put into place.

'University of Looking' was a one-off project, which was not continued in subsequent years. One might therefore have reservations over whether optimum benefit was reaped from the element of trust developed during the project. The main reason for this lack of continuity was the logic of the project. The organisers managed to gain one-off funding, and this was the chief determinant of the way it was carried out. At present, the young people who participated in the project are not involved in working with the theatre in any form.

### **Conclusion**

The projects presented in this article deserve a positive evaluation in terms of their general pro-development impact. The research material

we gathered demonstrated that engaging amateurs in theatrical activities and putting them side-by-side to interact with professionals is characterised by the potential to build both a sense of empowerment and community and participation of the people taking part in the activities.

This empowerment entails providing participants with the space to present, and frequently also to discover, hidden aspects of their personalities. Taking on new roles that are in general different from those they play in their daily lives creatively expands participants' field of perception of the surrounding reality. By engaging specific groups within society in the projects – disadvantaged young people and senior citizens – the organisers not only constructed potential for forming a sense of community, but also increased the chances of (re)including participants in an active social life.

During the study we observed a strong connection between the participants of the 'Participations' project and its organiser, Łaźnia Nowa Theatre, illustrating the positive atmosphere engendered by this place and the high social capital it boasts. We should also note a lack of this kind of relationship between the theatre and the participants of the 'University of Looking' project, reasons for which might be the brief duration and one-off nature of the activities. Particularly the latter, which limits the long-term effects of the enterprise, would seem to be a negative aspect of it. For many of the young participants, the project was just one occurrence of many provided by the sociotherapy community centre run by the Save the Chance Association in Kraków.

Describing the two projects in a wider context, we should point out that in the case of Łaźnia Nowa Theatre and these particularly enterprises we can only speak of development – of a socio-economic nature – on a microscale, at individual level. It is social, material and spiritual elements that interlock and strengthen each other here – solely rather intangible soft capital. However, modern views on economics suggest that it is not the dynamic of GDP created, or its total value, that are decisive in the assessment of the level of prosperity, but rather quality of life. Projects like 'Participations' and 'University of Looking' appear to fit into this context.

Such projects assure a sense of belonging going beyond the natural spheres of work and family. They therefore also activate a different context and a different and new point of view. As such, these ventures can contribute to building a sense of meaning to life and perceiving opportunities to change one's life that were hitherto invisible. This seems particularly important in the case of places such as Kraków's Nowa Huta district, which retains a stigma despite outward changes, and where identity is based on the experiences of the previous era.

A further factor of change behind both of the described projects is placing the participants of the activities (senior citizens, disadvantaged youth) in the role of founders/donors – the beneficiaries create something for the community, thus finding themselves in roles to which they are not accustomed. By deviating from the traditional recipient position in favour of a more proactive one, the participants are able to discern possibilities – capital – which they generally do not use, and which can at the same time provide them with the basis for creating values – that is, something from which others (or they themselves) can gain benefit or satisfaction.



To sum up the above observations, the projects carried out by Łaźnia Nowa Theatre provide the possibility for generating change by giving participants a sense of their own agency. This is done by creating the conditions for them to create freely, to propose and build something themselves. These projects are innovative insofar as they construct something new on the foundations of joining the intersecting fields of stage creativity and daily life. According to the participants, the project activities allowed them to 'become more open'. A challenge for the future that we can observe is transforming this temporary sense into a permanent position. It remains an open question how far the characteristics created in theatre laboratory conditions will translate into participants' daily lives.

Łaźnia Nowa Theatre's activities mark a definite addition to what the Nowa Huta district as well as Kraków as a whole previously offered in socio-cultural terms. To the best of our knowledge, no enterprises of this kind are offered by other institutions in the city. At the same time, we should bear in mind that these projects are just a narrow slice of the theatre institution's wide range of activity (and also just part of the array of social and civic actions in which it is engaged). Every year, the theatre has a grant of over four million PLN (around nine hundred thousand euro, 2014 data) to spend, is visited by a total audience of over thirty thousand people and organises one of the country's largest and top-rated theatre festivals, the Divine Comedy International Theatre Festival.

The format of the work described in these examples is an interesting one that might be replicated in other institutions with funds available for incubation of this kind of strictly social enterprise. Our analysis of these projects with reference to the field of culture leads to the conclusion that ventures like 'University of Looking' and 'Participations' should be of interest to theatres (as well as other forms of institutions or NGOs) whose missions include not only artistic and entertainment objectives, but also social ones (founded on positivistic work).

Translated by Ben Koschalka

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