



# STAGE



## STAGE



Az Európai Unió  
Erasmus+ programjának  
társfinanszírozásával



## Manual for creating a new play

There are many ways to create a performance, there is no one right way, and the method has to be adapted in each case, based on several aspects. On the one hand, it is important for the director to have their own toolbox, their own method that they are comfortable working with, and on the other hand, each method of performance creation must be able to be subordinated to the needs and competences of the group. It is also important to take into account the time span of the rehearsal process, the regularity and intensity of the rehearsals (a group rehearsing a few hours once a week will have a different working method from a group rehearsing intensively for a week). The third aspect is the workflow required for the performance to be produced.

We can use a number of different groupings for the types of presentation, but for us the following is the most obvious:

- **Staging a theatre play faithfully**
- **Staging of other literary works**
- **Physical theatre**
- **Improvisation performance**

In the first two cases, the work is done without the group, alone or with the help of a dramaturge. In the first case, the script is an abridged version of the original, provided with instructions and centering focal questions invented by the director.

For the second category, the work is similar, but with the addition that the non-theatre literary work has to be adapted to the stage, its possibly different time and place management (which a drama "pays attention to", but which is not a consideration for a novel or short story) has to be managed, and of course adapted to theatrical form before the material is delivered to the actors.

In the third case, physical theatre, there are also several ways: a choreographer may prepare the performance on their own at first and plan it as if they were writing a script, or the group may prepare the performance together from the beginning, either through improvisation or rehearsals.



Of course, the first three categories also provide room for the group's ideas and creativity, even to express their improvisation skills, but the fourth is the one that necessarily builds on this from the very beginning of the work process. This is the category we want to explore in more depth.

In many cases, the word „improvisation” can be scary for actors because they fear they will have to improvise in real life, which can be scary not only in front of an audience for even the most experienced actor used to a script, but it can also be, in front of peers, a frightful, uncomfortable experience without proper preparation. But in many cases, the end result of an improvisational performance is a performance with the same kind of script as if it were just a classical play. Improvisation is not just for the actor, but for the whole group, including the director.

Improvisational performances can also be further subdivided into subgroups, and here too there are several aspects to consider for the director. Our first grouping aspect focuses on the extent and form of improvisation.

## **- Lightning improvisation a.k.a. full improvisation**

In this form, improvisation can be interpreted most literally, where the performer improvises live in front of an audience, with little to no preparation, based on a given objective, without any fixed points.

Humour is almost the only exclusive tool of this form. It is very difficult to achieve a dramaturgical arc or dramatic effect with it, and it is also unpredictable, so it is more suitable only for play (e.g. the TV show "Beugró", the performances of the Momentán Company).

## **- Semi-Improvisation**

In this form, certain predetermined dramaturgical turning points, key phrases or key events are not reached through written, fixed texts, but through improvisation. Exactly which texts or sentences connect two points of the plot is not predetermined, the actors improvise as in a full improvisation, but they must get the plot from A to B, so that arcs and stories can be played out in this way. With practice, the quality of the end result is more predictable, it is easier to bring content and depth to the performance, but humour is usually the main driver of this form-language as well.

## **- Bound Improvisation**

In this form, the final performance on stage is almost entirely fixed and rehearsed. It is not a requirement that the text or the play be the same word for word, gesture for gesture, there is room for improvisation, but to a large extent all elements of the performance are bound. This form is already suitable for the creation of stories or performances of any genre, depth or mood, and is best suited to the staging of



serious or dramatic situations by improvisation. Groups tend to use this method because it makes the text come alive and the performance more lively and dynamic, but it this is also its main drawback; for example, authentically writing a serious quarrel between lovers can be a serious roadblock even to excellent contemporary playwrights; it is not at all certain that improvisation techniques will be able to make it as meaningful and dense as we would like. For example, very long improvisations can help with this. The actors playing the couple in love in the example above can start doing this discussion scene by improvising for very long periods of time, up to several hours, and filming the exercise. Obviously, this will be useless as a scene on stage, as it is too long, and it is likely to be full of self-repetition, meaningless phrases and generally the useless parts will predominate, but during such a long improvisation the actors will get so into the situation and the role that they will almost forget that they are not the ones arguing. This makes the situation much more authentic, which leads to good lines. So, while at the beginning of the exercise they will say their best sentences, their best arguments, at the end they will speak from the most authentic state (although probably only self-repeated sentences). Afterwards, it is possible to rewatch the scene and compile from it a perfect scene, possibly no longer than 2 minutes. This scene can then be used theatrically.

Of course, it is worth preparing for such a task thoroughly with games, guiding exercises, and keeping an eye on the mental state of the players during the performance, because it can be dangerous and can easily upset the actors.

An example of this type of performance is Kód Teátrum's „Emma és Kristóf” (working premiere August 2020)

## - Fixed Improvisation

In the case of fixed improvisation, all elements of the performance are recorded, written and thoroughly rehearsed beforehand. During the working process, the group collectively brainstorms, improvises or even writes scenes together. This is perhaps the most common and most effective improvisation method, and it is the least literally improvisational. This method can be used to create almost any performance and gives the group a great deal of freedom. Its advantage is that it is more creative than scripted work, all members of the group can equally take part in all elements of the creation, perhaps most of all it is a team effort. The disadvantage can be the quality of the text and the lack of coherence of the final result, but this can be avoided if the director constantly takes care of the text and sets up a strict set of rules for the style and form of the scenes.

Below, I will show how such a performance and its workflow can be constructed through a performance of recorded improvisations by Kód Teátrum, entitled The Angels Have Fallen Asleep.



## - The starting points.

Kód Teátrum Company is an amateur company of young adults founded in 2018. We create performances for young people, with a focus on young people, and we welcome teachers and school groups alike. In the past, we have produced fixed improvisational performances mainly for student audiences (Unknowns 2018, Mazsi's Journey 2019, The Influencers 2021) as well as literary adaptations (A Midsummer Night's Dream 2019, Nothing 2019, The Witches of Salem 2021).

The company was asked to create a performance on the Coronavirus outbreak and the quarantine situation that went with it.

This was the first starting point from which the workflow could begin.

It was clear, starting from the theme, that we would in some way work from fixed improvisations, since no specific drama had been written on this theme in 2021 when we started working on the material.

Knowing the topic, we could have gone in several directions, firstly, should we deal with the coronavirus epidemic in a concrete or metaphorical way? If we had opted for a metaphorical approach, we could have used literary material (Boccaccio's Decameron, Gorky's The Lower Depths), but obviously improvisation would have played a major role in bringing the works up to date. In the end, we opted for the concrete interpretation, in which a decision on another important issue played a key role:

Do we want to do a story or an edited play, a so-called sketch performance?

The fixed improvisation method is a way of telling a complete, rounded story. This method was also used by the Theatre Group of the Kölcsey Ferenc High School of Satu Mare for their performance about the Coronavirus. Taking the story of Romeo and Juliet as a starting point, but using recorded improvisations, they told the story of two high school students who fall in forbidden love under quarantine, and who are not separated by an ancient family feud, but by the fact that one family is anti-vaccine while the other is pro-vaccine.

However, we opted for an edited play. In this case, there is no single story, but a series of short scenes linked by a central theme. So we decided not to use a metaphorical approach, but to work as much as possible from our own quarantine experiences, very honestly and coming from our hearts.

With such edited plays, it can be dangerous if the topic is too broad. It is important to define a precise focus theme that is broad enough to allow for many different perspectives and moods, but narrow enough not to lose the cohesiveness of the theme. This must be strictly adhered to



during the process: if a scene, although very good, does not fit our narrow theme, it must be discarded or radically reworked.

Other important starting points for deciding on the theme and form may be who will play in the performance, what the rehearsal process will be like, or who the target audience is.

We worked with a group of eight people aged between 20 and 27, once a week for 3-4 hours. But the work method is also suitable for high school age groups, even as an intensive one-week camp. Our target audience is young people, mainly high school students and the actors' peers.

**So, to summarise, the following initial questions need to be clarified before starting the rehearsal process:**

- Theme
- Form language
- Do you want to create a story or a mood- or experience-oriented performance?
- With whom?
- For whom?
- What is the regularity and intensity of the workflow?

It is also useful to have an initial idea of the performance space. This should not be definitive, it should be allowed to evolve as the scenes evolve, but for example, if you want to travel the performance later, you should insist that no scenes are included that would prevent this (large setpiece, specially shaped space, etc.)

At the start of the process, it is important to be clear about exactly how much time you will have. It's a good idea to set a planned presentation date at the very beginning, so that the workflow doesn't get out of hand and we can see exactly how much time we have left, where we are, what we can fit into the time we have left and what we can't. We started working in September, with rehearsals once a week for 3-4 hours, and we set a date for the show in the second half of February, 5 months later. Of course, you can't plan the rehearsal process in advance, only in broad strokes. A lot of things can come up in between, such as illness, missed rehearsals due to other commitments, or even a creative block that prevents a particular rehearsal from going as planned (which also came up in our rehearsal process, due to regular illnesses caused by the omicron variant of the coronavirus. We made up for the missed rehearsals with a full-day rehearsal to meet the deadline).

There is also a big difference between a weekly work process and a week-long camp. For a camp, it is easier to plan exactly how much time you have, because in such a situation, absenteeism, lateness, sickness, or programme conflicts cannot interfere.



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## - Start of the rehearsal period

A key moment in a rehearsal process is the first session, where the group and the material first meet.

For script-based work, this usually means a reading rehearsal and a long analytical discussion. On the other hand, in improvisational work, especially if you want to explore a theme in the performance - as in our case the pandemic situation and the quarantine period - the first task is to go through, analyse and explore this theme in depth. It is worth preparing with questions and getting the director involved in the discussion, so that they can demonstrate the honesty and depth required by the topic, so that the group feels that they can all open up equally during the discussion. It's okay if such a conversation goes in the direction of storytelling (in the case of our performance, a sentence from such a story became the title of the performance: *The Angels Have Fallen Asleep*) and it's okay if it feels somewhat directionless, this way they engage with the topic experientially, developing a relationship with it. If we interfere, if we limit them, they can have a bad experience that can stay with them throughout the whole process and can discourage their creativity and playfulness. For this reason, if you're expecting a few hours of rehearsal time each session, you shouldn't prepare for the first form with anything else, it's worth letting this conversation go on as long as it can. It can happen, especially with a younger group, that such a conversation is too static and concentration breaks down. In such cases, different theatre games can be used for certain questions. For example, a game called "Run if you" can be easily incorporated, where the referee asks questions and whoever it applies to has to run around the circle of actor and find a new place for themselves in the circle.

During the discussion, ideas can already be brought up about how a story or thematic element could be staged, but these ideas can easily be half-baked and not suitable for the final concept. One of the expected outcomes of the discussion is that, once the group's attitude to the theme has been established, the focus of the performance can be further narrowed and basic questions of mood can be resolved. If the chosen topic affects the players very deeply, or someone is very painfully affected by it (for example, in the case of the example performance, losing a family member to the coronavirus) a humorous or cynical approach may be offensive to a member of the group, but if the group can find the humour, absurdity or grotesqueness in the topic during the discussion, it is worth taking the overall mood of the performance in that direction. Of course, in a performance where you show as many angles and nuances of a theme as possible, it is good to have more than one style and approach, and this is expected of such a play, but there are elements that also fundamentally determine the mood of a performance, such as the way in which scenes are intercut, costumes, set design, space.

If the conversation reveals that the group is cannot relate to the topic or has a hard time getting their minds around the chosen topic, try to alter the focus of the topic until all team members can feel ownership of the issue raised.

### **We can expect the following results from the discussion:**

- The group gets to know the topic and the basic concept



- The group discusses the topic in depth
- They share their experiences and stories on the topic
- Some thinking starts on how to stage the topic
- It reveals the group's basic attitude to the theme, which helps to define the style and genre of the play.
- Discussing the possibility to stage the stories told.
- Creative thinking, finding motivation

For the second rehearsal session, I prepared a questionnaire which the group filled in anonymously. This element of the workflow can be omitted and depends on the topic. For a different rehearsal process, for example in a camp setting, it can be replaced by a longer discussion.

An advantage of the questionnaire is that, due to its anonymity, it can be used to ask more personal questions or questions of a nature that would be uncomfortable in front of a larger group, and that players would be reluctant or unwilling to answer honestly.

Furthermore, certain opinions and points of view are inevitably left out during a conversation, because the conversation moves on, and a participant may feel that what they wanted to add is no longer relevant. It is also possible that someone may be so impulsive in stating a point of view that it seems more remarkable than it is, making our assessment more subjective. However, if we rely on the numbers after evaluating a questionnaire, we can get an accurate statistic of how important a particular segment of our topic is to the group. It is also worth looking at the outliers. If a question in the questionnaire asks for an opinion on something on a scale of one to ten, we get an average on the one hand, that the group has an average answer of, say, 6 to the question, and we get, on the other hand, information that the interest in the segment is middling, so it may not be worthwhile to go into it in depth later on. But if we got this average by having both a 1 and a 10, then we already have very contrasting viewpoints here, which implies a problematic topic that is worth exploring in more depth. There is a conflict in the issue which offers exciting possibilities for our performance.

### **Advantages of the questionnaire:**

- Anonymous, which makes it easier to answer more personal questions
- It saves time as it can be evaluated between two rehearsal sessions and takes only a few minutes to complete.
- After evaluation, we will get concrete statistics on questions that will help us to determine which segments of the topic are worth more or less attention.

The annex below is part of the questionnaire we used.





1. How well did you comply with the pandemic regulations during the two lockdowns? (1 for not at all, 10 for very strictly)

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10

8.2, outliers: -

2. How much did you fear for your health/ life because of Covid?

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10

3.9 outliers: 8

3. How much did you fear for the health/ life of your loved ones because of Covid?

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10

8.4 outliers: 5

4. How difficult was it for you to wear a mask in everyday life?

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10

5.5 outliers: 2,2,10

5. How much has the lockdown changed your daily life?

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10

8,2 outliers: 2

6. How difficult was the quarantine for you?

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10

6,4 outliers: 1, 10

7. How much was your daily life different from usual during the quarantine?

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10

7,6 outliers: 3,3





8. *How much did the quarantine affect you psychologically?*

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10

7.2 outlier: 2

After the interview and the questionnaire, the following conclusions were drawn.

- The group is interested in the topic, feels ownership of the problem
- The group was not severely affected by the outbreak, and even if they did catch the virus, they survived without serious illness and did not lose a loved one.
- The loneliness, isolation, boredom and lack of a social life caused by quarantine hit the group harder than the illness or fear of illness.
- The group has seen the absurdity and black humour of the pandemic in many situations, and are therefore open to such an approach.
- The social situation of the group can be said to be homogeneous. The group is made up of young, educated and informed members from the country's capital.

This last point was obvious from the beginning of the work process, but it is important to define it, because it has many implications:

- Group not at risk of disease
- Although many people have been financially affected by the epidemic, they have not been plunged into total insecurity
- The Internet, cellphones, computers and other tools were at their disposal, and thus the transition to online life was smooth for them
- They wanted to and were able to get information about the pandemic.

It is also important to establish such seemingly obvious facts because they determine what can be dealt with authentically in the performance. It is worth working on sub-themes within the theme that the players are involved in and can articulate first-hand. In our case, for example, making a scene about how a rural kindergartener or a visually impaired Japanese person may have experienced the pandemic is pointless, since we ourselves do not know their circumstances and cannot speak for them authentically.

After the discussion and the evaluation of the questionnaire, we can formulate our expectations for the presentation. We can determine what type of scenes the group is open to, and what mood they would prefer in those scenes. It is important to make certain stylistic and aesthetic rules so that the performance does not become too chaotic and can provide a coherent theatrical experience, even if it is composed of several scenes with different points of view and content. It



is therefore important that, in addition to the subject matter, stylistic and formal aspects also hold the material together.

I decided that the formal language of the performance should be similar to the classical language of student theatre performances. The actors should not play roles, as the large number of scenes makes this inherently problematic, but a given actor should take on the role of a different character in each scene. Actors should more or less play themselves and have a semi-civilian presence. The play should be similar to playing in the original sense of the word, i.e. the actor should enter the situation like a child, and play a role within a role. Here, the main role is that of a young actor who is making a sincere, or seemingly sincere, statement on a subject that is important and topical to them. This formal language provides good opportunities to explore a topical theme from several angles.

**The aspects and criteria for the preparation of the performance were as follows:**

- Everyone in the space at the same time, no cover-up, as much playing and speaking together as possible
- Players are the 'set' – tables and chairs can be used if necessary, but otherwise the players themselves should shape the space as much as possible
- Few props
- As much live music or background music as possible, either without an instrument (humming, body drum) or with an instrument (acoustic guitar)
- As little direct dialogue as possible, avoiding petty situations
- Monologues, songs, movement solutions
- A parody, or caricature-like representation, with an acting method similar to clowning.
- Look for common, not individual, problems, even go boldly into social issues, but with nuance and irony.
- Look for humour, even for harsher topics try to include at least irony, black humour, grotesque, absurd, even if the subject is very personal and dark.
- Aim for variety in the formal language used between scenes



- A longer, more 'variety' form
- Connecting with the audience, either through interaction or by breaking down the fourth wall.

If you can show the group a performance recording as an example of the chosen formal language and scene-making criteria, it will help them to understand what is expected.

Before the first concrete scene rehearsal, we watched the performance of *"What You Didn't Ask Me"*, produced at the Fodor Mihály Theatre Camp 2021, but if we had had more time, the performance of the title production of Krétakör Theatre's „Black Republic” could have been useful as well to become acquainted with the formal language.

Also, if you can give an example from theatre history, perhaps the working method of an artist can help in understanding, it is worth talking about this as well (in our case, Bertold Brecht's theatre).

## Scene creation

The backbone of a performance like this, and therefore of the whole rehearsal process, is the scenes, the scene-making.

There are many different methods that can be used in scene creation, and it is worth using several methods in one work, because each group will have different methods that work best, so it is worth experimenting. It is also easy to create very similar scenes with a particular scene creation technique, so the performance will not be as colourful and varied as we would like, and as sketch theatre requires.

Let's look at some scene-creation techniques:

### - Independent scene writing in groups

The idea is to form small teams from the group (4 is the most appropriate) and instruct them to perform a scene in a larger unit of time without any constraints. Neither the subject of the scene nor the theme is restricted (no more than already constrained by the general concept of the performance), nor do we give the group any formal or other constraints. The advantage of this method is that if we let the players create without constraints, we can come across ideas and points of view that the director who gave the task would not have thought of. It can also give room for creativity in the formal language. The disadvantage of the method, however, is that if we give so much freedom, it very often backfires, because the constraints not only limit our players, but also act as crutches, as a guide, along which they can start to work and think. The danger with this method (unless you know your group very well and know that this is the way to



get results) is that the time and energy invested might be wasted. If there is no initial basic idea, the group can easily get stuck and turn to trite solutions for lack of a better idea.

It is worth giving small groups a lot of time to create such a scene, as they have to create the scene from scratch, without any constraints or handholds, they have to come up with the concept, apply it on stage, rehearse it and clarify it a bit before performing it. An hour and a half of a 3-4 hour rehearsal day, or up to 3 hours of an intensive week-long camp rehearsal process can be devoted to it, but in this case there is an even greater risk that these three hours will be wasted from the perspective of the performance.

The creation of the small groups should not be left to chance either, I suggested four people because four people can make a lot of ideas come to life (it is not necessary to have four people in the scene if the concept requires fewer, but it is important to have all the members of the small group involved in the creation). Also, if you put the small group together properly, there should be someone among the four people who is creative and imaginative, who can easily come up with a starting point. You need someone who is theatrically open, can implement the idea quickly and well, so that it can be quickly seen if the idea works. You need someone who has an eye for detail, a way of breaking down the basic idea and the acting as a kind of dramaturge. We need a team member with a dominant and adaptable character. If too many ideas are battling it out and it becomes an ego issue as to which one should prevail, it can hold the group back as much as if there were no ideas.

This type of grouping can be applied to all types of scene-making where you work in small teams, although if there are constraints it may override the criteria for team composition (e.g. if you are creating a musical scene it is important to have an actor in each group with an eye for music).

## **- Independent scene writing together**

The method is similar to the previous one, but the whole group participates. It is only recommended for creating shorter, interconnecting scenes, as concentration is much harder to maintain in a larger group. Many of the disadvantages mentioned above are true for this method, but if you need a large group scene with all the actors, it is worth at least trying it, to see if it makes a good scene because of the advantages also mentioned above. It's worth leaving a shorter time for this, because although the task here is to create the whole scene, the aim is to create a short, punchy scene because of the interconnecting nature of the scene.

## **- Scene writing in small groups, according to different directorial constraints**

We used this method for roughly three quarters of our scenes in our performance, as the independent scene-writing methods did not result in a scene.



The essence of this method is that the actors create a scene in small groups, but here they are either given a thematic or formal constraint.

These constraints may be specific content, or a text or genre, or instructions for the use of a theatrical device.

The method can be used both by giving the same constraint to several small groups and by giving each small group a separate task (e.g. one group is to set their scene in a family situation, another in a love situation, the third in a friendship situation).

Using the following examples, I will show what kind of constraints the group has dealt with in the context of our performance and what practical benefits we can expect from the constraints.

## - Specifying the topic

Together, we broke down our theme into further sub-themes, i.e. we highlighted situations that we would definitely like to see a scene made of. One of them, right from our first rehearsal, was the topic of shopping under covid and quarantine. During the conversation, all the actors mentioned their experiences with this, and we found that it was an easy common point that eased the tension caused by the topic in the conversation, so it could have the same effect on the audience. Everyone in the audience can easily recognise themselves in these situations as it can be a shared experience regardless of age or other social aspects.

I asked two small groups of two people each to work on this topic.

The reason why two people were in each group was so that the scene's conflict would be produced between a customer and a cashier. As for why two groups were given the same task: on the one hand, it was clear from the discussion that there was a lot of personal experience available, and on the other hand, interesting and different dynamics could arise from the fact that one pair consisted of two girls and the other of a boy and a girl. The plan was to keep only one of the two scenes, so that if some idea or gag from the other could be incorporated, it would colour the scene of one of the pairs. In the end, this was not the solution chosen, for several reasons.

As this was our first rehearsal for a scene, the expectations for the scenes had not yet been fully mastered by the actors. They resorted to direct dialogue as the most obvious formal solution, even though part of the concept was to avoid this, but on the other hand the two groups brought two very different perspectives. While in one scene an obnoxious cashier abuses their increased 'power' by using COVID regulations to humiliate the customer, who is a pitiable victim, in the other scene it is the customer makes the job of a shop employee difficult, while the employee is sticking to the rules to the letter and only wants to comply. Although the customer's point of view is understandable and is the point of view that is shared with the audience, yet we can sympathise with the cashier.

We didn't want to put the two scenes one after the other in the performance, firstly because we didn't want to give so much space to this one segment, and secondly because the similarity in form (the two scenes were the same in terms of stage design and not very exciting) would have been boring. The solution was not to stage the two scenes one after the other, but to stage them



simultaneously, in parallel. One scene took place on the right side of the space and the other on the left, and while there was a silence or pause in one (the cashier had the customer put their mask on or sent them out because they were not yet allowed in the shop), the action took place on the other side. This action formally enlivened the scenes as well and broke the obviousness and predictability of the original scenes due to the direct dialogue.

Here is an extract from the script version of the finished scene:

*(right side)*

**Customer::** *Good afternoon!*

**Tobacconist::** *(on the phone) Hello. One moment. Hold on, a customer. Put on a mask, okay?*

**Customer:** *what?*

**Tobacconist:** *Mask. Put on your mask or...*

**Customer::** *Oh yeah, just a second.*

**Tobacconist:** *You cannot enter the shop without a mask.*

**Customer:** *(looking for the mask – meanwhile switching to the other scene)*

**Customer:** *Good day!*

**Cashier:** *Hello! Sir, may I ask how old you are?*

**Customer:** *27. And you?*

**Cashier:** *You misunderstand. The regulation states that only customers over 65 can be in the store between 10 and 12. So I ask you to please leave...*

**Customer:** *(looks at his phone) So I can come in in 1.5 minutes?*

**Cashier:** *That's right!*

**Customer:** *OK. (goes out – meanwhile switching to the tobacconist)*

**Customer:** *here it is. Sorry...*

## - **Specify one or more formal constraints**

In another rehearsal, I asked the group to create a scene in which they express themselves through movement, but the scene should be humorous. By taking verballity away from them as the primary means of expression, they realised how something can be expressive, even more expressive, without direct dialogue.



The resulting scene was a musical etude about hypochondria under covid conditions, based on dynamic rhythmic movement and situational comedy. In a scene of this type, it is impossible to overexaggerate what it wants to talk about, but it is necessary to stick to the concept of the scene, which can be summarised in one word, since this form cannot explain or elaborate, so a basic situation must be presented in a catchy and entertaining way.

The finished scene ended up being one of the most hilarious and comical elements of the finished performance and the group realised that the jokes that work best are the ones where the humour is not in the text or not just from the text.

## - Specify an acting mood

For another scene, I gave a small group of four people the task of creating a parody scene in the manner of Chekhov. The seriousness of Chekhov's plays and the slow-moving stories with their dark tones of depression are such excellent parody material that even Chekhov himself regarded many of his seemingly bloody and serious works as a comedy. The style is easily recognisable and is a great opportunity for play.

The finished scene is a seemingly monumental family drama about a separation, where the child leaves the family nest, possibly moving abroad, and the parents are devastated. By the end of the scene, it turns out that she's just taking the dog for a walk under quarantine, and will be back in twenty minutes. Great games were born of the comic exaggeration of the situation, with not one specific reference to Chekhov's Three Sisters and the Cherry Orchard.

Here is the script version of the finished scene:

*Lili: Mom, Dad. I'm going.*

*Mother: Wait a little longer!*

*Lili: Nothing to wait for!*

*Father: But sweetie...*

*Lili: Dad, you know there are no buts. I can't do anything else.*

*Father: There must be another way.*

*Lili: We've thought about it a thousand times and there isn't. No, no, we can't do anything else.*

*Father: Maybe if I...*

*Lili: And then what about Mom? If something happens...*





*Mother: Don't even say that! (crosses herself)*

*Lili: Please don't make it any harder!*

*Mother: Now it's our fault? Is that how you want to leave? By breaking my heart first?*

*Father: Don't get upset, darling! Not now.*

*Lili: I'm sorry, I'm just anxious too.*

*Mother: I'm sure we can work something out.*

*Lili: There is no other solution...*

*Mother: But Hámoriné's family too...*

*Lili: It's easy for them.*

*Mother: You shouldn't have...*

*Father: What is gone is gone. No point in dwelling on the past now. We could not have known in advance, we simply could not have known.*

*Mother: I'm going to be so scared for you. Out there, far away, alone. We can't take care of you, protect you.*

*Lili: Sanyi will take care of me.*

*Mother: Yeah, right!*

*Father: That Sanyi would protect you from the pandemic!*

*Mother: Don't say it, Gáspár, don't say it! You'll attract disaster! (Mother-Father cross themselves)*

*Father: Sorry, darling.*

*Lili: Calm down. Everything will be fine.*

*Father: I'm so proud of you. My strong brave little girl.*

*Lili: Okay, Dad, okay. It's going to be okay. I have to go now! (Mother hugs her too)*

*Father: I'll miss you!*

*Mother: Take care!*

*Father: Be careful!*

*Lili: I'll be careful. I'll do everything I can.*

*Mother: I will think of you every moment.*

*Lili: Let's not drag this out.*

*Father: You're right, it doesn't get any easier...*

*Lili: Well then... (puts on mask) Sanyi!*

*(Sanyi the dog enthusiastically runs into the space, jumps up on Lili, very happy)*

*Lili: (puts a leash on the dog) I'll be back in twenty minutes! (away with Sanyi)*



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*Father and Mother: (they embrace each other and wave long afterwards)*

The number and composition of small groups and the time required for a scene with different constraints will depend on the constraints, but groups of four are usually the most appropriate. The time frame can be slightly shorter here, as the constraints also help to keep the scene writing process in order, and there is less risk of it failing, as there is something to hold on to. It takes 45-60 minutes to develop a basic scene, and then, if the scene works, there is a long rehearsal period before it is ready to be shown to the audience.

## - Small group scene planning

Compared to scene writing, scene planning does not require the final result to be presented on stage to a small group, but only a detailed elaboration and explanation of the concept.

This method is useful because, if some result must be presented, the creators are already expecting to present it to their peers, so many ideas are rejected or not formulated, for any of the following reasons:

- the idea is not their style (they intend it for other actors)
- they do not have enough time to develop the idea for the stage
- they don't have the tools or props or setpieces they need for what they came up with
- There are not enough of them.

Another advantage of this method is that, although the concept is worked out in broad outline, it can then be refined in discussion with the whole group and the director.

This method is also useful if the group has a rehearsal space where another scene is already being rehearsed, because you can design without a space, even on a bench or in a corridor.

In our performance, we used this method to create the scene where a family sends one of their members shopping during quarantine, and to make sure he is safe, they put more and more clothes on him until he can't even stand upright because of all the layers.

We could not perform the scene on stage when the idea was born, because on the one hand it requires a lot of costumes, which we did not have, and on the other hand it requires a carefully rehearsed and practiced choreography to get the right sequence of costumes, who puts what on the character and when, to create the humour and rhythm of the scene.

## - Individual scene design

This method can be used as a kind of homework assignment between two rehearsals, to be given to the whole group or to certain members of the group. It saves time if the rehearsal time is spent solely on the realisation and the scene has already been planned outside rehearsal. The designer

can also be made responsible for the project during the creation of the scene, and can be entrusted with the development and staging of the scene.

This is the method used in the scene in which an esoteric psychic healer on TV tries to sell his hand sanitizer product.

#### - **Scene provided by the director**

Although the performance will be based on teamwork and improvisation, it is useful to bring an example scene to work from in order to help the group understand exactly what concepts we want to work on. It is worth keeping in mind as many of the expectations we have set for the scenes as possible, so that we can demonstrate as many of the elements listed in the **Aspects and criteria of scene creation** segment as possible in practice.

In our performance, this is how the first New Year's Eve scene was created.

## **Beyond the scenes**

If your performance is made up of scenes using only the techniques detailed above, it is easy for the final result to lack cohesion, or to become too predictable and monotonous for the audience too quickly, even if you have used a variety of techniques. Here are a few examples of ways to add colour to a performance that is fundamentally based on scenes created by the group.

#### - **Songs**

A great way to break up the monotony of a performance is to add songs and break up the sequence of scenes at the right dramaturgical points. A song sung by the whole group, especially when accompanied by live music, can have a huge power. Suddenly switching from the previously used primary means of expression to a song can be a good way of underlining something that is important to the group or to draw more attention to it. In addition, a well-chosen song can also have a community-building effect. It is always the song that lives longest in a performance. Once a performance has been taken out of the repertoire, the song is remembered by the group, sung elsewhere, it gets into the ears of the audience and stays with them, so that the performance can make a deeper impression.

We can have different goals when we include a song in a piece. A song can be a humorous device, if it is used as a counterpoint, is placed in a funny situation, or its lyrics are funny and its melody is familiar. In our performance, for example, we used the song "Masquerade", a parody of the children's song of the same name by the children's band Kaláka. The rewritten lyrics present the obligatory use of masks in a funny way. The original song will be familiar to most



Hungarian viewers, creating a recognition that viewers love, they feel initiated by the fact that they don't need the joke explained to them, they get it straight away. Linked to this welcome realisation is the inherent humour of the text and the obvious rhyming of the original and the rewrite.

*Rade, rade, masquerade*

*The whole bus is masked up*

*Don't get on through the front door*

*The ball is on, the ball is on*

*When will it end?*

*No need to fear*

*Cecilia told us*

*The vaccine is coming soon*

*Zeneca and Moderna*

*But until then, let's be careful*

*Don't yell at the bus driver!*

But a song can also be poetic, angry or sad or emotional, which can have a stronger impact on the viewer than the lyrics.

A song can also be an overture, to set the scene for the piece, or a grand finale to sum up what the piece is about or to underline its final message.

We used this instrument in the finale, at the end of the darkly humorous and sometimes cynical performance, we wanted to "get serious" and give it a poetic and beautiful ending, so we wrote a song accompanied by a slow guitar, leaves the stage and the song reaches the moment of the curtain call „a cappella”.

## - Monologues

Especially in the formal language we chose, there was a great need for monologues. Basically, we can divide monologues in a performance into two groups: internal and external monologues. In the case of an external monologue, a character is speaking to another character or to the audience who are treated as character in the situation, while an internal monologue is a stream of consciousness given voice, or a text outside the real time of the play or scene, during which all other real action seems to be frozen.

In our presentation, however, we used a third type, the civil monologue, which can be described as a combination of the two. With a few exceptions, most monologues stop the performance, as if the actor suddenly exits the performance and tells a story as a civilian. Since the main stylistic feature of our whole performance is that the actors "play" here, i.e. the stage space is not a separate reality as in a classical performance. For example, the prologue of Romeo and Juliet says "in fair Verona, where we lay our scene", immediately creating the impression that while the audience is in the auditorium, the action is in Verona.



In the case of our performance, this separation does not happen, so the actor can say anything when they step out of their role. We use this device often in our performances, but most often in monologues. Since our scenes and our songs are mostly humorous, or at least absurd, caricatures, „funhouse mirror” versions of the events we all know, we needed a more serious point of view. The subject matter demands it, and we wanted to show the serious tragic side of the pandemic. In between two scenes, an actor suddenly, as if bursting out of them, says their monologue. In many cases, there is no context provided, as if the words just explode out of her, so the texts are authentic and honest. In some cases, there is a real closeness between the text and the point of view of the actor who is saying the lines, or the life situation they experienced during the pandemic - for example, in the case of the actor who talks about how she did not suffer tragically, and was even happy during the pandemic. Yet the text does not fully reflect her truth. Theatrical considerations require exaggeration and expansion, in order to give the message more impact.

*I have to stay with my fiancé 24 hours a day for months. Oh, the horror. Well, I think I'm the luckiest woman in the world. I think every couple should have quarantine therapy before they get married.*

*I miss my family, of course, but we talk on the phone every night and since the weather has improved we go out to meet them in the yard every Saturday. No kisses, no hugs, and we wear masks the whole time, but at least I see them and we can talk. I also keep in touch with my friends. We have an online drink every week. In the old days, when we'd sit down for a beer after rehearsals, there was always something. Work, school, or a family event would make me one of the first to leave, but now I stay the longest. And we don't have to think about which of us can and can't drink to be able to drive. So I'm not lonely either.*

*Whenever I watch the Government Info broadcasts, I don't look forward to the restrictions being lifted. I'm anxious for it, because I know I'm going to miss it so damn much.*

*I am terribly sorry for everyone who has fallen ill, who has lost their job, who is in quarantine in terrible conditions, but let me not be ashamed of the fact that I am happy. Perhaps I have never been so happy. (excerpt from the monologue)*

In other monologues, the content of the monologue is not true to the actor, but the audience does not know this, or if a particular audience member does, it will only make it more exciting for them to watch and assume what is real and what is fiction. For example, one of the monologues is about the actor losing her grandmother to the virus. Fortunately, the actor has not suffered such a tragedy, but of course she has used the pain of her own losses in the monologue.

*I lost my grandmother.*

*The world should stop and everyone should be silent as the city goes dark because I lost my grandma, and yet nothing happened.*

*The next day it was also reported that 105 mostly elderly, chronically ill patients had died. She was elderly, but not chronically ill. And she was not a number in the statistics. She was my grandmother.*

*She loved us. She was always busying herself, listening to all our troubles. She was curious about everything and had an answer for everything. She was energetic for her age, especially when it came to her grandchildren. My grandfather died a long time ago, I don't even remember him. She said it was because of us that she could bear being alone. We gave her purpose. And when the pandemic broke out she said she would survive it because we were there for her and the purpose was the same now as it was when Grandpa Béla died.*

*It didn't work. Even though she did her best. And yet.*



*I lost my grandmother.*

*We hadn't seen each other since March, but she called every other day. She said it wasn't every day because we deserve to have some privacy. Sometimes I didn't answer. I was watching TV, the phone vibrated next to me, but I didn't answer because I didn't feel like it.*

*At seventy-five, she learned to use Zoom because she wanted to see us. She didn't like Messenger, but she found a virtual hug gif and sent it every day. And I sent her a smiley every day. That was the extent of our conversation. I'd love to hear her again. Or at least to see her kind and wise words written down, but that's all that's left. Gif, smiley, gif, smiley. Gif gif gif gif. Because I didn't even bother to send the smileies anymore. (Excerpt from the monologue)*

Each actor was given a monologue of their own, where the theme was discussed together, but they could decide whether they wanted to write it themselves, if we should write it together or if the director should write it for them. In this case, there is no problem with the latter, since an actor cannot be expected to be a good writer, and all the monologues and texts must eventually undergo a major rewrite anyway, so that our performance is in a unified language.

## - Playing together

In an improvisational performance, if you only build the performance on the scenes, there is not really room for the common parts that move the whole group, and if you want to have them - and it is worthwhile in a varied performance - it is better to make them with a different working method than your scenes.

It's a matter of taste which director prefers more regular, prewritten elements in a performance, but it's not easy to do this improvisationally, and scene creation methods do not easily give rise to precisely set choreographies, rhythm games or just carefully set stage compositions. Regularity requires a more classical directorial approach.

We have planned a lot of playing together in the show. One of our criteria was that all the players should be in the space at all times of the performance, no cover-ups, so that the whole performance is a collective play.

Taking the playful style of our performance as a starting point, we chose the method of realising the parts where everyone plays together by adapting real existing theatrical games to suit what we wanted to express through the scene. In creating the scene, we started by playing the original game, and then added more and more rules, or broke down the redundant ones, to arrive at what the audience finally sees on stage.

The rule of one particular theatre game originally intended for introductions is that everyone moves around the room in a space-filling walk, and when two people meet they should greet each other in alphabetical order. So if Alice meets Bob, Alice should come first, but if Bob meets Zoe then Bob should come first. We obviously didn't use this to learn names, but in one scene everyone chose a sentence about why they weren't afraid of this epidemic. *There are no pandemics now, we are not living in the Middle Ages!*) However, we kept the rule of the alphabet and the space-filling walk and the scene we made was incorporated into the performance. Likewise, the scene where a group of girls list how much they missed out on as adolescents during this period, until their social life was gone and their living spaces closed down, is based on games. In this scene, the rules of the game "never have I ever" are employed.



## - Interaction

To add variety to your performance, you can make it interactive at certain points, i.e. involve the audience in some way. For this, the audience is often grateful, willing to play a little in the performance if they enjoy it and if they feel safe while they are playing.

They can be made interactive with both more subtle and blatant methods, but what you choose depends on the material and the improvisational skills of the actor. Interactivity can be as simple as asking a question to which the audience responds with a show of hands, or asking a quick simple question to them or pinning a question at a single person, or simply calling them out, drawing them into the scene, or even calling them on stage at one point and actually giving them a task.

Acting in an interactive scene is very difficult and complex. It's important for the actor to communicate well, to gauge who is willing to play with them. It can be a bad experience if you try to involve an audience that has no affinity for being involved whatsoever. Good improvisation skills are important, in such a situation you cannot rehearse the reactions of the audience, even if you ask them a simple yes-or-no question. These situations have to be handled, and handled well - if you are going to interact, it has to be a two-way street. It's important to create a safe environment for the audience in the situation where we engage them. They need to feel that they can't make a mistake, that there is no wrong solution.

The audience will be reluctant to participate in the interaction if they feel they are being cheated - if what they have to do has no real impact on the performance, that is, if no real interaction takes place. If they feel that they are the only one taking a risk by being involved and the performer is not, then the interactivity will not succeed as we would like.

## Expert involvement and a broader perspective

In the case of a performance where we want to go into a broader problem in detail, broken down into its elements, the question may arise whether the group can express all elements of the topic in a credible way, whether there is enough experience and knowledge to adequately portray certain segments of the problem. If we speak only within our own competence, only about what we feel our group is credible about, then the audience may miss the broader perspective, whereas if we speak about things for which we lack the experience and credibility, the audience will notice and rightly resent it.

This problem also arose in our presentation, due to the homogeneous composition of the team. We were also interested in aspects of the subject that we ourselves had not lived, could not have lived, and did not know well enough. When we were creating the monologues, it occurred to us to create a monologue in which a homeless person talks about how he was affected by quarantine. The idea was ultimately rejected because we didn't know the answer and a text based on our own experience would not have been credible. The idea of a





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monologue by a homeless person, although completely rejected, was one that we wanted to address at least minimally, and we came up with two solutions, the first of which could be useful for any performance:

- **the involvement of experts**

It's worth taking the time to invite someone who is an expert in the subject as a guest for a rehearsal. They could be invited to give a talk, or to watch a scene or scenes that match their expertise and then give their critique.

It's certainly useful for the group to go deeper into the subject and gain new knowledge, but the end result will also show that a discussion with an expert will make their performance more authentic.

If the expert is open to it, it may be useful to invite them to participate in a follow-up discussion after the presentation, so that the audience can better understand certain aspects of the topic.

We asked internet lawyer Dr. Katalin Baracsi and psychologist Gergely Villányi to help us better understand how young people in particular are affected by the fact that a significant part of their lives is online, while the offline space has become more stimulus-poor and confined due to the pandemic, and what the advantages and disadvantages of online education might be.

- **Video clips**

The other solution was to show video clips at the end of the performance, interrupting the finale song, depicting people who were deeply affected by the quarantine situation for some reason, but which we could not have expressed authentically. This was an attempt to broaden the narrow perspective of young people of college age in Budapest. Thus, we were joined by a video presentation by

Gabriella, an anaesthesiologist who worked in a hospital's COVID department during the pandemic.

Richárd Fodor, a university lecturer, who shed light on the other side of online education and how difficult it is as a teacher.

Ádám Nagy, who runs a dog hotel, and during the pandemic, as no one travelled, the quarantine took a heavy toll financially on him

Máté Bredán, a theatre lighting and sound technician, told us that he had lost all his sources of income and received no support as a private entrepreneur, yet what he suffered most was to be deprived of the theatre environment.

And Hunor Nagy-Varga talked about how he experienced this situation as a kindergartener.

## **The order of the scenes, the final text and the rehearsals.**



When we feel that we have roughly enough scenes and the structure of the performance seems to be outlined, we reach the point where we have to put the scenes in order. Since there is no chronological coherence or dramaturgical arc for a performance that has no coherent story, there are many aspects to the final sequence. It is good to have a beginning and an end right from the start, and our scenes should connect these two fixed points in the most interesting and enjoyable way possible. The most important aspect is variety between scenes, monologues, songs, common games. If the first half of your performance consists only of monologues and the second half only of scenes, the result is likely to be more boring than if you alternate them. There are several good ways to group the scenes in terms of mood. Moving from the more serious to the lighter, or vice versa, can work equally well. But for a sketch performance like this, perhaps the most exciting thing is to have a roller-coaster of moods. It keeps the viewer more unexpected, keeps them guessing, not knowing what to expect, and allows the element of surprise to add to the impact of the scenes.

When the work process has reached the point where we know what scenes, songs, monologues and other parts will make up the performance, it is worth spending a rehearsal (or part of one) collecting them and then grouping them together with the whole group, according to mood and effect (sad, happy, in-between/neutral) and according to where the group thinks they should be placed: at the beginning, end or middle of the performance. It is important for the play to have a strong opening and an effective ending, so scenes that might be slower, have a more neutral mood, or be less effective (which is not necessarily a negative) should be placed in the middle. Once the scenes have been grouped together, it is now a directorial decision to determine the exact order, taking into account the following criteria.

- Variety (in genre, mood, dynamics)
- Actors' workload (if there are several scenes done by the same small group, or if there is a lot of overlap, it is worth separating them)
- Smoothness (scenes should flow easily into each other, and there should be as little use of rearrangements or darkness between scenes as possible, as this can make the performance feel fragmented)

Establishing the order is a good way to look at the material in this light. There is also room for expansion here if we feel that a sub-theme, mood or style element is missing. If necessary, it is also possible to remove scenes that feel too redundant or too repetitive or uniform.

Once the final order is established and all the elements of the performance are in place, the next task that the director alone, or if there is a dramaturgical collaborator, the two of them together, should do is to prepare the script and clarify the text.



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The text of each improvised scene must be finalised at this point, and the text must be combed together to ensure that it is consistent in its literary quality.

After that, the rehearsal process enters a new phase, and it should be treated in the same way as if it were a scripted process, where a specific literary work is being worked on, only here the playwright is the whole company, and the rehearsal process is more advanced, since it no longer has to be set up and adapted from the beginning, since the stage play is made at the same time as the literary material.

We are on track with our plans if at this point we still have 3-4 rehearsal sessions left (or a day or a day and a half in a camp setting) before the performance. We need to use these rehearsals to have a total rehearsal, so that the performance runs together, so that the rhythm and energy are in order, so that the desired density and smoothness of scene changes can be created. It is during these that the final space will be created and all the props, sets and costumes will be decided.

There are also several types of total rehearsals, all of which are worth doing if you have the opportunity to do them more than once.

- **Rehearsal with pauses**

In this type of rehearsal, the performance goes from start to finish in one piece, but the director stops, gives instructions and has parts re-enacted. The length of this is many times the duration of the play, up to 4-5 hours for a one and a half hour performance.

- **Note-taking rehearsal**

In this type of rehearsal, the director does not stop the rehearsal, but takes notes throughout. Here, deviations from what was previously recorded, mistakes or particularly good solutions can be given feedback, and more specific instructions can be given to the actors during the stop.

- **Partial technical test**

At this point the whole performance is not performed, you can skip scenes with monologues if they don't involve space management or other technical difficulties, but every intercut and rearrangement has to be reviewed.

- **Full technical test**

Here the whole performance goes down, complete with light and sound, all the props and set pieces, but the focus and emphasis is on these technical components, not on the acting.



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## - Full total rehearsal

Here, the performance as a whole goes down with light, sound, sets and costumes. The main focus here is on the acting and the rhythm and dynamics of the performance, but the technician is also rehearsing and practising their tasks.

## - Dress rehearsal

Everything is done as if it were a performance, after which there is no point in changing anything, only giving feedback on how well it worked, but any more serious tampering would do more harm than good to the premiere.

Once we have done a sufficient number of total rehearsals, the actors also become more confident and no longer feel the fears they had at the beginning of the process of improvisation.

## - The presentation

Many directors or groups tend to over-rehearse performances or parts of performances and therefore delay the premiere, but it is also worth looking at the premiere as part of the rehearsal process, where the material first meets the audience, giving it an external perspective from which many useful lessons can be learned and later incorporated into the performance.

It's important, not solely for improvisational performances, but especially for improvisational performances, never to look at it as something that is ready-made. Be ready to improve it at any time, to update it if the theme requires it, and to change it enough between rehearsals so that it does not become boring, always looking at your performance as constantly evolving, changeable material.



# STAGE

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