



STAGE



Az Európai Unió
Erasmus+ programjának
társfinanszírozásával

GIVING



HUNGARY

Professional handbook for organising an interactive theatre event

Theatre is an unquestionable part of our culture. We can list a number of works intended for the stage, which are considered pillars of the Hungarian and world literary canon, and which (with a few exceptions) are best received on stage due to their artistic characteristics. In addition to providing cultural information, theatre can entertain, make us think, influence our emotions, and play an extremely important role in education. Yet it is finding it increasingly difficult to find its own audience. Films and series are much more comfortable, much more dynamic in their storytelling, and they expect much less 'cooperation' from the audience, since a theatrical performance, from the moment the spectator enters, enters into a 'contract' with the spectator to accept the stylizations that the stage offers. In the past, many people who have addressed this problem have argued that theatre has a particularly difficult time appealing to young people. This claim is of course true, but as the problem is not new and was already true for young people in the 1990s, it is easy to see that the age group that was not addressed as young people in the 1990s is now middle-aged, and the problem has become more and more serious over the years.

What the theatre does have going for it is a "here and now" experience that no other storytelling medium can provide.

There is no sure way to change the way audiences, and especially young people, relate to theatre, but there are attempts (as so often in theatre history) to do so, not primarily from the stone theatre, but rather from alternative, amateur theatre communities.





One of the tools that helps the audience to become more involved and part of the theatre is **interaction**.

If we try to translate the word, we see that it points precisely to the possibility that theatre can be more than a film or a series for its audience, because interaction means *mutual relationship, interaction*.

A theatre performance can be partly or fully interactive. We speak of interaction when one or more, perhaps all, of the spectators become active actors, story-shaping forces during the performance, but also when the spectator can remain passive but has a clearly defined "role" in the story, but what all theatrical interaction has in common is that it breaks down the fourth wall (which is the one between the audience and the spectator and which, in the case of classical theatre, is impenetrable) and thus enters into a two-way communication with the spectator.

Interaction can be a source of fun, comedy and humour (e.g. audience participation in performances by L'art pour L'art), emotional involvement, giving us a choice, or simply asking for our opinion in certain situations.

We talk about interaction when the interaction is not (or not only) in the performance or as part of it, but as part of a theatrical event consisting of several programmes, for example as a pre- or post-event, which can be useful in the field of education. It can be useful in two ways: it can attract young people to the theatre, and it can also give them a deeper understanding of the subject matter that the theatre is addressing, whether it is an interpretation of a work in the context of an informal literature lesson or a theatrical treatment of a social issue.

In the following, we will show how multi-level interaction can work by describing such an educational theatre event.

In order to talk about the organisation of such an event, we first need to clarify the characteristics and objectives of such an event. Within the STAGE project, we have been studying the impact of the coronavirus and the pandemic on young people at individual and community level. Then, after the presentation, we held a processing interactive event.

In the interactive theatre programmes during STAGE, teacher "education" (or rather assistance/advice) plays as important a role as student education. The aim is always to reach out to teachers, to establish a long-term contact, to develop an active professional relationship on the spot and afterwards. This is important partly to transfer the theatre pedagogical methodology used during STAGE to



teachers, and partly to transfer a generally understood approach to theatre pedagogy.

This should also be borne in mind when choosing the participants for the event. It is important that the participating teachers include colleagues who are more 'professionally competent' in drama pedagogy or theatre-making with students, but also less experienced teachers. The professional debate between them will be launched with the help of the organisers and can then be continued within their own institutions. In this way, they will help to spread professional points of view and to promote the goals of drama education. From the point of view of STAGE, the extent to which the teacher can stimulate the follow-up of the discussion of the themes raised during the lectures and keep the student-student and teacher-student discourse alive also plays a major role in the selection of the target audience for teachers. The openness of the practitioner is also important, as he or she must accept that, given the topicality and constant changes in the subjects concerned, learning is a two-way process which requires an open attitude on the part of the teacher.

It is advisable to leave the students invited to the event to the teachers invited and to give them only helpful points of view, and to ask the teachers about the specificities of the group. Such a helpful aspect might be to explore the group's openness to the more sensitive issues raised by the presentations and so on. It may also be useful to organise a group that is homogeneous in some respects and heterogeneous in others. It is fortunate if the group is homogeneous in terms of age, but the more diverse the group in terms of gender, politics, social and racial diversity, the more interesting the discourse on the topics. In relation to the specificities of the group, one has to think about individual group dynamics. This includes the functioning of the group's speakers, awareness of internal conflicts, and the identification and understanding of shared experiences and tragedies. This information is useful both separately and in context. It is important not to avoid the resulting sensitive and sometimes uncomfortable situations, but to use them correctly. In our experience, such a situation can be (in the context of a performance by the KOD theatre) when a few members of the class or the whole class has suffered a loss or tragedy linked to the covid epidemic. Unfortunately, there are few opportunities in primary education to deal with such a loss in a group context, but the performance and the activities that follow it provide a good



platform. In all interactions, whether part of the performance or in the discussion that follows/precedes it, it is important that the actor or performer initiating the interaction is sensitive enough to address only those who he or she feels are open to it. A forced attempt at engagement can cause anxiety and leave a 'wound' that is completely the opposite of what is intended.

Most of the administrative tasks of organising the programmes involve contacting teachers. This can be difficult because of the heavy workload of teachers, who often have to work outside school hours (i.e. beyond the strict teacher's working hours) and are required to do extra preparation and follow-up work. On top of this, it has to squeeze in students' equally overloaded and overcrowded lives and timetables. In this way, a very good case must be made to the targeted teachers, showing how it will help them in their work. One such case is that the children's debating culture will be significantly improved during the programme. Furthermore, after having mastered the professional material of the programme, they will have the means to interpret and deal with issues in sensitive areas in a theatrical way, beyond the topics raised during STAGE. It is worth pointing out that in many cases it is sufficient to dramatise or dramatically process the moral and social issues raised in the compulsory reading to make it come alive and relevant. This also makes the teacher's job easier. The professional support materials also provide guidance on how to introduce a theme in the right way, how to use theatrical tools for discourse, creating a safe distance between the civil student and the student playing the role, while at the same time making the expressions as personal and honest as possible.

In addition to the live events, we have also prepared an online programme in response to the covid epidemic. This partly required less work and time from educators and partly reached a wider audience in some ways. There are several avenues to explore here. One is that the lecture can be watched online by the children and the corresponding session can be watched online, but obviously live. Here, it is an option for participants to attend 'alone' from their own homes, but it is also an option for participants to log in together from a room, thus facilitating and stimulating communication within the group. While there are advantages to this option, it is still worthwhile, if difficult, to opt for a live event, as the experience is more embodied and the distance is more difficult to maintain in this case.



In addition, partly due to the covid crisis and partly to achieve broad coverage, participants will be able to watch the presentation originally produced for the project online and discuss it with their own teacher or with the professionals involved in the project

If the session is live, technical constraints must be taken into account. Those creating the performance must have a precise knowledge of the space and technical requirements of the product. This should be agreed precisely with the institution hosting the performance. If it is a school or a community centre, the organisation should take into account even the smallest details such as the number and size of the extension stands. If the performance takes place in a space used by the company, this factor is simplified, but the needs of the post-performance session must still be taken into account. Such a need might be if, for example, a participant has limited mobility, or a member of the group or the group as a whole has a particular need.

At the initial stage of production, it is worth assessing whether you want to travel with the production and, if so, to keep it simple so that technical conditions do not prevent it from reaching an institution.

The duration of the session should also be adapted to the possibilities and the operating schedule of the institution hosting the event. In the case of a school, for example, it should be adapted to the forty-five-minute class. This can be spread out over a number of sessions, but the children's usual break times must be taken into account.

It is also a similar task (if the session is all day) to provide meals. If this is provided by the institution, it will often need to be agreed with them in advance.

When bringing in external professionals, the area of expertise of the potential professional, his/her experience with children and his/her knowledge of theatre workshops should be considered. It is not necessary for one practitioner to have all three, but it is important that if they do not, the session should be designed to be led by several people and cover these areas together. The professionals involved in the KOD Theatre are a good example. One of the



professionals involved is Dr Gergő Villányi, an internet psychologist with extensive experience in both planning and delivering sessions with children, and a specialism in anxiety and other issues arising from the challenges of the online world during covid lockdowns and affecting the generations of people employed. In addition, Máté Farkas, who has a great insight into creating good theatre processing sessions and was instrumental in the creation of the company's production, was also involved in the project and was a great help in coordinating the work of the actors and professionals, in addition to creating the session. This is extremely important, as it gives us the opportunity to involve the actors in the post-production sessions from the planning stage, which greatly helps to activate the young people during the discussions.

There are several methods for processing the work seen and different methodologies require different levels and qualities of involvement of professionals. These methods will be discussed later, but it should be mentioned here that the active participation of professionals is not necessarily required during the sessions, but their knowledge must be represented.

Description of the methodology of the sessions used in the application:

There are more opportunities to work on the lectures and the themes that emerge from the lectures. Which one to use depends largely on the time available, the exact purpose of the session and the age and composition of the group.

If the time available is at its minimum, the processing of the performance is exhausted in the interactive part of the performance, where the audience, who in this case become an active part of the performance, can express their opinions and sometimes influence its events, or at least experience the illusion of this influencing



power. For this interaction in the STAGE project, the 3 partners used 3 different methods.

in the Code Theatre's production of "The Angels have fallen asleep", the actor, or character, put the audience in the role and asked for their opinion on a particular subject. The easiest and most obvious way to do this is for the character to address the audience in a clear way. In this performance, for example, the character of the anthropomorphised dog, played by the actor, addresses the audience, creating a role where they and only they understand what the dog is saying (the owner only hears it barking), the actor makes the audience immediately complicit, a shared secret, and shows that he needs the audience as the only possible interlocutor. And the spectator automatically tries to conform to the newly established set of rules. If we use this method, we have to take into account that at certain ages children tend to fight against the rule systems, so we have to be careful that they do not consciously and directly try to spoil this "game". We can do this by preparing them before the performance that they will have to get involved at some point. In this method of interaction, the spectator does not necessarily shape the course of events, but it puts a great burden on the actor, since the situation is unrehearsed, never the same twice, and in every situation he has to resolve the situation himself and out of character.

In DigiQ's "Generacion-Z" presentation, they chose a different way. Their case is one more performance-specific. Their material is structured as a performance divided into seven units, each unit presenting a problematic area through one character. The characters deliver a monologue at the end of their scenes. Originally, three monologues were written for each of the characters, of which the audience votes on which one should be the monologue of the cockatiel. These are internal monologues, so the viewer can actually decide on the character's relationship to what has happened to him. Although the fate of the characters is no longer visible on stage, the audience automatically imagines it. In this way, this decision creates the illusion of influence without the need to react theatrically.

In the performance of the Kölcsey Ferenc Gymnasium's company "Against the Virus: TE", a third method is observed. Here, at the catharsis point of the performance, events stop and the viewer has to choose between two ways of resolving the main conflict of the story. The two main characters stop the flow of events and, breaking through the fourth wall, address the audience directly and



personally. They ask for their opinions and then make their decisions based on them. This requires the most theatrical work, partly because it requires several versions of the events to be devised, and partly because it demands a high degree of improvisation (i.e. education) from the actors involved. The risk of this is therefore the greatest, but it is also where the audience is most involved and the catharsis of the experience can be the strongest.

If more time is available, we can plan a follow-up to the presentation. This can also be done in several ways. If the teacher has a plan to talk to the children later about what they have seen, then the aim can be to deepen the experience, so that it is easier for the teacher to start the conversation. The best way to do this is to have the actors and the director engage in an informal discussion with the audience as an audience meeting.

If the aim of the session is to deepen and expand on the topic, you can choose from several sessions.

One of these is to divide the audience into groups, based on which unit of thought they felt closest to, which raised the most questions, or which was the most alien to them. After a few introductory questions to divide the audience into these smaller groups, each group sits separately with an actor. Here, the actors further dissect these questions.

They have a difficult task here, as they have to control a conversation with a team that has just been formed all by themselves. They have to be prepared for marked differences of opinion among the group members, for differences in the interpretative effectiveness of theatrical symbol systems, for participants to become nervous in such a situation and for the conversation to get off to a more difficult start, and also for participants to become passive. However, it may be an advantage that the actor can easily step out of the subordinate-superior relationship, communicating as a partner with the group, who, having seen him/her perform on stage, may treat him/her as a bit more familiar than a professional who would impart knowledge in a frontal manner.



Some starter questions for the actors leading the teams:

-What did you see?

Here the question is about bringing interpretation to the same level. It is worthwhile to put the groups together in batches of scenes and then interpret the specific events. By asking this question, the team will have a common knowledge base.

-What did you disagree with?

This is obviously to stimulate a civilised debate. Often there is no unity of opinion among the audience, so they can argue among themselves, but it is also not a problem if the audience is united against the creators. In such cases, care must be taken that the moderator does not try to convince the discussion partners, but rather to reach a common conclusion.

-What did you feel was too much in the performance?

Here we focus on the fact that theatre often makes use of exaggeration for the sake of theatrical condensation and dramaturgy. It is important to bear in mind, however, that often the spectator ignores (or is unaware of) factors that professionals know and use. As a result, what is perfectly realistic may often appear to be exaggeration. An example is the mental break-down during covid closures. In the performance of the CODE Theatre, one of the characters, who is basically a hypochondriac, worried about illness, has a monologue about how he is more comfortable in his daily life since the security measures were put in place. However, the character exudes anxiety, isolation and guilt. This character and emotional world often feels exaggerated to the audience, but they usually realise by the end of the conversation that his situation and emotional world is not so out of this world.

In the discussion, it can be useful to put the viewer in the perspective of the acting in. For example, not asking "what do you think character X should have done"? But "what would you do?"



It is important to discuss the content of the performance, not its aesthetic evaluation and rating. Of course, the two are often inextricably linked, and not always worthwhile. But we should not let the focus get lost in the discussion. It requires a helpful, open but firm mediator's attitude.

The best case is when there is time to engage with the audience before the performance. In this case, the post-performance session does not need to change substantially, but you should expect that you are already dealing with a more understanding audience, so that they can ask more specific, critical and insightful questions and make more meaningful comments.

The aim of the pre-performance session can be to familiarise you with the formal language used in the lectures, thus helping you to understand them smoothly. Here again, however, it is important to focus on the topic and not the form. Explain or go into dramaturgical and aesthetic issues only as far as there is time for questions of content.

Furthermore, it may aim, even before the performance begins, to jolt the student viewer out of the receptive attitude tired of frontal teaching, to make him realize that a different kind of cooperation is expected from him than in a classical classroom.

So, summing up the possible occupations in terms of the time available:

- 1: embedded in the performance, we help you interactively process what you have seen
- 2: after the lecture, we discuss the issues raised in a session
- 3: we have an influence on the processing process before, during and after the performance



The other grouping criterion is the formal implementation of the session. From this point of view, a distinction can be made between frontal and round-table.

Although it may seem that the frontal method may not be appropriate in such an area, it is often only necessary to make up for the information disadvantage of the participants. It is also worthwhile to make it playful or interactive in some way, so that the information is better absorbed. The personality and delivery method can be as important as the information to be conveyed.

In a round-table session, a simple but well-focused discussion can be a method, but you can also use dramatic tools. This can be done by putting the children in a role for all or part of the session, either as a character from any of the characters in the performance or in a themed environment created just for the session.

These sessions and events will focus on mentors who have participated in mentor training. Their role is also important in the technical delivery, in the creation and delivery of the sessions. Their professional training also enables them to deliver sessions and events tailored to different age groups in a pedagogically sound way and to assist teachers.

At the end of the session, it is also worth asking for some feedback from viewers on how they felt about the processing sessions, whether they found them useful. This is important feedback not only for the session facilitators, but also for the student to articulate what they have experienced. If there is no time or opportunity to do this, it is worth asking the teacher for help, and feedback from the teacher is also important.

As regards the events held, it is important that they are properly administered. It is necessary to record the details of the participants for the sake of accurate accounting and, more importantly, so that teachers can be easily contacted when organising the next event. It is important to develop a close professional relationship with the teacher partners, as this will help the participating teachers throughout the project. The table in the document was used to record the data of the participants in the STAGE days.



STAGE



MultiplierEventSTAGE DAY place:
Participants: date:

<u>Name of the participant</u>	<u>E-mail address of the participant</u>	<u>Function</u>	<u>Organisation</u>	<u>Address of the organisation</u>	<u>Signature</u>

