

# INCLUSION THROUGH THEATRE

A Journey of an Actor with Down's  
Syndrome to Cognisant Artistic  
Creation and Social Acceptance



JITKA VRBKOVÁ  
and collective of authors

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**Janáček Academy of Music  
and Performing Arts Brno**

Janáčková akademie múzických umění  
Janáček Academy of Performing Arts

Brno 2022

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***A Journey of an Actor with Down's  
Syndrome to Cognisant Artistic Creation  
and Social Acceptance***



*Reviewer:*  
*MgA. Vladimír Novák, PhD.*

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ISBN 978-80-7460-204-7





This publication reports on the artistic research for the project entitled ***The Artistic Research of the Production of Theatrical Performances with Down's Syndrome Actors as an Effective Mean of Social Inclusion (TL02000500)*** supported by the Technology Agency of the Czech Republic within the ETA Programme.

The project was implemented by the Theatre Faculty of Janáček Academy of Performing Arts in cooperation with Divadlo Aldente (the Aldente Theatre).

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This project is co-financed from the state budget  
by the Technology Agency of the Czech Republic  
within the ETA Programme.

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We would like to thank the Technology Agency of the Czech Republic for the support of the project TL02000500, within whose framework this publication was produced.

We also thank our actors with Down's syndrome and their families, who gradually broke down barriers – real and imagined – thanks to their enormous amount of energy.

Last but not least, we would like to thank not only our large number of collaborators, but also those who have contributed significantly to the success of our project without remuneration.

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Down's syndrome is not always  
a disadvantage, Down's syndrome is an  
opportunity to see the world from a different  
angle and an ability to act differently.

*Jitka Vrbková, director*





# Preface

Between 2019 and 2021 the project entitled *The Artistic Research of the Production of Theatrical Performances with Down's Syndrome Actors as an Effective Mean of Social Inclusion* was carried out at the Theatre Faculty of Janáček Academy of Performing Arts (hereinafter referred to as JAMU) in Brno. The project was supported by TA CR (the Technology Agency of the Czech Republic) within the ETA Programme. It focused on creating a permanent theatre company of actors with Down's syndrome (hereinafter referred to as DS), who would be regularly educated at theatre workshops. Every year one production would be put together and performed, with the level of demands on the actors increasing each time. The whole time, the project was observed and commented on from outside by a psychologist and a special education teacher. They focused on the inclusive effect of the theatre activities from both sides: what effect the theatre productions had on the actors with DS and how they help them to be integrated into society. Then from the other side: what effect does performing of actors with DS in front of an audience from the majority society have on the spectators themselves, i.e. whether it helps eliminate myths and prejudices and thus advances the social inclusion of people with DS.

The research was carried out together with the Aldente Theatre, which has been working with child actors with Down's syndrome since 2014. The theatre has worked towards establishing a stable company, but its productions were irregular until 2019. That changed due to the grant at the Theatre Faculty. Between 2019 and 2021, the child actors got an opportunity to develop their skills regularly and systematically. Their improved acting went hand in hand with their mental and biological adolescence – within three years the child actors became young adults, and for many of them we can say that the young adults became professionals.

All of the work of actors with DS in the Aldente Theatre was done together with theatre professionals with no disabilities. Before 2019, these professionals were, in fact, the 'production leaders' who had to direct the action on the stage. It was them who turned the steering wheel and stepped on the gas pedal (and of course the brakes). By the end of the project in 2021, the forces had become equal, and now the uninformed spectator can hardly see who is leading. With a little exaggeration, we can say that before 2019

the actors with DS could do whatever they wanted on the stage. It was up to the professionals without disabilities whether they would include these spontaneous contributions from the actors with DS in the productions. Between 2019 and 2021, however, we gradually moved towards cognisant artistic creation: the actors advanced their mode of stage-presence from a mere 'self-presentation' to a genuine 'role-playing'. They achieved this by gaining wider theatre experience, especially through taking part in workshops and performing frequently, but also by intellectual grasping of theatrical principles.

This publication is divided into three units: the first part, *Introduction to the Topic*, will present how people with disabilities are accepted by society, various approaches towards these artists' theatre work, and the general situation of this kind of theatre in the Czech Republic and abroad.

The second part, *A View from the Inside: A Journey of an Actor with Down's syndrome to Cognisant Artistic Creation*, analyses these three years of systematic theatre work with actors with DS. It is described from the point of view of Jitka Vrbková, lecturer, director, and the project's leader. She explains the process of the actors' progression from a spontaneous being on the stage to an intentional creation of characters; she describes the actors' training and also the creation of three productions, each one more demanding on their acting abilities than the previous one.

The final part, *A View from the Outside: Inclusion through Theatre*, is written by three co-workers who have observed the project from the outside and did not directly influence the theatre activities. They merely offered their reflections on these activities, which was a valuable compass for the creators. The first chapter of this part was given over to the psychological research of Lenka Pivodová who analyses the attitudes of the actors with DS, their parents, and the audience. She also presents the inclusive potential of theatre work. In the following chapter, the teacher of special education Ilona Fialová focuses on options of people with disabilities and compares the inclusion at school and in the theatre. In the last chapter, *A Theatre-Maker's Look-Back*, the theatre director and teacher Zoja Mikotová comments on the Theatre Faculty of JAMU's attitude towards this kind of theatre. These comments are based on many years of her experience since she established the Studio of Drama Education for the Deaf in 1992 at the Theatre Faculty. In the subsequent chapter, *The Short Long Way*, she reflects on the Aldente Theatre's work before and during the TA CR project.

The aim of this publication is to outline the current situation of theatres with actors with learning disabilities, to describe the three years of systematic work with adolescent actors with DS at the Aldente Theatre, and to analyse the influence of theatre work on inclusion of people with disabilities into society. Within all of this it shows possible methods of turning 'disability' into (theatrical) ability and it can inspire other theatres, artists and educators in their own work.



*'My heart is beating with love.'*  
Martina Trusková, the actress  
of the Aldente Theatre  
Photo: Jiří Kottas, 2018









# **Introduction to the Topic**







# The Society, Theatre and Actors with (Dis)abilities

## The Learning Disability: A Compost Heap for Myths, Prejudices, and Misconceptions

*Motto:*

*A learning disability is the most complicated disability to be accepted in our society. The reason is, besides everything else, the limited possibility of empathy for such a person's situation and our inability to imagine how they perceive the environment, how they think, how they see the world around them.*

*(SLOWIK, 2015:111)*

Since people in general cannot empathise with a situation of a person with a learning disability, they are shy, which stops them from even trying to get closer to those persons. This causes myths and prejudices to keep growing... To prevent this, let us say two things right now at the beginning:

1. A learning disability does not mean that a person stops at a particular phase of progress. An adult with a learning disability is not a child – they have an adult's experience and also they as well are adults even though some specific actions are performed on a child's level.
2. If a person's IQ, for example, is 50, this does not mean that the brain's capacity is 50 % of the capacity of an average person with no disability. Such a person has just as valuable thoughts as any of us, but their thoughts are on a different level – one which is not (yet) measurable and **cannot be ever fully understood**. **In the past, the term 'mental retardation'**<sup>1</sup> was used, which caused this miscon-

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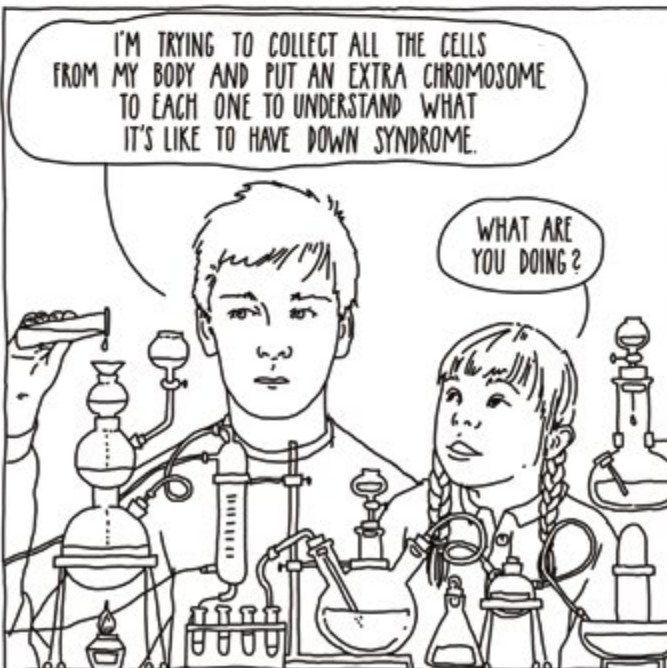
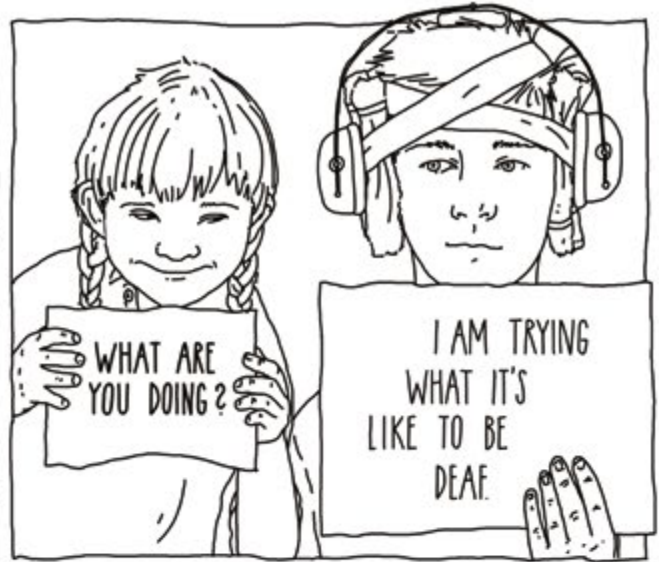
<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately many doctors, psychologists, and special education teachers still use this term in the Czech Republic. As well as being measured by the intelligence quotient, even though abroad not – IQ is just a small part of what determines a person's social abilities.

ception: it made us think of people with learning disabilities as people like us, but slower, having only a specific percentage of our abilities.

Theatre is an ideal place for showing the hidden and non-measurable potential of these people.

We decided to begin an attractive and maybe difficult adventure in which we would enter the world of those who we can never fully understand, but with whom we can share one stage and one world.



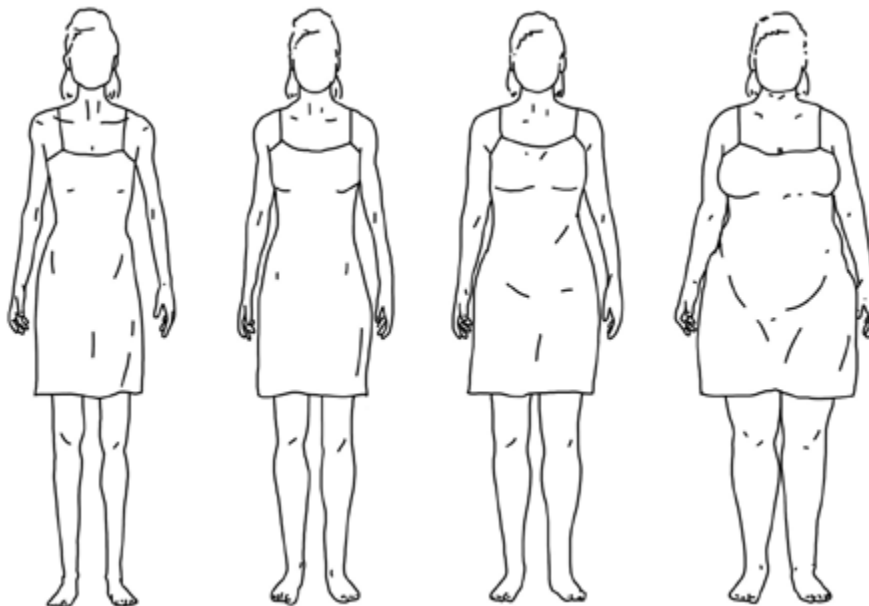




## Norma Dropped from a Pedestal

### A Parent, a Therapist, and a Theatre Professional

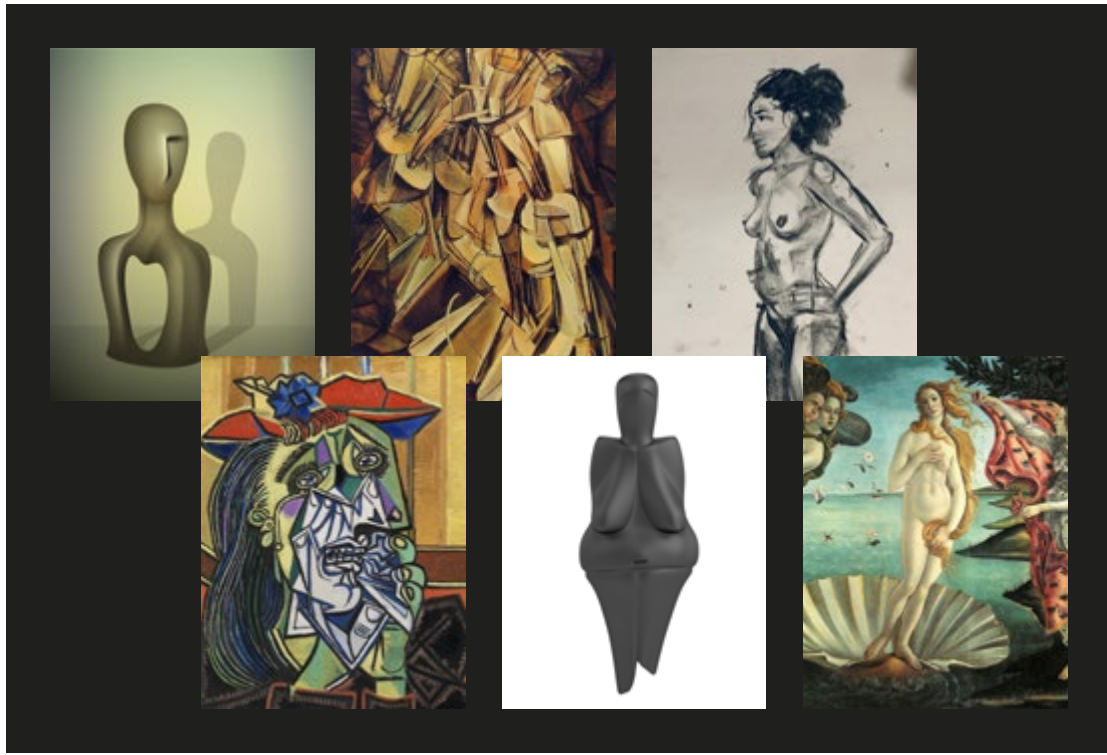
It is helpful to look at the topic from various points of view in order to obtain a complete idea of the issue of people with disabilities. In our research, we have included adolescent actors with DS, theatre professionals (directors, other actors), therapists (a psychologist, a special education teacher) and the parents of our actors with DS. We will show their varying perspectives in a simple example.



In the picture we can see four women. The woman on the left is thin, the one on the right is obese, and the two in the middle have an ideal weight.

**What is the therapist's task?** It is to **bring** a person **towards the norm** as much as possible — meaning closer to being one of the women in the middle. The effort to change a person and modify them into something else does not mean that we are insensitive to their differences from us, but that we logically wish to make their life better. If one has an optimal weight, they will most likely be healthier. That is to say: if, for example, one stops exhibiting an improper behavior in public, or learns to speak with better pronunciation, it will make their life easier within society in general. **To be closer to the norm helps with inclusion.**

Now we will turn what we said earlier upside down, and focus on **what the theatre artists' task is**. Is it to make someone adapt to the norm?



If we have a look at how women have been perceived by artists of different eras, it is obvious that art pulverises a 'norm'. The **valuable is what is outside the norm and can show things anew from a completely different perspective.**<sup>2</sup>

Petra Kuppens, an American theatre professional and activist in the field of disability art, says this about artists with disabilities:

*[Artists with disabilities] dissolve the stability of categories, and posit openness and change, instead. (...) They explode traditional art's boundaries, challenging the notion of genre, creating uneasy hybrids of art and the everyday. Time and space, living body and sedimented knowledge, semiotics and phenomenology start to leak into another, start to overwrite one another, and begin to move.*

(KUPPENS, 2013:4)

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<sup>2</sup> We refer to western culture. The east's way of thinking is completely different (for example Japan, China).

Destroying norms and borders is, in fact, something that is a part of the essence of art. From this point of view, people who look differently, speak differently, think and experience differently are an absolutely precious 'mineral' for theatre. The only problem is that we don't always know how to extract and process it yet.

And the third important group are the parents. **What is the parents' task?** If therapists work to bring the different towards the norm and, in contrast, artists want to take advantage of those differences, on which side are the parents? Or, which side should they be on?

The parents' most important task is simply to love the child. If they love the child, then they may push them towards the norm, because they believe that it will help them to be accepted into society. But, on the other hand, if they love the child, then they will surely see those valuable minerals in the differences which make the child exceptional, and will allow the child to develop them. **The parent is a navigator who decides where to turn the rudder according to their knowledge of the boat, as well as according to the current circumstances.**

Nevertheless, it is of the highest priority for the parent not to forget that the protagonist in these situations is the **person with disabilities themselves**. In our metaphor, the person with disabilities might be the captain who speaks their own special language which the steersman might not always understand...

In our project, we let all of the participants speak, because everyone has a different perspective on the topic: therapist, artist, parent, the person with DS.

## **Otherness: Disadvantage – Challenge – Opportunity**

In our research, we focus, more than anything else, on the theatre's perspective. This perspective has received little attention up to now. Society perceives people with otherness mostly as people who differ from the norm and who need to be helped to get closer to it, instead of as people with another kind of existence which might even be inspirational.

Let us have a look at clinical definitions of a learning disability according to the psychologist Iva Švarcová (ŠVARCOVÁ-SLABINOVÁ, 2011:51) and comment on them from the perspective of theatre work. The text quoted is in Italics, the theatre professional's comments are in a regular font.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *The following analysis is a modified quotation of my dissertation thesis. (VRBKOVÁ, 2020)*



*A learning disability manifests itself, clinically, particularly in:*

- *slower understanding, simplicity and specificity of determinations;*  
A person with a learning disability has the gift of seeing things differently, the gift of artistic abbreviation.
- *lowered ability or complete inability to make comparisons and infer logical relations;*  
A person with a learning disability infers relations which are not logical, or are worked out on a different basis than cause and consequence. This might remind one of 'magic realism' and lead to an original artistic outlook.
- *lowered mechanical and especially logical memory;*  
Logical memory can be replaced with emotional thinking: an actor then does not remember how everything works on the stage based on logical thinking, but the emotions felt lead him to different responses (when the production is structured to allow this). This technique is familiar even for many actors with no disabilities.
- *volatility of attention;*  
This is a disadvantage which forces the director to choose tools to keep the attention of actors with DS. It is presumed, then, that the audience will also be more involved in the scene.
- *insufficient vocabulary and clumsiness in expression;*  
This we can perceive as a certain stylisation, useful while putting together a theatre performance.
- *disorders of visuomotor skills and movement coordination;*  
These can lead to artistic stylisation of movement.
- *impulsivity, hyperactivity, or overall slowness in behaviour;*  
Again, this can become a kind of stylisation.
- *emotional excitement;*  
The ability to be excited emotionally is an advantage for acting.

As much as we can see that a person with a learning disability can have a great disposition for the arts, it is also clear that there are a number of realities that must be dealt

with. The real question for theatres working with people with disabilities is: 'How will you work with the otherness?' In general, there exist these options:

### **Otherness as a challenge**

The director can see that the actors have some disability (for example, imperfect pronunciation, or difficulties to remember their lines), and they want to **overcome this fact**. The otherness is a challenge for them.

### **Otherness as an Advantage**

A director sees the actors' otherness as a unique element of theatre which can be **used**. For example, an actress who speaks specifically and is difficult to be understood, so the director might see this as a kind of stylisation, as music rather than as language with meaning. The otherness becomes an advantage in such conceptions. It is obvious that this outlook cannot be applied to every aspect of every single actor's disability.

### **Otherness as a Ghost**

The third way is **invisibility**: in the first option the otherness is still visible, but we tried to overcome it. In the second, we even make the otherness more visible, because it adds to the overall artistic impression of the performance. In this option, which we have named 'otherness as a ghost', we catch the audience's attention with other elements of theatre, ones which will cover over the otherness. In practice, this can mean a theatre production with impressive scenography, extravagant costumes, masks, loud music... The otherness disappears among these stronger elements, and levitates above the stage like an invisible ghost – some spectators will sense it, others not.

None of these options is right or wrong. Theatres usually do not choose a 'clean form' of one of these, but mix them. In any case, one of them is often dominant.

The attitude toward the otherness is projected onto a number of levels in a theatre's activities: not only into the dramaturgy (i.e. the choice of titles) and acting work (which goes hand in hand with directing and scenography), but also into the theatre's marketing.

In the following chapter, four European theatres will be compared and we will point out to what degree theatres can differ from each other.

*'I am a very astonishing actress.'*  
Monika Pekařová, the actress  
of the Aldente Theatre  
Photo: Jiří Kottas, 2021







# Work with Otherness: a Comparison of Four European Theatres

## Choosing Theatres

Before the comparison of theatres, it is necessary to emphasize that the aim of such a comparison is not to evaluate and rank them. Our goal is to look for shared or different approaches and attitudes, and to discover how these theatres work with actors' otherness.

It is also crucial to realise that the following factors contribute to establishing the poetics of a theatre: the size of the city in which the theatre operates, the cultural customs of that area, the level of inclusion of people with disabilities, the age of the theatre company and the number and character of similar theatres in the country. Another thing which is not insignificant is the actors' identities, disabilities, ages, independence, and degree of social inclusion. In this chapter we are going to speak about actors with disabilities connected to a different way of thinking, especially learning disabilities and autism.

Considering the sheer number of things affecting the character of a theatre, I do not think that a person could obtain adequate information about the theatre by merely watching its productions at a festival or online. If one wants to penetrate the essence of the artistic creation of a theatre, it is necessary to see (or to experience) the theatre in the city where it operates, to observe its daily routine, to feel the atmosphere of the place, and to see the local audience and to understand their thinking. It is essential to personally attend the theatre.

Because of this, my analysis is based on my research stays at four European theatres. I dare to say that these four theatres have four very different approaches. I list them in alphabetic order: Blue Apple Theatre, established in 2004 in Winchester<sup>4</sup>, Moomsteatern established in 1987 in Malmö<sup>5</sup>, RambaZamba, established in 1990 in Berlin<sup>6</sup>, and Teatr 21, established in 2005 in Warsaw<sup>7</sup>.

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4 <http://blueappletheatre.com/>

5 <https://moomsteatern.com/en/start/>

6 <https://rambazamba-theatre.de/>

7 <https://teatr21.pl/>



# Theatres and Their Work with Otherness

How do theatres work with the specific characteristics of actors? Let us look at this issue from three different points of view: dramaturgy, acting (together with directing and stage design), and promotional technique.

## Dramaturgy

Let us begin with the differences caused by the actors' disabilities, which can affect the dramaturgy of these theatres. These actors usually have a problem with learning lines and they very often do not have perfect pronunciation (depending on the nature of their disability). They also usually look different, with their appearance automatically calling attention to the existence of people with disabilities. This has led to the idea that theatres with actors with learning disabilities stage only productions about those actors, essentially devised work. As can be seen from the work of all four discussed theatres, this is far from the truth. However, each theatre deals with and uses these actors' characteristics differently.

### **Blue Apple: Permission to be ourselves and a right to tell stories**

Blue Apple has a very wide scope of action – from dance through films to theatre of various kinds including devised theatre. However, the greatest emphasis is placed on word-based theatre. They stage new plays which have been written for Blue Apple, adaptations of famous stories, and classical dramas as well. The performers are proud of both their national genius, Shakespeare, and of themselves, as they can learn Shakespeare's lines.<sup>8,9</sup>

Richard Conlon, the artistic director, sees the meaning of their dramaturgy in giving people with learning disabilities the right to tell stories:

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<sup>8</sup> *Shakespeare's text is shortened, but not changed to be simpler; actors say lines in original.*

<sup>9</sup> *This is hard to imagine in Czech environment – Czech people do not usually feel respect, let alone pride, for Czech poets and playwrights. Staging Shakespeare has probably a value for English Czechs can never fully understand.*

*The company made a decision very early on that we would work with text. The actors would have scripts and they would also go for classical stories, Hamlet and so on. That is quite unusual for theatre companies with performers with learning disabilities. Many theatres say: 'Forget the text! We will improvise, devise ideas, we will work with music and movements, but we are afraid of speaking.'*

*We have a very different approach: Speech is important! We can communicate in words, we can communicate with stories that are hundreds of years old, because everyone has the right to tell such a story.*

(CONLON, 2019)


The theatre does not work with the 'topic of disability', but at the same time, they are aware of the effect these actors' specific characteristics have on the message of the show. Simon Morris, the former general manager of the company,<sup>10</sup> says:

*Our performers teach the others how to forget fixed ideas about what is 'correct' and be more present in their own bodies. I think this is a part of joy in our shows – it is something the audience picks up and feeds off, it is like a reminder that we all have permission to be ourselves.*

(MORRIS, 2019)

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<sup>10</sup> He was a general manager till 2021.



*Blue Apple Theatre – The Tempest. Actors utter Shakespearean lines in their original form. They have the right to express themselves with stories that are hundreds of years old. Lawrie Morries as Caliban. Photo: Mike Hall, 2019.*

### **Moomsteatern: Disability as a topic? It is up to the audience**

Moomsteatern was founded in 1987 in Sweden, and since 2005, actors with disabilities have been regularly employed. In this theatre (as well as in the whole country) the issues of disability and segregation are not the main concern, as the inclusion of people with disabilities is at a high level.

This theatre does not need to look for easier pieces to stage due to the diversity of its actors. The dramaturgy ranges from physical and puppet productions, through scenarios created for the theatre, to classical dramas. In addition, it is necessary to add that there are also those in the ensemble who do not have major problems with speech.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *At the same time, for example Miranda in The Tempest by Shakespeare was played by Frida Schriver, an actress with DS. Down's syndrome is always connected with speech difficulties. It seems that speech difficulties are not a barrier for staging classical dramas.*



However, some social issues have previously appeared in the productions. In 2003, Moomsteatern created a production, *The Special Gospel*<sup>12</sup>, about two refugees, Josef and Maria, who gave birth to a son with Down's syndrome. The story refers to the story of Jesus as described in The New Testament:

*The struggle is between diversity and simplicity. The show praised Diversity. 45 artists from 17 different nations participated in the performance and came from all sorts of artistic genres – opera, rap, African dance, samba, ballet, poetry and much more.*<sup>13</sup>

This production was an exception, rather than reflecting the long-term dramaturgical direction of the theatre. For Moomsteatern, diversity (or disability) is not an issue, but a reality in which they live and therefore do not need to talk about. On the other hand, they do not want to influence their spectators with their own approach to disability. Per Törnquist, the former artistic director,<sup>14</sup> says:

*It is up to spectators. If they want to see a disability issue, they can see it. If not – they don't see it. I will not determine what they shall see.*

(TÖRNQUIST, 2020)

### **RambaZamba: No specific issues! Diverse theatre as an ultimate goal**<sup>15</sup>

Contrary to Per Törnquist's conciliatory approach, the opinion of the current artistic director of the RambaZamba theatre Jacob Höhne is uncompromising:

*Our actors have so much more to tell. It's not just about disability issues. I am not interested in discussing specific issues with people with disabilities, but to use their great artistic expression, their wonderful acting skills for theatre. I want to get away from the approach where, in the end, the production keeps returning to these people.*

(MÜLLER, 2017)

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12 Kjell Stjernholm, Jan Erik Sääf, Carin Bräck: *The Special Gospel. [Speciells evangelium]. A musical. Directed by Kjell Stjernholm. Moomsteatern Malmö, 2003.*

13 <https://moomsteatern.com/forestalling/speciells-evangelium-2003/> [accessed on Dec 18, 2020]

14 He was an artistic director till 2020.

15 I base my analysis of theatre's approaches on my article *Theatre of Diversity: Theatre RambaZamba in Berlin.* (VR-BKOVÁ, 2019a)

Despite the fact that Jacob Höhne does not want to discuss these topics, it is clear to him that the very presence of people with disabilities on the stage invites the audience to an interpretation that was not originally intended. At the same time, it should be emphasized that in RambaZamba Theatre such interpretations are rare because the theatre has existed for a long time and has its audience, which is slowly ceasing to perceive disability as an issue.

None of these three theatres proclaims disability to be a political issue. What is interesting is the differences in how they look at the same thing: all three theatres are aware that certain topics creep into the minds of the audience, no matter what the intention of the cast and crew might be. While Blue Apple sees this as an added value and a positive fact, Moomsteatern perceives it as neutral, and RambaZamba tenaciously resists it.

Resisting social issues is an important part of RambaZamba's approach. The aim of the theatre is to be considered a 'normal theatre'. To achieve this objective, RambaZamba's dramaturgy includes dramas and stories with very complicated topics: *Lulu* by Frank Wedekind, *Antigone* by Sofokles, or *The Robbers* by Friedrich Schiller. Compared to Blue Apple, whose shows are always more or less optimistic, RambaZamba loves the opposite: it chooses difficult topics and stages them in a very expressive way. Blood, disgusting visual scenes, and nudity are no longer taboo. They use theatrical tools many people consider inappropriate for actors with disabilities. The term 'disability' and even 'inclusion' should be, in Jacob Höhne's opinion, erased, because all people are different and we should no longer think about it:

*Inclusion is important but it is only a step along the way, at the end of which it has to be abolished again. (...) It is necessary to move as quickly as possible towards a diverse society where there is no need to label people in any special way. Where it is normal to have everyone in a theatre company, and not think about the fact that a person is from a family of immigrants, that another person has a disability, and so on. A diverse theatre – that is the ultimate goal.*

*(Müller, 2017)*

*RambaZamba: Blood, disgusting  
visual scenes, and nudity  
are no longer taboo. Antigone.  
Photo: Arno Declair, 2019*





*Pension Schöller.  
Photo: Sarien Visser, 2018.*



## **Teatr 21: Giving a voice to those who do not have one.**

### **Artistic message as a political message<sup>16</sup>**

Unlike the three theatres above, Teatr 21 skillfully utilizes the political potential of having actors with disabilities on the stage. Justyna Sobczyk, the artistic director, said:

*What I really want to fight for in the theatre, and what I care most about, is giving a voice to those who don't have it. For a long time, I thought this was not material for theatre, because it was too idealistic and maybe not too inspiring. (...) Critical theatre opens people's eyes, and I would like to give the audience more positive energy and inner strength through it.*

*(MORAWSKI, 2016:15)*

It is necessary to add that Teatr 21 does not insert social issues into its productions arbitrarily. Director Justyna Sobczyk works very sensitively with the ensemble and perceives the social problems not only of individual actors, but of society as a whole:

*Each performance is created at a specific moment of the ensemble's existence, but also at a different moment in the life of each of the actors, who are older year by year. Apart from all this, the socio-political context in Poland and in the world is also particularly important for the company, and for each individual participant.*

*(SOBCZYK, 2016:45)<sup>17</sup>*

The character of the performance is appealing, not agitating. It evokes critical thinking because it raises questions to which there are no clear answers. Consider this example:

In the production *The Falls*<sup>18</sup>, there are actors with Down's syndrome who want to have their own theatre building, but do not have the money to buy it. Then they receive the money and they can go to a country called Mongolia. Everything is inclusive here. Unfortunately, after a while they recognise the money is counterfeit – it is only

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<sup>16</sup> I base my analysis of this theatre's approaches on my article with the title Teatr 21: Theatre of Actors with Specific Abilities. (VRBKOVÁ, 2019b)

<sup>17</sup> The theatre began its activities in a school for young people (15–25 years old) with disabilities. Some of these young people have continued and nowadays they make up the majority of the ensemble. That is why the director knows each actor very well, and the theatre can grow together with the growth of individual actors.

<sup>18</sup> The Falls. [Upadki] Directed by Justyna Sobczyk. Teatr 21, Warsaw, 2015.

a toy for children. They do not want to have everything 'inclusive' and false, they want to live in reality. They try to borrow money from a bank, but it is obvious for them that they cannot show their faces. There is a funny scene where they cover their faces with their hands and run to the bank. Suddenly, there is a new opportunity: to change their appearance and get rid of Down's syndrome's visual characteristics forever. A young man with DS says: 'I want to be a superhero, but I have Down's syndrome.' Somebody argues: 'Can a person with Down's syndrome be a superhero?' And his answer is: 'No.' He slowly crosses the stage, reaching upstage, where his face is projected onto a big screen. During his walk, the face changes to that of a man without DS.

The question for the audience is: are we sure we are doing the best thing if we give people with learning disabilities 'completely inclusive treatment'? Do we allow these people to be a part of our real world, or do we still push them into a 'fairy tale world for people with otherness'? Is erasing differences the real solution, or would we miss these people?

The scripts of Teatr 21 are inseparable from the form of staging, and the theatrical message for the audience comes from the clash between them. The production *The Fall* is very spectacular, funny, with lots of music and dancing. It does not push the spectator to tears and regrets, but encourages critical thinking and provides an incredible artistic experience.

The need to stage social issues may also stem from the fact that this theatre (the only one of these four) is located in a country where communism and its exclusion of people with disabilities existed for a long time. From an artistic point of view, it is important to emphasize that portrayal of social issues is not the only aim of the theatre, but it is a natural consequence of artistic creation and investigation. As the dramaturgists Ewelina Godlewska and Justyna Lipko say:

*Theatre, as a public space par excellence, can become a locus of visibility and audibility for people with disabilities, who by the force of cultural beliefs and a specific configuration of space were previously pushed into a sphere of political silence and invisibility. What seems key here is, first of all, the right to recognize one's own voice as meaningful, the right to recognize one's speech as socially important, and, in consequence, being recognized as an entity capable of formulating an autonomous artistic message, which is at the same time a political message.*

(GODLEWSKA-BYLINIĄK and LIPKO-KONIECZNA, 2016:5)





*Teatr 21 – The Falls. A face projected onto a big screen slowly changes into the face of a man without DS.  
Photo: Marta Ankiersztejn, 2015.*





*Teatr 21 – The Falls. A country called Mongolia: people receive lots of money; unfortunately, it is counterfeit – it is only a toy for children. The production is very spectacular.  
Photo: Marta Ankiersztein, 2015.*

## **Acting (Together with Directing and Stage Design)**

There are some specific characteristics of people with disabilities which affect their way of acting. In response to this, direction and stage design can be influenced as well. As we mentioned earlier, such specifics may include:

- Atypical tension of the body
- Diversity of bodies and faces
- Bad memory, imperfect pronunciation, and slow speech (typical for actors with learning disabilities, especially Down's syndrome)
- Strange movements
- Slow reactions and difficulties with timing
- A different feeling for time and space

Each theatre copes with this otherness in its own way. Is it a challenge, an advantage, or is it invisible?

### **Blue Apple: Disability as a challenge**

Blue Apple is a good example of the first approach. Actors memorize long, difficult lines, and the mise-en-scène of large theatre halls with lots of actors requires discipline and the attention of each actor. Everything is staged according to the notion that actors with disabilities will be allowed to stay on the stage and tell stories. The actors have very good conditions for telling their stories – a big theatre, many light design possibilities, expensive period costumes, and spectacular sets. Their acting does not spring from inner experience to outer form, but vice versa: the content is gradually put into the form. From what I could witness during the last week of rehearsals before the premiere and during the shows, some of the actors make amazing progress and are eventually able to fill the stage with spontaneous emotions and distinctive acting. However, not all of them manage this, and so there are still moments with worse timing and scenes where the movements of the actors do not correspond with their emotions and the meaning of the scene. This remains a challenge for the future.

Although the directing does not focus on the specific characteristics of the actors, these sometimes influence the result. In addition to experienced actors with disabilities, Blue Apple engages less experienced performers with more serious disabilities. Crowd scenes often have a distinctive feel because we see people of very different shapes, voices, and heights – this diversity is much greater than in an ordinary theatre. This creates beautiful stage pictures and spreads a positive message about human life towards the audience



*Blue Apple Theatre – The Tempest.  
Light design possibilities, expensive  
period costumes, and a spectacular set.  
Photo: Mike Hall, 2019.*



## **Moomsteatern: Disability is not visible**

Moomsteatern produces many different plays directed by many directors, so it is not possible to speak about all of them. In this case, I chose the directing style of the 'directing duo' Nina Jemth and Pelle Öhlund,<sup>19</sup> because it represents a very special approach that cannot be found in the other three theatres.

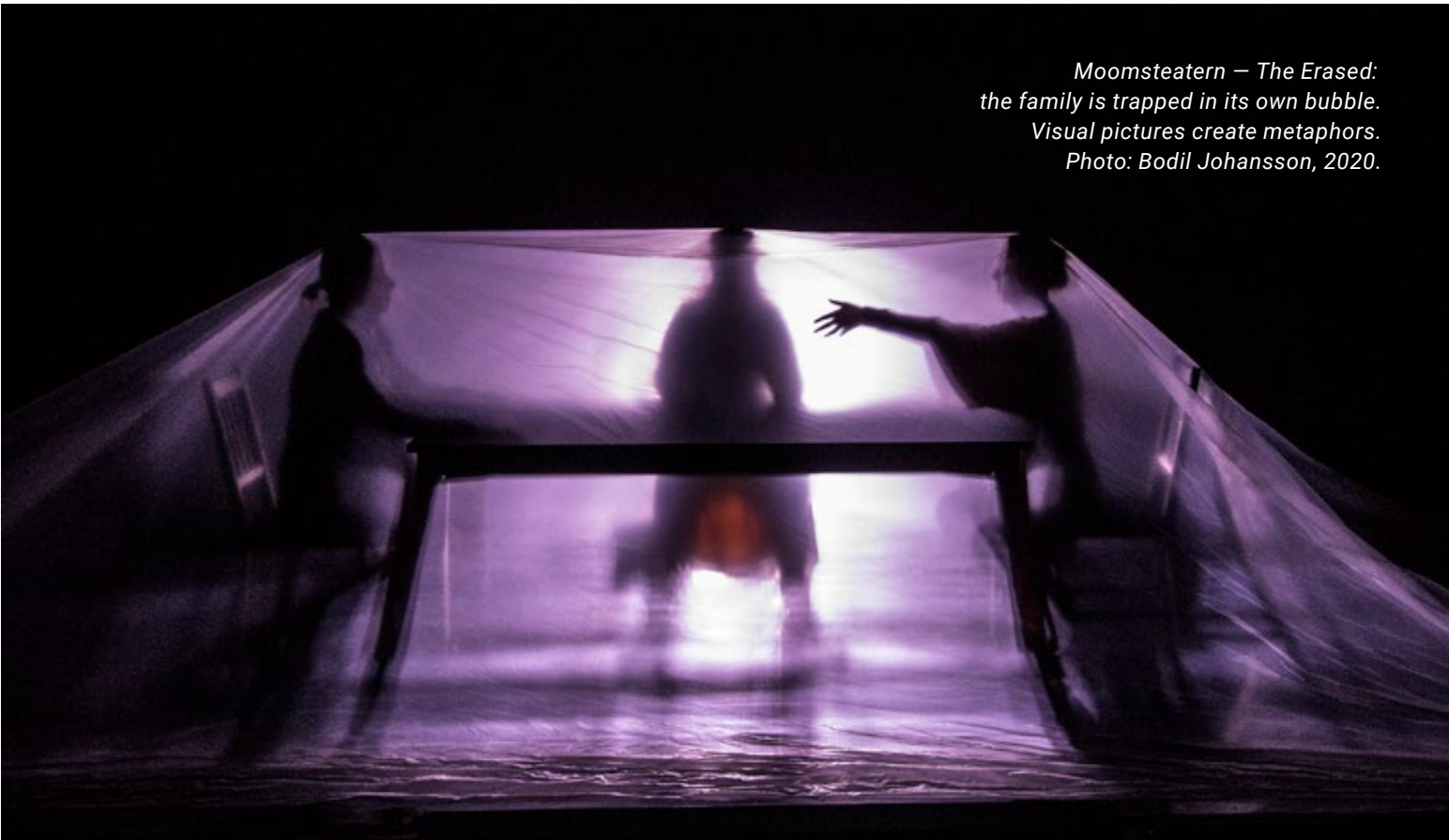
Watching Nina Jemth's and Pelle Öhlund's productions, one often does not recognise the piece as theatre with actors with disabilities. Rather than using the fact that some actors are different, they use many distinctive theatrical tools to secure good timing, meaningful acting, and a distinctive feel for their productions. Their otherness disappears, as they are disguised by greater stylisation. The majority of scenes do not require special acting talent; they work perfectly because of the directors' solutions. At the same time, it is necessary to add that the actors' movements are precisely rehearsed. The meaning of the scene is usually conveyed by a visual metaphor.

Take, for example, a scene from the production *The Erased*:<sup>20</sup> a family is sitting at the table – a father, a mother, a daughter. They do not move and, without any emotions, they keep repeating a simple dialogue about making coffee. The table and the characters are covered with giant shrink-wrap. This is a metaphor for an exhausted relationship; the people are trapped in their own bubble and cannot properly see the life around them.

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<sup>19</sup> Pelle Öhlund is also the new artistic director from November 2020.

<sup>20</sup> Nina Jemth and Pelle Öhlund: *The Erased*. Directed by Nina Jemth and Pelle Öhlund. Moomsteatern in Malmö, 2020.



*Moomsteatern – The Erased:  
the family is trapped in its own bubble.  
Visual pictures create metaphors.  
Photo: Bodil Johansson, 2020.*

*Moomsteatern – The Erased. The specific characteristics of the actors are overwhelmed by large-scale stylisation of set and movement. Photo: Bodil Johansson, 2020.*



The unique characteristics of the actors are not perceived as 'specifics springing from disabilities', but only as 'specifics'. Each actor can have some specifics no matter whether he has a disability or not. These specifics are sometimes well taken advantage of, sometimes not. The overall impression is created by other theatrical tools.

### **RambaZamba: See great artistic expression, no disability**

Let us remember Jacob Höhne's quote:

*(...) I am not interested in negotiating specific issues with people with disabilities, but to use their great artistic expression, their wonderful acting skills for theatre. (...)*

*(MÜLLER, 2017)*

Similar to Moomsteatern, RambaZamba considers the unique traits of the actors to be 'characteristics of the actors', not 'results of disabilities'. On the other hand, in contrast with Moomsteatern, they like to make these traits visible. For Jacob Höhne, diversity is something to be sought after by contemporary theatre. RambaZamba's productions are very expressive, with distinctive costumes, scenery, and makeup.

Let us show an example from the production of Schiller's *The Robbers*.<sup>21</sup> The robbers' gang led by Karl Moor is in ideological opposition to Franz Moor, Karl's brother. In this production, many members of the gang (including Karl) are played by actors with DS (Karl is played by Jonas Sippel). On the contrary, Franz is played by Pascal Kunz, an actor with autism. The contrast given by Schiller's drama is thus greatly underlined by the traits of the individual actors: (uncontrolled) emotionality versus cold logic, the need to break free from rules versus the ability to use the rules for one's own benefit, inability to hide emotions versus inability to feel them. In addition, as Gunnar Decker writes, *the gang of robbers enjoys its slowness in speech and its inefficiency*. (DECKER, 2017) It is typical for people with DS to have reduced muscle tension and, as a result, to usually be a little bit slower. This 'soft energy' is a big contrast with the increased tension in the body which is natural for Pascal Kunz.

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<sup>21</sup> Friedrich Schiller: *The Robbers*. [Die Räuber] Directed by Jacob Höhne. RambaZamba in Berlin, 2017.





*RambaZamba Theatre – The Robbers.  
Pascal Kunz as cool and calculating Franz  
Moor. Photo: Sarien Visser, 2017.*

RambaZamba sees these special characteristics of the actors as great acting tools. On the other hand, Jacob Höhne sometimes underestimates the necessity to make actors' lines shorter or simpler. In some performances, this causes imperfect pacing.

### **Teatr 21: Specifics as an advantage or Specific theatrical poetics thanks to specifics of actors**

Teatr 21's work with their actors' traits is similar to RambaZamba's approach, but at the same time, Teatr 21 is also aware of the limits of acting skills and does not ask the actors to do things they cannot do. Most actors in Teatr 21 have DS, which brings not only problems with pronunciation and learning long lines, but also a very specific feeling to the productions: as we said above, people with DS have lower muscle tension, which creates 'soft energy', slower and rounder moves. Thanks to this, the spectator themselves can also feel relaxed.

Teresa Foks and her acting serves as an example of an actress who is 'one of the most unique actors' on the stage, because her disability is quite serious. Let us see how Justyna Sobczyk describes Teresa Foks' acting:

*If we talk about the qualities of Teresa, they lie in the complexity of her performance. Teresa's presence on the stage is absolutely exceptional. Words (incomprehensible) flood into the space like a wave, and speech is always connected to the body. She is very soft, as if she were boneless.*

*(SOBCZYK and WIELGUS, 2017)*

Teresa Foks has DS, very poor eyesight, and even problems walking and moving because of this and her being overweight. She cannot communicate through words, but she likes to talk, and her speech is a bit like interesting sounds or music. In scenes with Teresa Foks, the spectator becomes aware of the nearness of theatre and ritual. It is never a dramatic situation. In Teresa's monologue she, and the audience with her, lose track of time and the audience begins to see what is on stage as something different and unique. The meaning of the words (which cannot be understood anyway) recedes into the background and instead, Teresa's physical presence and her voice come to the fore. This could be called 'musicalization' according to Lehmann's elements of post-dramatic theatre, as described in *Post-dramatic Theatre*. Musicalization happens when dramatic coherence is so relaxed that one's own auditory semiotics take over. (compare LEHMANN, 2007:103)

Teatr 21 can combine these specific characteristics of their actors in their pure form (as could be seen in the example of Teresa Foks' acting) with coherent scripts and well-built dramatic situations. The director Justyna Sobczyk alternates between scenes which are close to ritual and scenes with normal pacing. Some of the productions are performed only by actors with disabilities, which is not common. Sobczyk helps actors with their pacing by using a musician (without a disability) who makes music on a computer during the performance and can react to what is happening on the stage or the atmosphere in the auditorium, and is capable of manipulating the pace of the show. As a result, the performances have usually good pacing and at the same time, the specific traits of the actors are used: there is a space for their own theatrical feelings including a specific perception of time.

On the other hand, the search for new ways to use the actors' specifics is challenging in this case because it would be easy to stagnate by sticking with the methods which the theatre has already invented.

## Promotional Technique

There is another pressing question: how does the theatre advertise its work and how does it brand itself? This time, the relevance of disability for promotion and the emphasis on its advantages (or the absence of such emphasis) is of interest.

### **Blue Apple: Transform the lives of people with disabilities through high quality art**

Blue Apple proclaims its mission on their website as follows: *Through producing high quality theatre, dance, and film, we aim to challenge prejudice and transform the lives of people with a learning disability.*<sup>22</sup> Blue Apple's promotion is based especially on their role helping people with disabilities, so they emphasize encouraging performers on every opportunity. Blue Apple's Facebook page focuses on individual actors and the benefit of them being a member of this company.

As Richard Conlon explains, Blue Apple feels it is beneficial for both performers and spectators:

*What we want to do is make the world a better place by taking people who used to be ignored on the stage and give them their rights: the right to tell their story or even the right to be on stage. To try to make them members of society.*

(CONLON, 2019)

### **Moomsteatern: Challenge the performing arts. Disability is a nonissue**

Although the benefits for performers with disabilities are evident especially in Moomsteatern, the company does not feel the need to emphasize these benefits. Of all these theatres, equality in Moomsteatern is at the highest level, because the actors are regular employees of the theatre.<sup>23</sup> Rather than benefits for people with learning disabilities, Moomsteatern focuses on benefits for performers and spectators, who have a chance to change their thinking. On their website, it reads:

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<sup>22</sup> <http://blueappletheatre.com/our-mission-1> [Accessed on Dec 15, 2020].

<sup>23</sup> *Some of the other theatres pay their actors as well, but the actors do not have a status of an employee. They receive money for individual performances (Teatr 21) or as a form of social benefit (in RambaZamba, actors act at the theatre instead of working in special workshops for people with disabilities).*



*Moomsteatern produces stage art with actors who break the norm. We want you who visit our theatre in order to have an unique theatrical experience. We use the form of the theatre to challenge people's way of thinking and to create a dialogue. Our aim is to challenge the performing arts by creating theatre with actors of all kinds.*<sup>24</sup>

The approach of the theatre can be seen in an informal conversation which I had with Per Törnqvist about what name is better: 'actors with disabilities' or 'disabled actors'.<sup>25</sup> He ended the conversation with the words:

*When you're acting, the disability has no importance. So, therefore, it is a nonissue. An artist is an artist, period!*

(TÖRNQUIST, 2020)

### **RambaZamba: No disability!**

RambaZamba rejects any reference to the disability of its actors. Such information cannot be found anywhere, neither on their website nor on their posters or programs for their productions. Their approach is so evident that there is nothing to add.

### **Teatr 21: Social issues in dramaturgy, not in promotion**

Teatr 21 inconspicuously refers to Down's syndrome by its own name: Down's syndrome is caused by the tripling of the 21st chromosome.

Otherwise, this theatre does not emphasize the disability of its actors on promotional materials and does not even talk about the benefits for the actors. At the same time, however, their dramaturgical line focuses largely on appealing political theatre with social issues.

Teatr 21's approach contrasts with the Blue Apple's: Teatr 21 often discusses social issues but they do not speak about them in their promotional materials. Blue Apple does not deal with these issues in their dramaturgy, but they are a part of their promotional strategy.

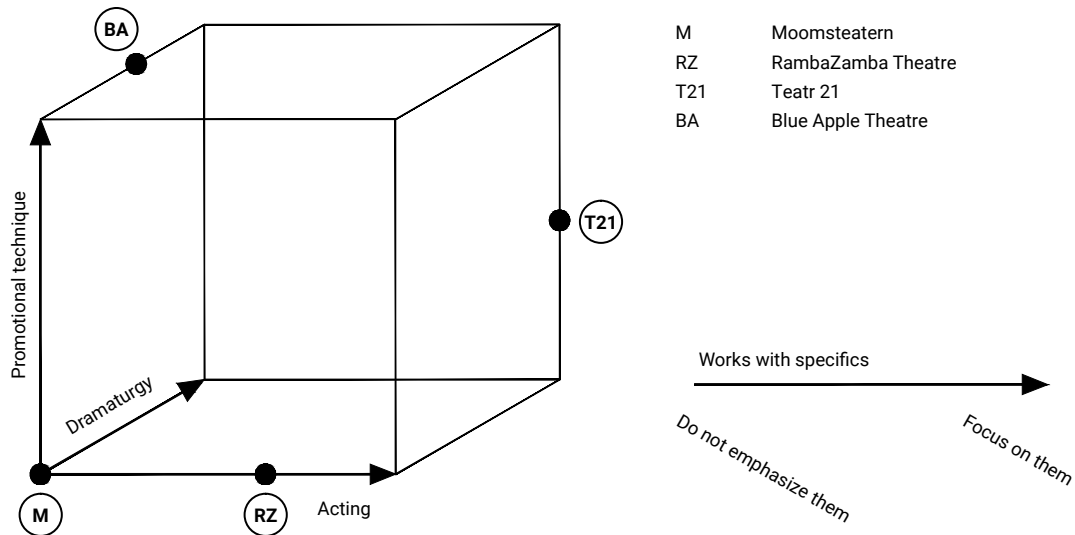
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<sup>24</sup> <https://moomsteatern.com/en/about-moomsteatern/> [Accessed on Oct 15, 2020].

<sup>25</sup> Note that Moomsteatern avoids the word 'disability' on its website. It states: 'actors who are breaking the norm' or 'actors of all kinds'.

## Actor-Specific Theatre?

Let us look at a graph where the theatres' work with the specifics of the actors are projected: three dimensions are apparent – dramaturgy, acting, and promotional technique.



It is obvious that these theatres' approaches vary. In spite of this fact, all four theatres are still mainly considered theatres that work with actors with disabilities, and as such they are categorised differently: theatre with actors with disabilities, 'disability art', 'disability theatre' or 'disabled theatre'<sup>26</sup>; in the Czech environment, for example, 'integration theatre', 'specific theatre', 'actor-specific theatre'<sup>27</sup>... However, is the fact that a theatre works with actors of all kinds really the most important feature to be used when describing it?

26 When discussing these terms, one problem is evident – it exposes 'disability'. The term itself is negative; it focuses on what the actors cannot do. However, the central theme is not 'dis' (what is not possible), but diversity as a chance (what is possible).

27 Such shift in understanding (see note above) is the reason why in the Czech theatrical environment other names were created: theatre in specific groups, specific theatre, theatre actor-specific. The word 'disability' is changed to 'specificity', which describes the fact, that the actors are different, and this difference can bring another value and require another theatre tools, better. 'Theatre in specific groups', 'specific theatre' are terms used at Theatre Academy of Performing Arts in Prague. They were invented by Vladimír Novák and Kateřina Šplíchalová. (NOVÁK – ŠPLÍCHALOVÁ, 2014). 'Actor-specific theatre' is my own term and it refers to the creative theatrical process. The term is analogous to the well-known term 'site-specific theatre'. Site-specific theatre is inspired by, often specific, space. Creative theatre poetics is based on its specifics. The same is valid for actor-specific theatre. More in my PhD thesis. (VRBKOVÁ, 2020:49)

The name 'actor-specific theatre' probably fits Teatr 21 perfectly, as it works with the specific traits of the actors and uses them as building blocks for the overall artistic impression they give. Blue Apple focuses on the topics of disability in their promotional materials, but often do not work with the specific traits of the actors in their creative process; however, diversity plays a big role in the end. Directors Nina Jemth and Pelle Öhlund at Moomsteatern create productions in which disability is nearly invisible. It is also not a theme of Moomsteatern's dramaturgy or promotional technique. Finally, RambaZamba heavily bases its theatre's poetics on their actors' traits, but they reject disability promotion or dramaturgy. They would probably also refuse the name 'actor-specific theatre', because in their opinion all actors should be considered unique, and one should not separate actors with otherness and come up with a special name for them.

Considering this outcome, it is necessary to admit that 'actor-specific theatre' is not accurate for describing all these theatres. At the same time, there is probably no correct and fitting name for all these theatres for one simple reason: these theatres are very different, and it would not be correct to lump them together.

This statement can be contradicted by the fact that we have found shared characteristics: in all productions, the unique traits of the actors play at least some role, no matter whether the directors plan this or not, and even if they did not want those traits to be noticed at all. As Piotr Morawski said in an interview with Justyna Sobczyk about Teatr 21, *physicality itself is political*, with Justyna Sobczyk adding: *you cannot run away from it, you cannot not notice it.* (MORAWSKI, 2016:15)

The question is whether these points of contact make 'one kind of theatre' which should share a name. My answer is: 'No!' I would argue that the overall impression a theatre gives is not always based on the traits of the actors. There are sometimes other theatrical tools which are much more significant. A production is not called 'musical' just because there is one song, so a production should not be called 'actor-specific' because there are atypical actors. Moreover, if a theatre does not want to be pigeon-holed because of the traits of their actors, this should be respected. However, it will most likely take time for the audience and society to accept this fact.





*'I love!'*  
Václav Šarközy, the actor  
of the Aldente Theatre  
Photo: Jiří Kottas, 2021.





# Actor-Specific Theatre in the Czech Republic

In the Czech Republic, theatre activities labeled 'actor-specific' are often connected to the academic environment. In 1992, the Studio of Drama Education for the Deaf was established by Zoja Mikotová at the Theatre Faculty of JAMU in Brno, a company which still exists. The Theatre Faculty of AMU in Prague (hereinafter referred to as DAMU) established a five-year *Integration program* in 1997, led by professor Jana Pilátová. After these efforts were interrupted for several years, Vladimír Novák, a student of Jana Pilátová, picked up her idea. Together with Kateřina Šplíchalová and professor Miroslav Klíma, he created a specialised company for *Theatre in Special Needs Groups* at the Department of Alternative and Puppet Theatre. The students studying at this department have no disabilities, they just want to do professional work with actors having unique traits. DAMU is also connected to two theatres of this type – Vzhůru nohama [Upside Down Theatre] and Jiné jeviště [Other Stage Theatre]. The Aldente Theatre, which is also the subject of this research project, is linked to JAMU.

Besides these three theatres, in the Czech Republic there are two more theatres which work on a high level with actors with learning disabilities: Divadlo Klauniky [The Clown Theatre] in Brno and Ujeto [The 'Gone' Theatre] in Prague.

The following chart reflects these theatres' accessibility, background, and production possibilities – this chart is a part of my PhD thesis<sup>28</sup> (VRBKOVÁ, 2020). The goal was not to compare the theatres or measure and evaluate them, but to show the range over which Czech theatres work. Some of them work with actors who have been segregated from society for many years (people from institutions). Some work with those who have been living their lives almost on their own, out in the world with everyone else. This alone makes the theatres incommensurable. Each has a different mission and values.

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28 The chart was updated and approved by each of the companies on May 1, 2022.



## An overview of actor-specific theatres in the Czech Republic (working with actors with learning disabilities)

(Situation as of May 1st, 2022)

	Who are the actors with otherness?
<b>Vzhůru nohama (Upside Down Theatre)</b>	People with learning disabilities from the social institution Zahrada, which provides social services in Kladno; since 2018 also some from Koniklec, which provides social services in Suchomasty
<b>Jiné jeviště (Other Stage)</b>	People who work in a sheltered workshop in Neratov
<b>Ujeto ('Gone' Theatre)</b>	People with learning disabilities, who live more or less independently in Prague
<b>Divadlo Klauniky (Clown Theatre)</b>	People with learning disabilities working in a sheltered workshop which is connected with a theatre (Pension Lipůvka)
<b>Divadlo Aldente (Aldente Theatre)</b>	Young and adolescent actors with DS or another type of disability. Most of them are still pupils
	Are the other members (performers, directors, stage designers, etc.) – those without disabilities – theatre professionals?
<b>Vzhůru nohama</b>	Yes
<b>Jiné jeviště</b>	Yes
<b>Ujeto</b>	Partly
<b>Divadlo Klauniky</b>	Partly
<b>Divadlo Aldente</b>	Yes
	For how many years has the theatre been working with people with learning disabilities?
<b>Vzhůru nohama</b>	21
<b>Jiné jeviště</b>	11
<b>Ujeto</b>	14
<b>Divadlo Klauniky</b>	18
<b>Divadlo Aldente</b>	8

	<b>The theatre's goal</b>
<b>Vzhůru nohama</b>	Theatre as an opportunity for aesthetic communication. The process is more important than the outcome. Seeking adaptation and integration into society for people with disabilities through art
<b>Jiné jeviště</b>	'Laboratory' of being together on the stage
<b>Ujeto</b>	An effort to have maximum stability and a professional level of performance
<b>Divadlo Klauniky</b>	Integration of people with disabilities into society, a combination of theatre – a drama course for adolescents without disabilities – plus a sheltered workshop
<b>Divadlo Aldente</b>	Finding a specific overall artistic mission and being included in the regular network of professional theatres
	<b>Dramaturgical choices</b>
<b>Vzhůru nohama</b>	Devised theatre (including free adaptations of famous stories and dramas)
<b>Jiné jeviště</b>	Devised theatre
<b>Ujeto</b>	Work with written texts, which were made for the theatre
<b>Divadlo Klauniky</b>	Devised theatre
<b>Divadlo Aldente</b>	Until 2019 only devised theatre, since 2019 also stage drama
	<b>Regular productions? How many shows per year?</b>
<b>Vzhůru nohama</b>	No. Circa 10–15 shows per year.
<b>Jiné jeviště</b>	No. Circa 1–5 shows per year.
<b>Ujeto</b>	Yes, circa 20–30 shows per year.
<b>Divadlo Klauniky</b>	Not in Brno, but by touring, yes (circa 20 shows per year before the Covid situation).
<b>Divadlo Aldente</b>	Yes, more than 30 shows per year.

	<b>Do the artists without disabilities get a fee?</b>
<b>Vzhůru nohama</b>	Yes, but they are paid from DAMU's research fund
<b>Jiné jeviště</b>	For creating a production yes, for the shows no
<b>Ujeto</b>	The guest artists yes, the internal ones only for creating a new production (based on the theatre's current financial situation)
<b>Divadlo Klauniky</b>	Yes
<b>Divadlo Aldente</b>	Yes
	<b>Do the actors with disabilities get a fee?</b>
<b>Vzhůru nohama</b>	Yes, if there are no external financial resources, then the director pays them on his own
<b>Jiné jeviště</b>	No, but occasionally they get various kinds of bonuses
<b>Ujeto</b>	Yes
<b>Divadlo Klauniky</b>	They are being paid as members of the sheltered workspace institution
<b>Divadlo Aldente</b>	Yes
	<b>Does the company have its own theatre?</b>
<b>Vzhůru nohama</b>	Partly – an alternative venue in Rynholec, without blackout or a heating system, with a minimum of technical options, a yurt
<b>Jiné jeviště</b>	No
<b>Ujeto</b>	No, but since 2010 they perform as a guest company in Theatre Kampa.
<b>Divadlo Klauniky</b>	Yes
<b>Divadlo Aldente</b>	No. They perform regularly as guests in Theatre Barka and Leitnerova Club.
	<b>Number of premieres per year</b>
<b>Vzhůru nohama</b>	On average, one
<b>Jiné jeviště</b>	On average, one
<b>Ujeto</b>	On average, one
<b>Divadlo Klauniky</b>	In the first twelve years only one production was created, now it is circa one per year
<b>Divadlo Aldente</b>	One or two



	Theatre reviews
Vzhůru nohama	No, coverage in the media yes
Jiné jeviště	No, coverage in the media yes
Ujeto	No, coverage in the media yes
Divadlo Klauniky	No, coverage in the media yes
Divadlo Aldente	Yes, but not much



*'When you are an actor, you have to do something not to feel ashamed. You have to play your role.'*  
 Martin Polišenský, the actor of the Aldente Theatre  
 Photo: Jiří Kottas, 2021.





# Ready for Research

In the part called *Introduction to the Topic* we described the basic characteristics of people with learning disabilities, introduced various perspectives on this topic, and various options for theatre work. We have looked at several theatres in the Czech Republic and abroad and thus the door to our own research was opened.

There are strange sounds behind this door – we have no idea what we can expect... We are excited and full of hope and dedication. Come with us!







**A View from  
the Inside:**

***A Journey of  
an Actor with  
Down's Syndrome  
to Cognisant  
Artistic Creation***







# On the Journey to Cognisant Artistic Creation

## Our Journey

In the previous chapter we described various attitudes to theatre work with actors with disabilities, eventually various ways of working with their otherness. We were facing the same question with the Aldente Theatre company.

Let us say, to start off with, that our main goal always was, is, and will always be to create **high-quality art**.<sup>29</sup> At the beginning, between 2014 and 2018, there was only one possible way: **'DS as an advantage'**. In practise, this meant that **the whole artistic task of shaping productions was almost exclusively in hands of professional artists without DS** – primarily the director, who had to create stage action to show the originality and interest of the acting of actors with DS, but also give actors without disabilities the space to inject drama and pacing into dramatic situations. This approach was viable, but still had its limits. For example, the subject matter of such productions was confined almost exclusively to authorial projects and, moreover, after a certain period of time, the theatrical methods available started to get repeated and seemed to stop being productive.

We prefer to move forward with every show so as to not get stuck on one idea until the theatrical poetics is exhausted. We try to **teach our actors with DS to artistically shape their acting**. Here we got to the point of **'DS as a challenge'**. At the beginning, the task for our actors seems to be unreachable, but generally they figure it out in the end. Of course, we never let them do anything that they are not ready for yet, and which would lower the artistic level of a theatre production, thus put also the actors themselves in a bad light.

It might seem like the last path we described above, **'DS as a ghost'**, has been removed from our consideration. This is not quite the case. Sometimes it is added into a production spontaneously, as an artistic idea which comes up at the spur of the moment. We do not consider making our actors' disabilities invisible to be a foolproof

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<sup>29</sup> *That does not mean that our work is not beneficial for our actors with DS, or that we have given up on our work improving their lives offstage. Just the contrary; if people with DS can have a meaningful and quality job, and it is not just something to occupy their time, then they feel useful and society appreciates them as well. That naturally helps people with DS to be accepted by society.*

way to help our artistic results, nor, on the other hand, something that would inevitably diminish artistic quality or discredit the actors.

It must be mentioned that in the early stages of a new production, there is rarely a determination to take only the path of 'DS as an advantage' or 'DS as a challenge'. Rather, difficult moments appear naturally due to the actors' characteristics (very slow speech and others), and we then have to find solutions. Very often, we are able to convert a disability into an advantage, meaning that we use this characteristic for an artistic purpose, but it is not always like this. Sometimes we can eliminate an obstacle through practice, or eliminate it by employing relevant theatrical tools. We will give examples of both of these paths from the three productions put together during the three years of our research project. Almost without exception, every unique trait of an actor with DS has both advantages and disadvantages at the same time – it depends on one's viewpoint and the way a theatre tends to work. The following chart presents this:

Characteristic	Disadvantage	Advantage/solution
Strong, barely controlled emotions, spontaneousness	Limited ability for regulating one's performance	Authentic acting performance, presence on the stage 'here and now'
Memory challenge	Difficulty with learning texts	The memory is bonded to emotions, so when the text connects with emotions, the actor understands this and the memory is activated too
Lower muscle tension	Worse pronunciation, slower movement	Different pronunciation and different movement as a theatrical poetics
A different look	An absence of the kind of 'beauty' dictated by fashion magazines	A specific theatrical poetics
Different perception of time	Troubles maintaining a production's pacing	Pacing can be evoked externally by the director or a co-actor without a disability
Limited ability for self-reflection	It is more difficult for these actors to shape their performances	An absence of destructive self-control, so more spontaneity is present

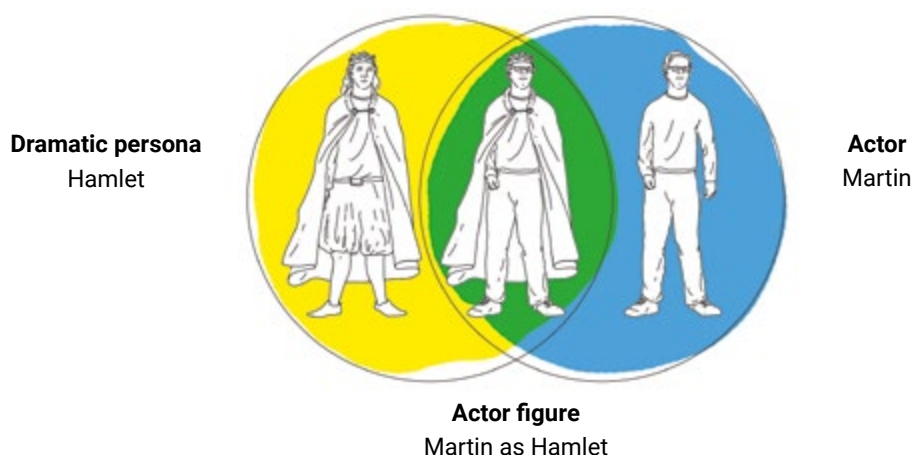
The journey to a 'cognisant artistic creation' is not straightforward and requires not only a considerable theatre experience, but also certain mental maturity and intellectual grasping of theatrical principles. In the following chapter we will introduce the secrets of this complicated process.

## Creating a Character

As we saw earlier, some of the typical characteristics of people with DS can be made into an advantage for theatre. People with DS often seem to have a natural tendency towards acting. This is indirectly proved by the fact that there is a high percentage of actors with DS in theatres employing actors with learning disabilities.<sup>30</sup>

At the same time, we have to admit that these actors are also limited in some ways as compared to other actors. The difference lies not only in pronunciation, but also in the ability to keep to the necessary pace, to grasp both the role and the dramatic situation and stay in them. The reason for these limits is that actors with DS are often captured in the present and too concerned with their own emotions. In the beginning, it is difficult for an actor with DS to distinguish between **what is reality and fiction** (just as it is for a child actor without a disability). It is also a question of understanding the difference between the role and oneself, – for the spectator – between the role and the actor on stage. Even adults without disabilities can confuse the two, for instance conflating an actor who plays a doctor on TV with a real one, and writing letters to them asking for professional medical advice.

The moment when an actor understands this distinction arrives at a different time for each actor. Some of our actors start out understanding that they are playing a role, but then, in certain situations, they get so deeply into the character that they stay in it even after leaving the stage, or vice versa: sometimes actors' own emotions are so strong that they break the character and express their own needs at that very moment. We will now explain how to surpass these hurdles by following the scheme of the Czech teatrologist Otakar Zich as detailed in his (ZICH, 2018):



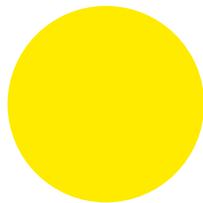
<sup>30</sup> Circa 4 % of the population are people with learning disabilities, and circa 0,1 % have DS. This means that of all people with learning disabilities, circa 2 % have DS. In theatre companies, however, the proportion is higher than one to fifty.



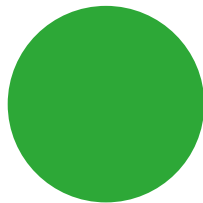
**A dramatic persona** is a character described in the script of a drama. **An actor figure** is then the specific result of casting a particular actor in that role, as that dramatic persona. Thus there exists only one dramatic persona 'Hamlet', but many actor figures of Hamlet. From the perspective of teatrology, every actor on the stage creates an actor figure, because he has a specific appearance, he moves a specific way, he has a specific voice... Due to the differences in these, each actor figure of Hamlet is unique.

Right now, let us consider an actor figure so successful that the actor has created a '**distinctive actor figure**', which is, in fact, a work of art. It is not an easy achievement. It is something which can occur when the actor surpasses both himself and the script's dramatic persona. But at the same time, the actor figure contains parts of the actor himself and of the dramatic persona. If we think of the dramatic persona as yellow and the actor as blue, the actor figure will be a shade of green. According to this scheme:

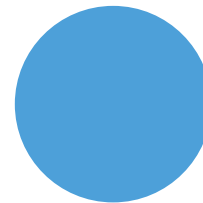
### Autonomous actor figure



**Dramatic persona**  
Hamlet



**Actor figure**  
Martin as Hamlet



**Actor**  
Martin

The creation of the distinctive actor figure is not always achieved because the actor is not always able to leave behind both the dramatic persona and himself and, at the same time, use both to create something new. If the process is not successful, the result will be one of the following:

## Reproduction

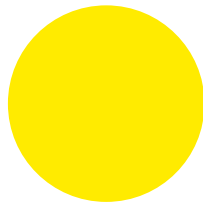
**The actor mechanically quotes the text** or just mechanically fulfills the director's instructions. There is no creation of an actor figure, only **a reproduction of the text.**<sup>31</sup>

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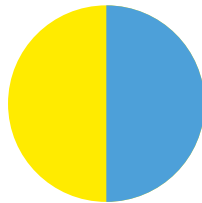
<sup>31</sup> We began with Zich's separation, but we have left out his explanation. Zich considered an actor to be an artist of reproduction.

Because no characterisation was created, the audience sees the actor on the stage just as he is, but hears the dramatic persona's text. This can be explained in our scheme as a combination of the dramatic persona and the actor (yellow and blue) where nothing new is being made (and the colours appear next to each other in blotches, unblended).

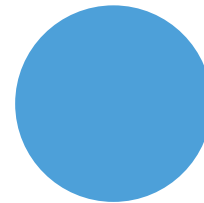
### Reproduction



**Dramatic persona**  
Hamlet



**Actor figure**  
Martin as Hamlet



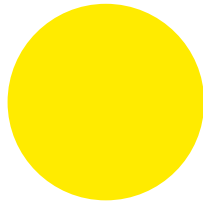
**Actor**  
Martin

### Self-Performance

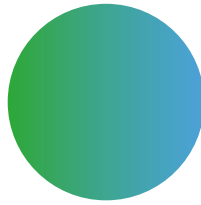
The actor stays himself even when performing a role. There are two ways this can happen:

1. The actor is not able to stay in his role the whole time, but keeps breaking the character, speaks to his friends in the audience, or prioritises his own needs at the moment (now I want to sing a song, I do not want to dance etc.).
2. The actor figure is basically almost identical with the actor himself, either because of the casting or the actor's interpretation. In other words, if the actor is cast for a role too close to his own personality, the differences between him and the role can hardly be noticed (this is typical for non-professional theatres), or the actor's personality is so strong that all of his roles are more or less copies of himself (something known to occur even in the professional sphere). In our scheme, we can see that the actor figure is almost blue, with only a bit of the dramatic persona and a tinge of green.

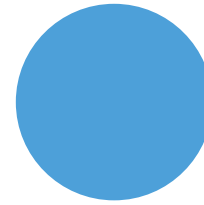
## 'To perform yourself'



**Dramatic persona**  
Hamlet



**Actor figure**  
Martin as Hamlet



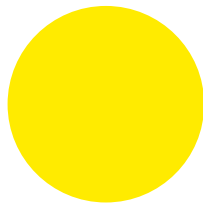
**Actor**  
Martin

## Losing Oneself

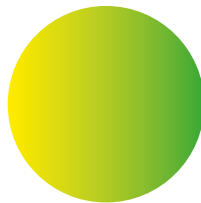
The actor takes his character so seriously that he stays in the role even when no longer on stage. He is depressed because of what his character feels or what he has done on stage. It might seem that this happens only to actors with learning disabilities, for whom it is difficult to separate fiction from reality. But we know that also many actors without disabilities have trouble with this,<sup>32</sup> as do many spectators. They may be unable to separate reality from fiction and might cry for a week because of the death of a favorite character on stage, in a movie, or perhaps more often, in a TV series.

We can mark this with mainly yellow in our scheme (the dramatic persona's overriding influence), plus just a tinge of green.

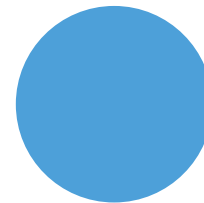
## 'To lose yourself'



**Dramatic persona**  
Hamlet



**Actor figure**  
Martin as Hamlet



**Actor**  
Martin

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<sup>32</sup> This case might be also caused by the acting technique of Stanislavski, which uses the 'emotional memory': it is an ability of remembering emotions in specific moments of own life (for example a relative's death), to be able to use this emotion on the stage later. Stanislavski's student Michael Chekhov has modified the technique and turned out from the emotional memory, because of the psychological stress of the actors while interpreting it. Source: (LINDOVSKÁ, 2012).



# The Three Levels of Acting

Any actor wishing to gain real understanding of how to play a role without falling into any of the above-mentioned traps will have to pass two milestones along the way. The first one is the **capacity for spontaneous action** in a dramatic stage situation (**self-presentation** – presenting oneself as one is) and then **developing these actions and purposefully handling one's own actions on stage**: meaning the presentation of one's own actions, which for now is still not playing a role, but simply acting. If these two milestones are not reached, there is a risk that mechanics and inauthenticity will creep onto the stage, and the actors will not have enough space for a true **inner** understanding of theatre.

We can observe three phases of acting work, corresponding to three levels of inner perception of acting creation:

## **1st phase: acting of spontaneous action (self-presentation – not acting)**

Spontaneous reaction to situations caused by someone else, for example by a professional actor without a disability. The goal is to maintain stage presence without any interruption.

## **2nd phase: acting of a personality (presentation)**

This phase deals with one's conscious impact on the audience, i.e. the awareness that one can influence the situation on stage, still by being themselves, not being the character. From here one can learn to shape one's actions artistically, e.g. by working with dynamics.

## **3rd phase: playing a role (representation – acting)**

To play the role of someone else. Here the key is the ability to stay in the role without unwittingly breaking it, unless it is not the actor's own artistic intention.

It should be noted here that a higher phase on this scale does not necessarily equate to better acting. Even a professional actor without disabilities will work at all three levels at different times according to which one is needed. The first two phases can be found in various professional performances or happenings: if, for example, a performer is closed inside a glass cube for 24 hours and does everything he normally would, this is self-presentation without any intentional acting or stylisation (phase 1). If he covers himself with a color and then moves around on a big white canvas to paint a picture, this is a presentation of his behavior – acting on purpose

(phase 2). In typical theatres we can also find respected actors who do not really create an actor figure (phase 3), but straddle the border between acting a personality and playing a role (phases 2 and 3). Essentially, the actor figure does not completely escape the personality of the actor himself. This has occurred with the Czech actors Boleslav Polívka, Arnošt Goldflam, Simona Stašová, Jiřina Bohdalová, and others; examples from further afield are for example Rowan Atkinson or Johnny Depp. Generally, actors have a strong personality or a unique timbre of voice (something shared by all the above-named Czech actors), which then becomes a basic element of their performance.

For actors with learning disabilities, the challenge is to understand these differences and thereby achieve better self-control on stage. Reaching a higher level means a wider range of **acting options**, and also **stimulates cognitive abilities and improves the actors' will**. At the same time, if an actor is not mature enough for a higher level, it is not necessary to insist, and we can successfully employ the presentation of spontaneous action or the acting of a personality in our productions.





The actors of the Aldente Theatre  
Photo: Veronika Bartoňová, 2021.





# The System of Workshops

During our three years of research, we organised weekly workshops at which we worked on developing the acting skills of the actors with DS. In fact, many of our exercises were identical to those done at acting schools. For actors with DS we chose those exercises which do not depend on remembering large sections of text, or a long attention span, or the ability to react quickly. By making the right decisions and focusing on one goal for each exercise (for example, the ability to vary one's dynamics) we achieved good results.

Now we will present examples of the exercises which helped to develop specific aspects of acting. One of them is also available as a video. This list is not exhaustive, but it should explain the principles which one can work with in order to raise these actors' level.

## Stimulation of Phase 1 – Spontaneous Acting

### Goals:

- an authentic presence on stage
- infusion of continuous stage energy

These goals will remain valid for all phases, but in the first phase they are the only requirements.

### Tools:

- imitating
- being in a situation created by someone else

## Example:

### A Trip

*Description:* An etude (story) performed by everyone, including the lecturer. The lecturer is the one who sets up the dramatic situation and the mood (ideally using musical instruments): we are on a trip, the sun is shining, we feel good, but suddenly it starts to rain, so we run back home, avoiding branches, jumping over streams, stepping into a swamp, slowly drowning, lying down, feeling the earth's heaviness, turning into soil... Slowly, we discover our own bodies again, first moving only our fingers on one hand, then the fingers on the other hand, then the whole right hand, then the left. Gradually we awaken the whole body.

*Principles:* The actors imitate someone else, entering a stage situation which has been created by the lecturer. The actors' task is to 'absorb' the mood and maintain tension for the whole duration of the exercise.

### Throwing Energy

*Description:* The actors stand in a circle. One of them holds an imaginary balloon — 'energy'. The balloon can be heavy or light, can freely jump around or run away, can shake with the actor, can get bigger or smaller. It is an uncontrollable source of energy. The first actor takes the balloon, briefly 'interacts' with it, then passes it to another actor. Every other actor has to accept the energy as given to him, and can then transform it (for example making it heavier in their hands).

*Principles:* This exercise develops the ability to maintain onstage energy, whilst showing the actor the difference between not having energy (i.e. not being on the stage) and having it and working with it. This exercise also requires the ability to perceive another person (since the energy has to be accepted just as someone else gives it to you). At the same time, it offers the opportunity for using one's own creativity, linking into phase 2.



## Stimulation of Phase 2 – Acting of a Personality

### Goals:

- developing the ability to act independently on stage (the actor is aware of his acting's influence on the audience and co-actors, and is able to regulate his acting).
- acquisition of at least minimal ability to shape one's acting, e.g. by using dynamics

These goals are also valid in phase 3. In general, achieving them is very difficult and even many professional actors cannot handle them perfectly. Here we describe an ideal model, a theoretical goal.

### Tools:

- exercises for changing moods
- exercises for changing dynamics

### Examples:

#### Hi!

*Description:* The lecturer says 'Hi!' in various ways – using various emotions, tempos, volumes... The others repeat it. Then someone can switch places with the lecturer.

*Principles:* Developing the ability to change moods. It is good to show contrasting emotions, one right after the other. Once the actor has mastered the imitation of a given emotion, he can try saying the same word himself with a different emotion.

#### Cookies<sup>33</sup>

*Description:* A nursery rhyme, meaning a short dramatic situation, is periodically repeated. The text is the following:

Everyone:	Who stole the cookies and took them off the table?
Person 1:	Who, me?

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<sup>33</sup> This game already existed, we did not create it.

Everyone: Yeah, you!  
Person 1: Not me!  
Everyone: Then who?  
Person 1: 'Person 2!' (i.e. the name of another person who is involved in the exercise)  
Everyone: Who stole the cookies and took them off the table?  
Person 2: Who, me?  
Etc.

*Principles:* The regular rhythm helps the actors to maintain tension. This game allows the expression of mood, and the exercise is good especially for switching dynamics: for a while everything can be whispered, then screamed – the actors have to perceive the others around them.

*Note:* even though it is difficult to remember the text and not to scramble it, our actors had – paradoxically – no greater problems than actors (both children and adults) without disabilities. The rhythm and emotions probably helped them to remember the text better. It is worth mentioning that actors with DS are much more authentic with their emotions than those without disabilities.

## Stimulation of Phase 3 – Acting a Role

### Goals:

- the ability to separate oneself from a dramatic persona and an actor figure
- the capability for self-reflection

### Tools:

- work on separating oneself from a character – for example through performing contradictory tasks (the character completely different from myself)
- reflection on my own performance

## A Chair

*Description:* Person 1 sits on a chair. Person 2 comes to them and the following dialogue takes place:

Person 2: That's my chair!  
Person 1: What?  
Person 2: (more insistently) That's my chair!  
Person 1: What?  
Person 2: (most intensely) That's my chair!  
Person 1: All right then! (lets person 2 sit down)

*Principles:* The dramatic situation is simple. The actors have to act on their own, and even have to raise the tension and bring the situation to a climax. Sometimes they are forced to act against their natural tendencies or their mood at the time (a typical quote: 'But I don't want to yell at him!'). With this exercise we have not entered phase 3 yet, but we are preparing for it.

## Reflection of Movement Improvisations

*Description:* At the beginning, we characterise three pairs of contrasting styles of movement, as explained in the pictures:



Round vs. Angular movement



Slow vs. Fast movement  
(a snail vs. a ferret)



Intended vs. Spontaneous movement  
(man vs. washing machine)<sup>34</sup>

Later, we practice various kinds of movements. Once we have mastered one, we change the task: we practice improvisation (a solo, a pair, or a group) and when finished, we discuss the movements we have made.

*Principles:* The goal of this exercise is to teach the actors the capacity for self-reflection. Thanks to the pictures, they can slowly start to think about what they have done on stage and how they felt while doing it. Besides asking about their movements (in the above-mentioned styles), we also ask:

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<sup>34</sup> Sometimes we move as if every movement was thought through ahead; other times we mostly leave our body to 'move by itself' and the brain is 'switched off'. The picture of the man describes the first option – it is a person with a head and mind, which leads the body. The second picture shows clothes in a washing machine – the clothes has no right to decide about the moves, something from outside moves with it – for example the washing machine.



1. Did you dance together as a group, or was everyone on their own? Did you have similar energy or contrasting energy?
2. How did you work within the space assigned for that movement? Did you fill the whole space, or were you only in a small part of it? Or did you change things up?
3. If you danced in pairs, who was leading? Can you even say that one person was leading, or did the joint dance arise spontaneously?
4. Were you comfortable dancing, or were there times when you didn't know what to do next?

*Example:* a sample of the exercise can be viewed [here](#).

## Summary

Over the three years of the project, our actors greatly improved their abilities. Not only did improve the quality of the individual exercises, but also did the level of concentration and perception of their co-actors. Both were more intense and lasted longer. At the beginning, we thought the last-mentioned exercise (reflection on improvised movements) was far too ambitious, since at that time the actors were almost totally incapable of self-reflection. With the aid of well-chosen questions and pictures, we brought about at least some degree of self-reflection in each of our actors, even though their acting abilities were on varying levels.<sup>35</sup>

As time passed, we could also see that these acting workshops were not the most effective way to help our actors; it was the work done on specific new productions. As we will see in the following chapters, every new production requires further progress from the actors. At the same time, we can see that in each of the productions, acting tasks appear which can be assigned to each of the above-named phases of acting work. This is because each phase has its own place in the world of theatre. Let us now go on this new adventure.

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<sup>35</sup> *This experience raises the question of whether it would be possible to educate actors with DS not only for acting (practically), but also dramaturgically (theoretically): can people with DS understand the principles of theatre work and talk about them? We would say yes, but that could be the topic of another research project entirely.*

*Movement improvisation*  
*Photo: Jiří Kottas, 2020.*









# The Production 1

## Vladimír Holan: *Cathy and Bajaja*

### Annotation:

*Well, books they remain.*

*The good ones destroy all evil.*

*Vladimír Holan: Bajaja (HOLAN, 1962)*<sup>36</sup>

### About love of a daughter, a country, verses...

Vladimír Holan is known as a famous Czech author of poetry. But only a few people know that he is an author of (the only one) collection devoted to children. Holan wrote the collection for his daughter Cathy, who had Down's syndrome.

A symbolic title of his collection *Bajaja* metaphorically refers to a character, who had to be silent, similarly like Vladimír Holan himself, who wrote the collection at a time period, when he was forbidden to be published. Otherwise, Holan tended to write complicated meditational and reflexive poetry and the complexity of his poetical language also mirrors in *Bajaja*. Despite the difficult life situation, *Bajaja* is full of poetic stories and it is full of hope. Curious Cathy meets nature, four seasons, poets and especially verses.

### Production team:

Script and direction:	<i>Jitka Vrbková</i>
Music:	<i>Jan Kyncl, Pavel Čadek</i>
Stage design:	<i>Zuzana Hejtmánková</i>
Costumes:	<i>Tereza Vojtěšková</i>

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<sup>36</sup> This and all following quotations of Holan's *Bajaja* come from this source.

**Cast:**

Bajaja:	<i>Martin Kříž</i>
Vladimír Holan:	<i>Václav Dvořák</i>
Cathy (the biggest):	<i>Barbora Remišová</i>
Cathy (smaller):	<i>Jana Kučerová</i>
Cathy (the smallest):	<i>Klára Vrbková</i>
Neruda, Dobrovský, Beer and others:	<i>Lukáš Suchánek</i>
Flute and others:	<i>Jan Kyncl</i>
Violoncello and others:	<i>Pavel Čadek</i>
Christmas tree and others:	<i>Iveta Kocifajová</i>

**Premiere:** September 14, 2019, Leitnerova Club, Brno

**About the production on the theatre's website:**

<https://www.divadloaldente.cz/en/inscenace/cathy-and-bajaja/>

**Trailer of the production:** <https://youtu.be/ebLRFFow5hs>



Divadlo  
**ALDENTE**

divadelní  
fakulta  
brno

# Vladimír Holan: **Káťa a Bajaja**

***Příběh o lásce k dceři, k vlasti, k veršům...  
ze sbírky Vladimíra Holana „Bajaja“***

Režie a scénář: Jitka Vrbková

Hudba: Jan Kyncl, Pavel Čadek

Hrají: Václav Dvořák, Martin Kříž, Jana Kučerová,  
Barbora Remišová, Lukáš Suchánek, Klára Vrbková

Sobota 14. září v 10:00

Neděle 15. září v 10:00

Neděle 13. října v 10:00

Neděle 10. listopadu v 10:00

Klub Leitnerova, Leitnerova 2 Brno  
(kousek od zastávky Hybešova)

**[www.divadloaldente.cz](http://www.divadloaldente.cz)**

Činnost Divadla Aldente je finančně podporována Statutárním městem Brnem.



# Dramaturgy

## Vladimír Holan: an Author for Children?

Vladimír Holan (1905–1980) was one of the most prominent Czech poets and writers of the 20th century. His life went through several stages as the important events of the 20th century unfolded. In 1945 he left the Catholic Church, joined the Communist Party, and supported the Communist revolution of 1948. Shortly after that, he got disgusted by the new situation and returned to the Catholic Church. His membership in the Communist Party was canceled.

Then came the difficult 1950s, a time of political show-trials and fear about who or what might cost a person his freedom or life. Holan was prohibited from publishing and could survive only by translating, something which greatly damaged his family's income. There was only one option: to write a book for children, for which censorship would be less of a problem. For Holan this was obviously a counter-task.

This is how, in 1955, *Bajaja* was written – a collection of poems where the child's naivety and the main character Cathy's curiosity both engage with the writer's deep melancholy. Formally, we can find refined poetic expression next to typically childish expression in one and the same verse. We also get answers, with existential overlap, to Cathy's naive questions (for example when she asks what Jan Neruda, meaning his statue, will do when it is raining):

*Little girl, being a poet,  
is as when a statue stands,  
in the rain and hailstorm,  
and yet still loves...*

*(Draft translation Adrian Hundhausen)*

In the whole collection, there is an obvious struggle of the author with himself – on one hand there is his need to express his own feelings and complicated poetic style. On the other hand there is the 'assignment': it has to be for children. As the interview with Josef Hiršal and Ladislav Fikar shows, they considered Holan's *Bajaja* to be a bit of a curiosity (HIRŠAL and GRÖGEROVÁ, 1993: 126). They gave evidence of this by referring to a considerable number of complicated turns of phrase, transitions, neologisms, or historicisms that children could never understand. And if children cannot understand it, can it be understood by those with Down's syndrome? Let's leave this question open for now.

## Holan: (Un)Happy Father of a Daughter with Down's Syndrome?

We do not know much about Holan's daughter Cathy, after whom he named the main character of his work. This might be due to the fact that she had Down's syndrome and it was a social taboo at that time; those children were simply 'put aside'. So when anyone mentions Holan's daughter, they rarely mention Down's syndrome. In the collection itself are a few clues, but they are not noticeable to the average reader – Cathy is a princess with a 'cute little flat nose' who does not know how to ride a footbike, cannot count...

*That's Vladimír's tragedy. He takes it as a curse!* says Ladislav Fikar about Cathy in an interview with Josef Hiršal (HIRŠAL and GRÖGEROVÁ, 1993: 126). But could Holan possibly be writing such beautiful verses for his daughter if she was a curse for him? And is it a coincidence that he completely stopped writing after her death in 1977?

What he really thought of his daughter we will probably never know. But we know for sure that his situation at the time was very difficult. It is likely that he was very fond of her, if his collection *Bajaja* is anything to go by.

Cathy in *Bajaja* is a very curious and smart child. It would be a mistake to think that this was just wishful thinking on the part of the poet. Children with Down's syndrome can be curious and clever, even if it is in their own special way.

*Dad, you were saying, a while ago:  
stop counting and read!*

says Cathy in the collection *Bajaja*. Yes, counting, like many other things, is difficult for children with DS, but they can love books and the rest of the world as easily as anybody else. And if a child with DS is somebody not much understood by the people around them (and not only because of imperfect pronunciation), the censored poet Holan is in the very same situation: he would like to speak to the world, but cannot be heard – cannot publish. Princ Bajaja expresses this all metaphorically: in the famous fairytale by Božena Němcová, Bajaja is a prince who becomes mute for a while. Holan's Bajaja is a prince with a castle full of books, but who loses that castle and has to turn himself into books...

Holan – Bajaja – Cathy: a trio of people who do not understand the world, but love it and admire books and poets, because they can also look at the world from a different perspective.







*In quick sequence, the setting changes in both color and sound: in these pictures are seen the mysterious haunted forest, romantic ducks on the Vltava river, a loud steamboat, and a storm by the statue of Jan Neruda. Photos: Jiří Kottas, 2019.*



## Holan's Bajaja and the Aldente Theatre

It is obvious that a book where the main character is a girl with Down's syndrome is just begging to be staged by the Aldente Theater. But how difficult is a text which has no action, not much of a story, and yet contains complicated phrases, unknown words, and existential melancholic thoughts?

I understand the concerns of literary theorists about whether children can understand such a text (PIORECKÝ, 2001), but I do not share them. These concerns come from an assumption that children perceive the text the same way as adults – primarily seeking meaning rationally. Kids usually perceive the text **intuitively, emotionally**. It is even clearer for child actors with DS. Logical connections often escape them, even in normal life. So they have no problem in a situation where they do not see these logical connections at all – where they do not even understand some words or turns of phrase. If we are concerned whether the text is good for children, then let us see whether it provides 'sources for emotions'.

A theatre professional's answer is: yes! the text is very visual, containing many scenes which are easy to follow and primarily create some mood – meaning that they are very theatrical. In quick sequence, the setting keeps changing: a forest and a mysterious castle, a huge statue, a storm, a river with ducks, Christmas, spring, summer, autumn, winter, a celebration and a cake with candles, a whistling steamboat, an amusement park... Colors change (a dark forest, a glowing amusement park...) along with the accompanying sounds (a loud amusement park, a screaming river – in contrast to it a quiet statue, quiet books...). For Holan each of the seasons has some sound – spring buzzes, summer screams, autumn gets quiet, winter is muted.

**Holan's Bajaja has a suitable topic and the necessary emotions.**

**Nevertheless, a number of things remain to be considered:**

1. The emotions and visual quality of the text are obvious, but how about its lack of storytelling?
2. It is a nice idea to cast a five-year-old girl with DS for the role of five-year-old Cathy. But is this realistic and practical?
3. The text is solid, the verses as well. Is it possible to ask adolescent actors with DS to perform them?
4. Is it possible to combine, on stage, Holan's deep melancholy with Cathy's childish happiness and unconditional love?

Rehearsing *Bajaja* was an adventurous search for answers to these and many other questions.

## A Text without Narration and a Script with a Story

### Part one: stage action as a dramatizing element

Each of Holan's scenes evokes emotions rather than telling a story. It is possible to simply flow from one mood to another while reading poetry, but a play, especially one for children, requires stories, situations, tipping points... Our task was to **emphasise each of Holan's scenes and highlight the storytelling or situation contained therein**. We also decided to keep to Holan's text and not to touch the verses.<sup>37</sup>

The only way to influence the script,<sup>38</sup> is by creating **new dramatic situations on stage**. By this we mean situations which are not explicit in the text, but are built up on the stage by the way the actors say their lines, their movements, the music etc.

#### Let us give a few examples:

1. In the original text we find this: Holan passes a piece of bread to Cathy, and while Cathy eats he tells her about Christmas. So the situation is not dramatic. Then, on the stage, it looks like this: it is not just Cathy who eats the bread, but all of the actors. They stand downstage, stare dreamily into the distance, eat the bread, and listen to the verses about Christmas. Upon the verse '*Christmas, Cathy, what a time!*' they suddenly realise that Christmas is coming and they have no Christmas tree. This slow, lyric scene then finishes with a panic run for the tree. A situation with a turning point was created.
2. The alternation of the four seasons does not give rise to any conflict in the original text. Basically, there are just four lyric poems. In the show this process is framed by the story of a parent (father) who is always behind: by the time the Christmas tree is finally up (as described above), spring has come and the tree has to be put away again. The most difficult part is when summer comes: there is Cathy lying on a blanket (actually three of her representatives) along with the rest of the actors. Holan – the father – keeps running to collect sunglasses, drinks, a parasol, head covers, etc. When he finally lies down on the blanket to relax, someone calls: '*Autumn is coming!*' and Holan begins putting away all the

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<sup>37</sup> Some poems were skipped, some were put in a different order, and a short prologue was added at the beginning of the production. Sometimes the actors divide the lines between each other. The verses themselves, however, were left unchanged.

<sup>38</sup> In our interpretation, the script contains not only the poems, but everything that happens on the stage and influences the meaning.



summer props. A dramatic situation is thus put between the completely non-dramatic lines, without adding any new words.

3. Sometimes the poem is dramatised by simply splitting the verses between multiple characters. For example, in the original Holan's text is:

*As a boy I got a book,  
what was written, it is in there,  
but these four verses,  
I still remember:*

*'Odolen and Ivan from the mill,  
that is a nice pair,  
this morning they caught in a river,  
in a net two whites!'*

*(Draft translation Adrian Hundhausen)*

Holan does not say the whole text in the show. He begins with the first verse: *'As a boy I got a book.'* Then comes Cathy's curious question: *'What was written in it?'*, and then Bajaja's response *'It is in there!'*. From Bajaja's look it is obvious that he assumes that Holan does not remember the books at all. Holan defends himself: *'But these four verses, I still remember!'* Everybody stares at him, waiting to see whether he will really remember it or not. He says the verses with great difficulty. Sometimes Cathy helps him, which upsets him because he wants to prove that he does remember the verses. A comic scene is thereby created from a nostalgic memory.

In this way we created a dramatic script from a lyric text. It was important to make sure that the made-up scenes were clearly visible on the stage as well, and because the text could not help the audience, it was up to the actors. Even during the individual shows, it sometimes happened that some of the situations suddenly became vague and lost their point – from time to time, the meaning of each of the characters had to be explained again.

### **Part two: two paths to the script**

In the previous chapter, we mentioned what we wanted to achieve while creating the script. We were looking for the right stage situations within Holan's verses. I myself, as the script's author and the production's director at the same time, searched in two ways: with my professional colleagues who had no disability, and with my own children.

### *Children as an inspiration for the script*

*Cathy and Bajaja* is a production for children, so there is no better way to put it together than by working with children. At home I could work with the person portraying Cathy, five-year-old Klárka with DS, and also with three-year-old Vojta without a disability. With Klárka we read the text many times. She liked it a lot, even though she did not understand it. I could see which passages she could relate herself to, and which not. Together with these two children, I began performing the poetry at home. We brought various props and acted out situations which came to our minds in the moment. When one of the situations was more interesting for the kids, we stayed there and tried to develop it more. Thus it can be said that this part of the script was directly created by children.

Klárka also became a valuable source of inspiration by just being herself. For example, she loves celebrations, birthdays, and presents, and it does not have to be her own birthday. So when someone comes to congratulate her on her birthday and gives her a present, very often she congratulates them too and gives the present back. In the scene where Cathy celebrates her fifth birthday, the characters not only congratulate Cathy, but they congratulate each other and even some of the spectators. This creates an authentic feeling of happiness within the celebration, an idea that came from my daughter.

### *Adults with no disability and their added meanings*

It is typical for the Aldente Theatre that the opinions, desires, and needs of each individual member are given equal importance. This does not just mean that those with no disabilities accept the opinions of actors with DS, but also that our artistic work is not altogether compliant with the needs and feelings of people with DS; we also take in the opinions of other actors and professionals in the rehearsal process. Maybe it is similar to Holan's piece, in which the world of adults is crossed with the emotional world of children. That is why this work suits our theatre so well.

In addition to brainstorming with my own children, I spent time with the musician Jan Kyncl and the actor Václav Dvořák. We sat down with the text and kept thinking about how to stage various situations, about the musical concept, and about the scenography. The script then contained not only Klárka's life experiences, but also input from us, three adults. All three of us are parents of three or four children, which added the motif of parental challenges to the script.

This trouble is already noticeable in the description of the four seasons alternating, when the father is in a hurry and cannot relax. Similarly, an ordinary double-verse, '*Cathy, put the wellies on / go to look at the little ducks,*' became a dramatic situation. Just when Holan is putting the wellies on Cathy, he suddenly remembers that there are

three interpreters of Cathy in our production, so he quickly runs to get another pair, and then a third pair. The situation was sometimes provoked by Klárka herself, who took the wellies off while Holan was helping the others to put them on. The child audience laughs a lot at this point, because they can see that the actor interpreting Holan does not have the situation under control. They enjoy watching to see whether Holan will be successful with the wellies or not.

After the scene with the wellies comes another one where we got inspiration from Klárka. The music here was chosen so that only the adult spectator, and an educated one at that, can see the double meaning. Klárka adores the ballet, especially *Swan Lake*. In Holan's text, Cathy goes to feed the ducks by the Vltava river. In the show, Smetana's famous symphonic movement *Vltava [The Moldau]* is playing at first, then is replaced by Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*. Feeding the ducks in wellies slowly turns into swans dancing. Then, there are no longer any ducks swimming on the Vltava, but swans, which Holan feeds until he becomes a swan himself.

There is much more musical humour in the show. At times I used music to highlight a kind of patriotism which is just barely present in the original text. Besides Smetana's *The Moldau* from the cycle *My Fatherland*, one also hears the Czech and Slovak anthems. When Jan Neruda's statue appears in front of Cathy (also a patriotic symbol, since Neruda is one of the most famous Czech poets of the 19th century), everyone is mesmerised, until after a while discreet dialogue begins:

<i>Violoncellist:</i>	<i>What are we playing?</i>
<i>Flute player:</i>	<i>'C.'</i>
<i>Violoncellist:</i>	<i>'C?' (plays the note C)</i>
<i>Flute player:</i>	<i>No, sorry, it is 'D'.</i>
<i>Violoncellist:</i>	<i>(plays the note D)</i>
<i>Everyone is singing:</i>	<i>Where my home is, where my home is. [This is the beginning of the Czech anthem. The word play in Czech is between 'de' for the note 'd' and the real word in the anthem, 'kde' = 'where'.]</i>

*(HOLAN and VRBKOVÁ, 2019)*



Actors standing by Jan Neruda's statue (Lukáš Suchánek) singing the Czech national anthem.  
Photo: Mila Vašíčková, 2019.



The wordplay with 'kde' and 'de' is clear only to an adult spectator. Another surprise comes shortly afterwards. The Czech anthem *Where My Home Is* turns into the musical motif of the Slovak anthem. Holan's verses are added: 'Look Cathy, a storm is coming, it is light just a bit!'. An adult spectator will associate this text with the Slovak anthem's text, which begins with the words: 'Lightning over the Tatras, thunder loudly sounds...'

These plays on words and music are not very important for understanding the whole piece, but rather a spice added to the meal for the adult spectator. The adult and child spectators thus leave the show with different experiences. For kids, one of the most striking things is the Christmas tree being played by an actress who wears an umbrella on her head. Atop her is a Christmas decoration. For adults, there are the plays on words and music, and the themes of parenthood, Down's syndrome, or existentialism.

## **Klárka and an Authentic Being (Sometimes Even) on the Stage**

*I envy the actors with DS. I envy them mainly for their authenticity and ability not to judge themselves or others. And what inspires me the most is that when they do theatre, nothing else exists for them. Only the present moment and their love for what they are doing. And that is how it should be.*

*Do you know why actors with DS are so good on the stage? Because they are absolutely honest in life...*

*(REMIŠOVÁ, 2019)*

This is the view of Barbora Remišová, an actress at the Municipal Theatre in Brno, who met actors with DS for the first time during production of *Bajaja*. Speaking about actors with DS, it is obvious that the essence of their specific characteristics is represented by child actors (with DS), as children have not yet had their natural tendencies modified by their surroundings. Many of these typical characteristics are visible in five-year-old Klárka, who played Cathy. It is also necessary to add that every person with DS is unique, and so what works with one does not necessarily work with another one.

As I mentioned earlier, Klárka was there when the script was assembled. I read Holan's text through with her a hundred times, and I tested various situations with her even before we had any official rehearsal. It can fairly be said that she was the one who

was best prepared for rehearsals. I was aware that bringing such a small child with DS onto the stage was a big risk, but felt confident because I had tested how the dramatic situations worked with Klárka at home. My confidence was misplaced. What Klárka had done enthusiastically at home, she no longer wanted to do at rehearsal. She felt pressure and blocked herself. She felt that mum was not playing with her anymore because Klárka wanted it, but because mum and the other people around her wanted it.

After a few rehearsals, it turned out that Klárka did not feel secure enough and we would not be able to get her to perform on the stage. This was true even though all of the situations had been created in such a way that she was not the one directing the action, but merely a participant. We came to the conclusion that she could not be on the stage alone, so I asked the professional actress Barbora Remišová to join in; she does not only have a talent for acting, but also has a childish visual appearance and, importantly, a very sensitive/perceptive approach towards her acting colleagues. In addition to her, I also invited two more eight-year-old girls with DS. At this point it was not yet decided who would interpret Cathy. All four of them? Or just two? Would we replace Klárka with an older girl?

Rehearsal was difficult, especially for Barbora Remišová. Not only was it her first meeting with actors with DS, but she also had to deal with herself, her own role, and her three alter egos (i.e. the three little girls). Very soon, however, she figured it all out:

*Before I started to rehearse the production with the actors with Down's syndrome, I thought that they had to be 'specially cherished' – somehow in some specific way. And you know what? Not at all! They are kids like any other... Pardon that I say kids, but I call everyone whom I like that... even adults.*

*(REMIŠOVÁ, 2019)*

A solution became very clear at one particular rehearsal: there would be three Cathys. The adult Barbora, a middle one (eight-year-old Janicka, who does exactly what she is asked to), and in some parts the smallest one (Klárka, who was slowly finding her comfort zone). The third girl was very good but was not compatible with the rest of the team; she tended to create things which were disturbing and very often she wanted to interact with Klárka, who was not happy about it (for example, she hugged her so much that Klárka fell onto the floor etc.).

In the end the three Cathys, of different sizes, make for a very good directorial-dramaturgical concept. Not only is it possible to split them up and thereby express more meanings (e.g. the smallest Cathy lies ill in her father's arms, while the middle



Cathy dreams about wandering around with Bajaja, and the oldest Cathy observes all of it). It helped us to express Holan's final melancholic thought: that every child will grow up one day. In the finale, suddenly the adult Cathy leaves with Bajaja as if he was her fiance and abandons her father, who is left with his books and his memories of the small Cathy. This idea came to us due to Klárka's unwillingness to cooperate, something which is typical for our theatre but also a paradox: overcoming difficulties brings new artistic solutions.



*Three Cathys of different sizes  
(from left: Jana Kučerová, Klára  
Vrbková, Barbora Remišová).  
Photo: Jiří Kottas, 2019.*

Although we had won at least a partial victory at the above-mentioned rehearsal, the scene with Klárka not cooperating repeated itself frequently. Often she simply lay on the floor the whole rehearsal and did not join in. In the best case, her chosen place of rest was on the stage. But at home she perfectly performed everything that was rehearsed. She played recordings from the rehearsals, brought all the props, and instead of a rotating construction she used a swivel chair since we had done this at some rehearsals. It was interesting that she acted not only her own parts, but everything. She even rotated the chair when it was the moment for a technician to do it. Later, it turned out that Klárka knew better than anyone else exactly where all the props were supposed to be and when the construction on the stage was supposed to turn.



*Klárka plays outside  
as a Christmas tree.  
Photo: Martin Čadek, 2022.*



*Klárka repeats, at home, the scene  
of the tearing up of the book, with an  
armchair being used instead of the  
rotating set construction.  
Photo: Jitka Vrbková, 2022.*



*The Christmas tree in the show.  
Photo: Mila Vašíčková, 2019.*



*Cathys tearing up a book on the stage.  
Photo: Mila Vašíčková, 2019.*





One particular situation from rehearsals demonstrated her clear perception; somebody forgot a line, and no one knew what was supposed to happen next. While we were looking for the script, Klárka said: *'Horse!'* Because we know that she likes horses, we tried to calm her down, saying that we would go to see the horses sometime, and then kept looking. Klárka yelled again, with more intensity: *'Horse!'* Again we tried to calm her down, saying that we would get her a picture of a horse. Then someone finally found the script, and it turned out that the forgotten line was supposed to be: *'But when you spot a life horse in the ring.'* This is a typical example of times when 'a disability' is on the side of the people supposedly with no disabilities, even if they do not realise it.

One of the main reasons we had to keep working with Klárka through all this trouble was her uncommon **stage presence**, and especially her beautiful movements. Practically everything Klárka does on the stage catches the spectator's attention every time.





*Klárka and her elegant movements.  
First photo: Mila Vašíčková, 2019.  
Other photos: Jiří Kottas, 2019.*

***Iveta Kocifajová, actress and lecturer, speaks about working with Klárka:***

*Klárka is an insatiable observer. Very often, she just watches what others do. And it does not matter if we are performing or just rehearsing. For example, she hides behind the set or in a portal, or she walks onto the stage in front of the actors. At moments, she has her own specific stage reality. She is still in her role and knows which scene will come next. She notices the audience's presence. She just does not have the need to do what the director or her colleagues want. Klárka just likes to observe, then suddenly she stands up and does something spectacular, winning the hearts of everybody, and then she disappears again to continue observing. Personally, I think that as she grows older, Klárka will be in better control of the border between observing and acting. For a couple of years, she will be mostly observing and learning from others so that this can eventually happen.*

*I remember when a classmate of mine refused to draw lines between three points in order to make a triangle because it was too easy. It was obvious that he could do it, so when he refused, it was clear that he was refusing precisely because someone was telling him to do it. Klárka refuses to perform when asked, when someone wants it right now. She has done it before, and she knows very well what she is being asked to do. But right now it is just much more interesting to observe what others are doing. And maybe it is even more interesting when she herself is the missing element that everybody needs. How will they solve this? How do they talk? How do they move? She collects all of these details and absorbs them and performs when it is not needed. And then a miracle happens. No one expects anything from Klárka, and suddenly she performs the whole piece on the stage together with the others. It is because she feels like it at that moment, and there is no pressure. Sometimes it is difficult. It is always necessary to take into account her absence. If the theatrical form of the production allows it, it's a win-win.*

*(KOCIFAJOVÁ, 2021)*

This production allowed for this and counted on it from the beginning. Two of the Cathys follow the script, and the third one creates the 'here and now' effect. She brings the show alive, and on occasions makes it unclear to the actors and the audience how the show will continue. A mistake does not always mean a mistake, as we can demonstrate in this picture:

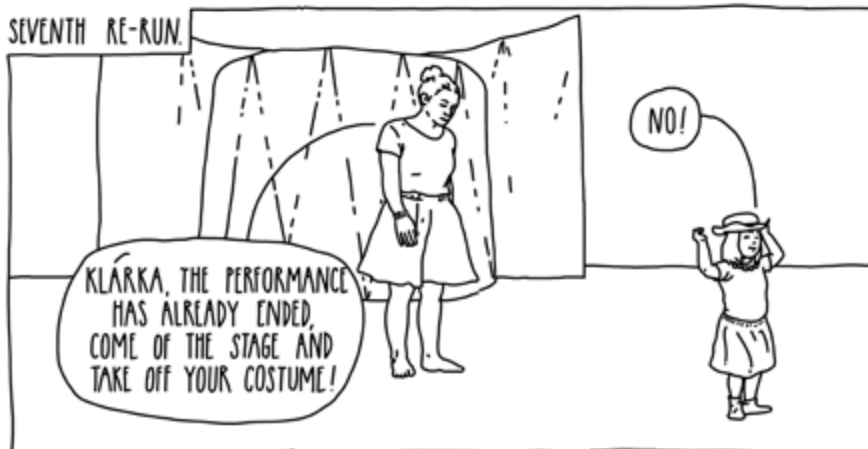
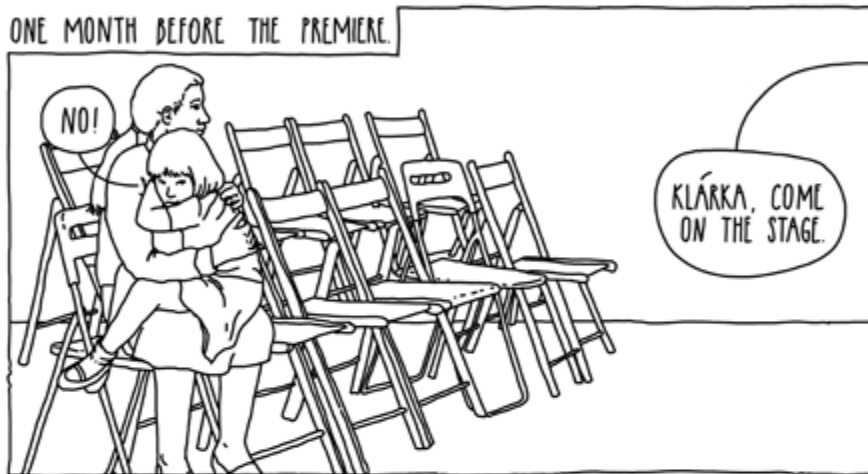




This looks like a very dramatic situation where everyone is involved. The problem is that Klárka's escape was not in the script at all. Yet all the actors were able to work with it as if it were planned.

The following comics clearly expressed Klárka's love for the theatre, but also her need to show defiance. Klárka is a typical representative of the first phase of acting (spontaneous acting), which we discussed in the chapter Three Levels of Acting. More than acting, this could be called authentic being. Sometimes this authentic being also appears on the stage.

# KLÁRKA AND THE STAGE



## Being in a Role and Learning Lines for the First Time

Involving child actors with DS was not the only challenge in this production. Martin Kříž is a seventeen-year-old actor with DS and he played Bajaja. This was his first time having a set role and reciting written lines.

Up to this point, the Aldente Theatre had experience only with original productions wherein actors with DS work together with professional actors who have no disabilities. In effect, the professional actors move the story along and create dramatic situations. Then, actors with DS can be spontaneous on the stage without having to say any exact lines. Or sometimes, they do not have to say anything at all, because their colleagues will somehow work the situation out. Actors with DS were always on the stage only as themselves. They rarely had a role, and if they had one, it was a role written for them, copying what they would do on the stage naturally.

At first we were afraid of the **number of lines**, but that turned out to be a small problem. Martin wanted to keep repeating the text all the time, something which he did not only at home with his relatives, but also every day with the director over the phone. He wanted to repeat his lines, even though he knew them perfectly.

The problem was somewhere else: Bajaja was supposed to appear and disappear at various places in the script, and these entrances and exits were key to maintaining dramatic tension. But as things turned out, when Martin had to leave the stage and then enter again, he had lost his connection with what was happening in the script. He was not able to 'switch on' and 'switch off' his presence on the stage. Before this, he had always been on the stage the whole time, so there could be, for example, just one motivational game whereby he gained energy and the show flowed right through to its end.

Another problem was the **absence of a stage partner**. The actors with DS were used to acting together with a professional actor without a disability who was their antagonist or partner, i.e. someone who is in a direct conflict with them or puts an arm around their shoulder and communicates a mood or emotion which can be worked out with no problem. But now, there was Martin as Bajaja, completely alone, in a poetic text where the dramatic situation and the characters' motivations are not so tangible.

And before we will have a look at the smaller problems, let us introduce one more actor from the production, Lukáš Suchánek. Lukáš was not originally supposed to perform in *Bajaja*, but he attended summer rehearsals. At first, he just watched, and then he started to repeat individual words and act out the situations... One day, I (as the director) told him to bring his chair from the imaginary auditorium and put it onto the stage. We rehearsed the whole show in this way. Without having any role, Lukáš was on the stage



and involved himself as much as he felt like. We modified his ideas a bit, and found a role for him on the stage: Lukáš would be one of the musicians, playing on an empty beer bottle. In some moments, he would create a small role, for example, Jan Neruda's statue, abbe Dobrovský, a drunk lifeguard, etc. Lukáš is a non-speaking actor with a special receptivity to the atmosphere on the stage. **Being a spectator involved him authentically enough to make him into an actor**, onto whom it is worth putting the spotlight.

Both Martin and Lukáš needed the same thing, even though they are different personalities and actors: **continuous acting** – to be on the stage the whole time, in the action, and a **stage partner**. We decided to give them both. The script was modified so they could be on the stage the whole time, and for every situation we gave them stage partners. Since the text was poetry, the partner was mostly an actor who was just there to make sure that his colleague with DS would 'catch' the right emotion or energy – for example, by happily dancing. The partner kept watching the movement of his colleague with DS on the stage. We tried to look for possible conflicts, thus creating opportunities to make the partner into an antagonist. Thanks to this, we found a slight connection between Holan (Václav Dvořák, professional actor without DS) and Bajaja. In fact, Bajaja is somehow Holan's alter ego. It was good for him to be looking for moments when his alter ego interrupts lines, gives hints, finishes sentences, or is in a conflict with him. Once again, **we were able to complete the dramaturgical concept by looking for solutions to help the actors with DS.**



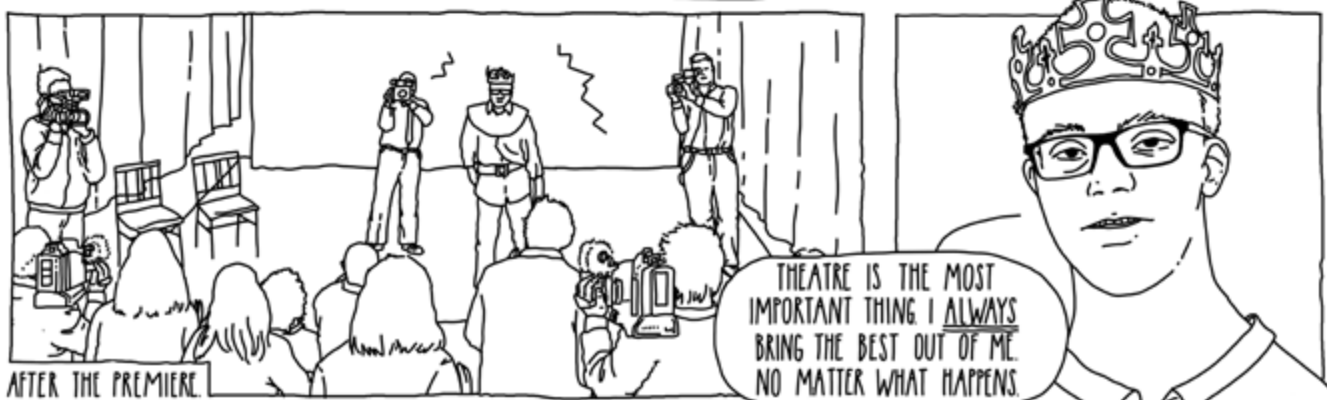
*In the middle is Martin Kříž (Bajaja), on the left is Lukáš Suchánek (in the white costume) with his acting partner Jan Kyncl. Photo: Jiří Kottas, 2019.*

Martin Kříž jako Bajaja.  
Foto: Jiří Kottas, 2019.



Thanks to these methods, we could help actors with DS handle their new acting tasks. Especially for Martin, the rehearsals were too long and he had to overcome his own momentary needs, which were at times stronger than the need to rehearse, and could not be delayed. The following comics show real events. Truth be told, it was not until opening night, which was being recorded by Czech television, that he fully played his roles for the first time, even though he had a severe cold.

# MARTIN AND HIS MAGICAL MEDICINE





## Conclusion

Holan's text is a specific combination of a deeply adult melancholy with a joyful childish naivete. The same goes for the cast, which is a specific combination of people with disabilities and without, children, adolescents, adults... In the production there are topics for children (inspired directly by our actress Klárka) and for adults. There is a mix of comic situations, childish happiness at Christmas, summer, attractions, steamboats, birthdays; but also darker, more melancholic themes (Cathy's illness, the poet's loneliness, the loss of one's roots, an adolescent child...).

There were acting challenges created by casting **very small girls with DS**. It all worked out thanks to **our collective's building a safe place** for each of these actresses. It was also our young actors' first experience with a **role and verses**. The lines were not the main problem in the end, but the actors with DS, of all age categories, struggled to **maintain tension and continuous stage energy**. These were won back by **involving the actors for the whole production** (meaning no exits from the stage) and adding their **stage partners**, who helped to put the colleague with DS into the right emotion and mood.

In the production *Cathy and Bajaja*, we worked with **acting of spontaneous action** (the actresses playing Cathy), but at the same time, with the older actors, we have entered higher phases: **acting of a personality** (Lukáš) and **playing a role** (Martin). In the next two productions, we will deepen our work with these phases of actors' development even further.

An addition, two photos from  
summer outdoor rehearsals.  
Photo: Jiří Kottas, 2019.









# The Production 2

## Karel Jaromír Erben:

### *The Golden Spinning Wheel*

#### Annotation:

Famous ballad of love, betrayal, and justice by Karel Jaromír Erben.

Spectators, together with the characters, journey through the parish of Lechovice. Various stage-images materialize before them: tree avenue with a girl pretty as a picture, old gate with a hag all skin and bone, window with a queen, who is the spitting image of the first one...

Site-specific: performed in the exterior of the parish of Lechovice. In case of bad weather, we perform in the local church.

#### Production team:

Direction:	<i>Jitka Vrbková</i>
Music:	<i>Tatiana Kazanovič Poulíková, Barbora Zuchová, Markéta Břundová</i>
Stage design:	<i>Zuzana Hejtmánková, Tomáš Madro</i>
Costumes:	<i>Kateřina Dvořáková, Alice Šindelářová</i>
Light design:	<i>Tomáš Král, Vendula Kacetlová, Jitka Vrbková</i>
Production:	<i>Vendula Kacetlová</i>
Poster:	<i>Iva Potůčková (graphic), Jiří Kottas (photo)</i>

#### Played by:

King:	<i>Martin Kříž</i>
King's company:	<i>Josef Beránek, Martin Polišenský, Václav Šarkózy</i>
Dornička:	<i>Zuzana Filoušová</i>
Dornička – legs:	<i>Monika Pekařová</i>
Dornička – arms:	<i>Kristýna Kučerová</i>

Dornička – eyes:	<i>Barbora Šotkovská</i>
Devil mother:	<i>Filip Teller, Martina Trusková, Eliška Vrbková</i>
Devil sister:	<i>Iveta Kocifajová</i>
Old man:	<i>Jakub Zahálka</i>
Pachole:	<i>Hana Bartoňová</i>
Storyteller:	<i>David Tchelidze</i>
Musicians:	<i>Tatiana Poulíková Kazanovič or Jitka Vrbková, Barbora Zuchová or Marie Hnyková, Markéta Břundová</i>
Women:	<i>Nikola Havránková, Jitka Vrbková</i>

**Premiered:** August 12, 2020, Lechovice parish

**About the production on the theatre's website:**

<https://www.divadloaldente.cz/en/inscenace/the-golden-spinning-wheel/>

**Trailer of the production:** <https://youtu.be/fqM0F7YjKww>



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# ZLATÝ KOLOVRAT

K.J.ERBEN

JITKA VRBKOVÁ

STŘEDA 12.8.

PÁTEK 14.8.

SOBOTA 15.8.

NEDĚLE 16.8.

POKAŽDÉ VE 21:00

**ZAČÁTEK A KONEC: U KOSTELA NAVŠTÍVENÍ PANNY MARIE V LECHOVICÍCH**

**VSTUPNÉ: ZDARMA**

**REZERVACE MÍST: WWW.DIVADLOALDENTE.CZ NEBO +420 731 897 007**

**PŘEDSTAVENÍ SE HRAJE V EXTERIÉRU ZA KAŽDÉHO POČASÍ.**

**MOŽNOST REGISTRACE ZDE:**

**<https://bit.ly/ZlatyKolovrat>**





## Dramaturgy

### **The Golden Spinning Wheel by Karel Jaromír Erben**

*The Golden Spinning Wheel* is one of thirteen ballads in Erben's famous *Bouquet* collection of Czech folktales. The plot is familiar to most Czechs, but to orient ourselves in other texts and analyses, we also present it here:

The king meets Dornička, a beautiful girl, on a ride. He falls for her with burning love and wants to marry her. However, her stepmother offers him her daughter instead of Dornička, saying that she is indistinguishable from Dornička. But the king refuses.

The stepmother prepares Dornička for the wedding. On the way to the royal castle, the stepmother and her daughter kill Dornička in the forest. They cut off her arms and legs and gouge her eyes out. The stepsister puts on Dornička's wedding dress. They leave Dornička's body in the forest but take her eyes, arms, and legs with them to the castle (in fear that someone might return them to the body and bring Dornička back to life).

At the castle, the stepdaughter introduces herself as Dornička, and the king marries her. After the wedding, the king leaves for the war and leaves his new wife temporarily alone.

Meanwhile, a mysterious old man finds Dornička's dead body and takes it to his cave. He then sends his young servant to take a golden spinning wheel and offer it at the castle. The purchase price should be nothing but legs. The queen – the fake Dornička – longs for the spinning wheel. She, therefore, orders her mother to give Dornička's legs to the servant. The old man places Dornička's legs next to her body in his cave and they reattach themselves.

Then he sends his young servant to the castle for the second time, this time with a golden distaff to the spinning wheel. The servant is supposed to sell the golden distaff for Dornička's arms.

The evil queen gives the arms to the servant, and the old man reconnects them to Dornička's body in the cave.

The young servant heads to the castle for the third time, this time to exchange the golden spindle for Dornička's eyes. As soon as he gets them from the evil queen and gives them to the old man, the old man puts Dornička's eyes back into her eye sockets and Dornička comes back to life.

The king returns from the war and greets his wife. She brags that out of love for him, she bought a golden spinning wheel with a golden distaff and a golden spindle.

The king orders her to spin. However, as soon as the queen starts to spin, the spinning wheel starts talking and tells about everything that has happened.

When the king hears it, he goes to the forest and looks for Dornička. He finds her, marries her, and banishes his 'fake wife' together with her stepmother from the castle. The two women run to the forest, where they are torn apart by wild animals.

## The Nature of Erben's Folktales

Erben's *Bouquet*, originally called *A Bouquet of Czech Folktales*, was published in 1853 and is one of the key works of Czech literature in the period of the National Revival. The collection of thirteen folktales is based on the Slavic tradition, mixing pagan and Christian elements. Freed from long descriptions and superfluous words, it captures the reader with a fast storyline. It is often adapted by both theatremakers and filmmakers for its dramatic nature, archetypes, and visuality.

A *Bouquet* focuses on women: they are the main characters in many folktales. Motherhood is also a frequent topic.

The plot is usually set in motion by someone's guilt, which is followed by a disproportionately large punishment: most tales have undertones of horror and end up very badly.

In this respect, *The Golden Spinning Wheel* is an exception: the plot consists of fairy tale – horror elements, but it has a happy ending. The punishment for the stepmother and her daughter is cruel but fair in regard to what they did.

Erben uses several onomatopoeic words that not only help the rhythm of the verses but also the gradation of the story:

*And in front of the cottage off the horse **hop**,  
and on the cottage **knock knock knock!***

*(Draft translation: Karel Pala)*

How less dramatic and action – like would be:

*And he jumped off his horse in front of the cottage  
And pounded on the door.*

The verses are often repeated, containing a small change. For example, the 'sale' of the spinning wheel, distaff, and spindle always take place in the same way with almost identical verses. The young servant must return to the royal court three times. The golden spinning wheel also spins three times as it tells the king what happened. Repetition metaphorically refers to the wheel – to the wheel of the spinning wheel, which rotates similarly to the mills of God.

*The Golden Spinning Wheel* is an archetypal story of pure love that encounters falsehood and eventually wins.

## ***The Golden Spinning Wheel and the Aldente Theatre***

Reasons for staging this folktale can be various. At the Aldente Theatre, we had the following four reasons for choosing *The Golden Spinning Wheel*, not all of them being purely theatrical.

### **A Random Reason, or Covid**

The original plan was to rehearse a site-specific project in cooperation with foreign artists in August 2020 in the rectory of Lechovice. However, due to the pandemic, foreign participation was a very uncertain issue, so the ensemble decided to cancel it and change the plan: We decided to keep the location and the partly site-specific character of the project, but instead of the international dimension we gave the project a purely Czech and national orientation. This was the first clue that eventually led us to Karel Jaromír Erben.



## **A Personal Reason, or the ‘Weddings and Re-Weddings’ of the Aldente Theatre Members**

Many actors with DS in our theatre long for love and marriage. It is quite common for them to act out wedding ceremonies at theatrical training camps and workshops. But these ‘marriages’ do not usually last for a long time, and often a ‘re-wedding’ must take place the very next day. It is a ‘repair wedding’, when they marry someone else again. Therefore, if there is a literary work where there are two weddings, then it seems that this is a great title to be staged by our ensemble. And this is exactly what Erben’s *The Golden Spinning Wheel* offers.<sup>39</sup>

## **A Dramaturgical Reason, or Actors with DS and the Archetype of Pure Love**

We guessed that a story with fairy-tale undertones, in which we had to deal with archetypes, could well correspond to our actors. Due to their otherness, spontaneity, and openness, they seemed to resonate with the archetypes easily. Who else could perform ‘pure love’ better than actors with Down’s syndrome?

From a dramaturgical point of view, the fact that some roles are played by actors without a disability is also an advantage for us. Casting an actress with DS as a kind and innocent Dornička and an actress without disability as her evil and treacherous sister is very relevant – not because ‘people with DS are kind and the rest of us are evil and treacherous’, but because actors with DS usually show the part of their heart that the actors without disabilities tend to hide.

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<sup>39</sup> *The actors liked the weddings so much that they asked for an addition to the production: applause was followed by several weddings – our actors either married each other, or borrowed a bride or groom from the audience. The audience appreciated every wedding kiss or hug with a big round of applause.*

*On the left, evil sister (Iveta Kocifajová).  
On the right, Dornička (Zuzana Filoušová).  
Photo: Eduard Novotný, 2020.*





*The archetype of pure love.  
Photo: Eduard Novotný, 2020.*





## Site-Specific as a Bridge between People

If we perceive theatre performances as the forms of communication or a connection between viewers and actors, then it is obvious that in a site-specific environment this connection is even stronger. We all suddenly find ourselves in the same boat: all under the same sky where the stars shine, from which cold wind blows, or from which it may even rain. We all hear crickets or the distant voices of drunkards, which are not part of the performance. We all feel insecure that anything can interrupt the show. Because the viewers have left the comfort of their 'upholstered seats', the communication between them and the actors is intensified. The viewers' experience is a common experience for us all.

This experience is made more powerful by the fact that there are 'actors with otherness' in the performance. The audience has the opportunity to get closer to them, not only during the show but also after it when many viewers stay at the after-party or overnight. Thus they have the opportunity to be in contact with the actors 'outside of their roles'. This finding was also confirmed by the research of the psychologist Lenka Pivodová.<sup>40</sup>

Deepening the inclusive effect of a theatre performance through a site-specific artistic form was one of the reasons why we used this genre – even though we were aware of the many risks and difficulties associated with it. They are mainly discussed in the next chapter entitled *Acting Challenges*.

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<sup>40</sup> See the chapter *Inclusion through Theatre Observed by a Psychologist*.



*Viewers and actors share the same site-specific space. Even in the rain.  
Photo: Jiří Kottas, 2021.*



*In some scenes, viewers could sit on chairs; other times, however, they had to enter the dark space and even squat.  
Photo: Jiří Kottas, 2021.*

# Acting Challenges

With the new genre (an epic poem) and the new theatrical form (a site-specific production) new big challenges for actors with DS appeared:

## 1. Playing the Role. Someone Who's Not Me

As Bajaja, Martin Kříž already partly experienced the need to be someone else. However, this transformation was something new to most of the ensemble. So far, they were on stage for themselves, or they were in a role, but they were allowed to step out of it. The story in verses did not allow them to do this, or only up to a point.<sup>41</sup>

In this respect, the greatest demands were probably placed on Zuzana Filoušová who played the role of Dornička. Zuzana is experiencing a period in which she is enjoying tattoos, piercings, and rock music. However, the character of Dornička was supposed to be gentle, tender, and decent. To everyone's surprise, Zuzana understood the character very quickly and always remained in the role without any problems throughout the whole rehearsal or performance. I think that the fact that it was a leading part and that her photo was on the theatre posters was great motivation for her. However, the motivation would have been useless if she had not reached this stage of her acting through many rehearsals and performances as well as through the maturity of her personality. Dornička's role probably just came at the right time.

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<sup>41</sup> Three actors performed the role of the evil stepmother – Filip Teller (a professional actor without a disability) and two actresses with DS, Martina Trusková and Eliška Vrbková. Martina Trusková is a natural born improviser and submits to the director's comments with difficulties. But her role was probably the only one that allowed her to perform improvisational entries. The journey of Dornička's stepmother and evil sister to the castle also included several comical performances: the evil sister disguises as Dornička (no matter how hard she tries, the evil sister still lacks Dornička's beauty), or the evil women collect Dornička's amputated limbs (they cannot find them, the limbs constantly fall on the ground or the women leave them in some places and forget about them). Martina Trusková slightly extended these scenes with her improvisations, which brought the desired relief to the audience after the otherwise emotionally tense scene of Dornička's murder. It should be noted that the presence of comical scenes did not detract from the drama of the whole.



*Dornička Zuzana Filoušová.  
Photo: Mila Vašíčková, 2020.*



*In the role of Dornička, Zuzana Filoušová had to maintain her dignity. In the photo: with her evil sister (Iveta Kocifajová) and the 'triune' stepmother (from left Eliška Vrbková, Martina Trusková, Filip Teller).  
Photo: Jiří Kottas, 2021.*



*The dramatic scene of Dornička's murder has turned into a humorous scene, in which the evil women search for and collect amputated limbs.  
Photo: Jiří Kottas, 2021.*

## 2. Waiting for the Audience: Litmus Paper of Professionalism

Until recently, the actors were used to being on stage all the time: to absorb the atmosphere at the beginning, stay in it, and leave the stage again at the end. However, the epic story does not allow everyone to be on stage all the time – only the one whose character has it in the script are allowed to stay on stage.

But all this was made even more difficult due to the genre of site-specific: The viewers moved from place to place because each scene unfolded in a different venue. For the actresses who played Dornička,<sup>42</sup> for example, this meant that they were not present at the beginning of the production, but they were waiting for their acting performance in the alley, where they would meet the king for the first time. Then they disappeared from the 'stage' and did not see what was happening next. Instead, they went to prepare for their next acting performance. This took place in the courtyard of the rectory, where viewers

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<sup>42</sup> One main girl played Dornička, and three other girls represented her arms, legs, and eyes – i.e. limbs, which were then amputated.



slowly entered and sat down on chairs. Their arrival varied depending on their number and age – sometimes it took up to ten minutes. During this time, all the three Dorničkas had to be in their roles. They were illuminated on the stage, standing ‘frozen’ in their ‘small living room’. Sometimes they could change their position with slow dance movements. The theatre performance thus crossed its boundaries towards the genre of a happening in which **the performers have to continue doing a certain action for a longer time.**

It was a completely new experience for our actors. In the beginning, we had to calm their laughter and, conversely, initiate dramatic stage tension that had to be kept. It was not the last demanding scene of the three Dorničkas. At another moment of the play, the viewers went to the ‘deep desolate thicket’, where Dornička lies dead on the ground and her limbs dance around her – Arms, Legs, and Eyes. Sometimes, Dornička had to lie on the ground motionless for about twenty minutes.

If the actors with the DS played theatre in the past it was because we created an atmosphere that attracted them to do so, now the process was reversed: the actors themselves had to create the atmosphere that would capture the audience. So this process is, in fact, based on their own will not something that was necessarily appealing. Closely related to a learning disability is the tendency to want to focus on satisfying the needs that they have at the moment and limit the volitional qualities of the individual. However, in *The Golden Spinning Wheel*, the actors proved that they internally understood the needs of theatre and were able to overcome their innate tendencies, training their own will. The actors thus reached the threshold of professionalism.

*Dorničkas in the ‘deep desolate thicket’.*  
Photo: Jiří Kottas, 2021.





*Dorničkas in the alley of trees.  
Photo: Eduard Novotný, 2020.*





*Dorničky in their living room.  
Photo: Eduard Novotný, 2020.*





### 3. Site-Specific: a Theatre Where It Rains and Mosquitoes Bite

Our actors have probably never experienced more demanding rehearsals than those of *The Golden Spinning Wheel*. Because the storyline of the production did not take place in a theatre building, we rehearsed at real venues in any weather. The problem was that there was rarely the perfect time to rehearse: the sun was blazing already in the morning, and mosquitoes were biting after the sunset. In the evening, the actors were tired, or even afraid of the dark.

It was also difficult for the actors because the performance could not start until 9 pm – it was not dark outside before that time. However, at this hour, they are already accustomed to sleeping.

There is great unpredictability associated with the art form of site-specific theatre. It is always a question of the extent to which the ensemble is professional and can cope with unpredictable phenomena. Right at the first rerun, we experienced one of them: just before the start of the performance, it started to rain and the technological equipment started to deliver electric shocks. Playing outside would have been dangerous. We placed all the viewers in the church and asked for patience. Within twenty minutes, we brought a couple of spotlights, not yet eliminated by rain, to the church. The actors were briefly instructed on how to move on the new stage. In this respect, the performance is so complex that it was not possible to think it all through in such a short time. We started playing without the actors knowing exactly where to get on the 'stage', and where to leave it...



*The king's retinue during the rerun in the church.*  
Photo: Mila Vašíčková, 2020.





*The atmosphere of the performance in the church was very specific. Photo: Veronika Bartoňová, 2020.*

To everyone's surprise, the show went very well: the whole ensemble was united by the uncertainty it all, as well as by the desire to make it turn out well. Everyone fully focused on their tasks. Thanks to this approach, the ensemble perfectly succeeded in maintaining the dramatic stage tension.<sup>43</sup>

The following comics show the joys, sorrows, and challenges of the site-specific genre.

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<sup>43</sup> When it started to rain a year later during the last performance, the technological equipment was already so secured that it was possible to play in the rain. Nevertheless, there was a fear (on the part of actors, stage technicians, and viewers) that the cloudburst with wild winds would start, which would not only make it impossible to play but also create a relatively dangerous situation (such as the danger of falling spotlights in windows, etc.). Luckily, the cloudburst did not occur, and both actors and viewers stayed together in the rain. None of the actors (not even the viewers) thought of either leaving the 'stage' and 'auditorium' or hiding in the building.

# SITE-SPECIFIC PROJECT: ERBEN'S GOLDEN SPINNING-WHEEL IN LECHOVICE

## EPISODE 1: BEFORE THE REHEARSALS



## EPISODE 2: REHEARSALS OR THE SCRIPT IS SACRED



### EPISODE 3: REHEARSALS OR OUTSIDE IN ALL CIRCUMSTANCES



### EPISODE 4: AFTER THE PREMIERE



### EPISODE 5: 1ST RE-RUN



...and they say there are no miracles in Lechovice!



## Actors with Down's Syndrome: 'Archetype Actors'

In the dramaturgical introduction, we mentioned our assumption that actors with DS are close to archetypes. This was confirmed during the rehearsals of *The Golden Spinning Wheel*.

The basic premise for 'archetype acting' lies in complete spontaneity and openness. Viewers also see this, especially if they share a site-specific common space with the actors. The actress Zuzana Škopová describes actors with DS as follows:

*At least I would like to have a pinch of their cordiality, spontaneity, and enthusiasm. I have never seen so much pure and cordial enthusiasm (not only) for the theatre. This is something that I, as a person influenced by the system, unpleasant emotions, and the need to measure up to others, lack in my acting work.*

(ŠKOPOVÁ, 2021)

*The enthusiasm of actors with DS during the applause after the performance.  
Photo: Eduard Novotný, 2020.*





The acting performance of actors with DS is characterized by their ability to be 'here and now at this very moment' and to show their inner feelings in their 'nakedness'. As if the actors with DS 'lived' rather than 'played' the individual performances. Professional actors without disabilities can usually modify their speech, they can evaluate and check themselves. On the other hand, they are usually unable to push evaluating and checking processes aside. Therefore, their experience, which they pass on to the audience, is censored and presented only 'little by little'. Externally, they show only part of themselves.

This is also confirmed by David Tchelidze, actor and teacher who played the role of the narrator.

*It seems to me that people with Down's syndrome see the world a little more straightforwardly than others. And we see this ability, free from unnecessary details and doubts, in their communication as well. It also manifests itself in their acting performance on stage. You look at them and somehow you immediately perceive **the essence of the things** – what is at stake here.*

(TCHELIDZE, 2019)

Thus, if we need to portray a couple and their pure love, we can be sure that in the rendition of actors with DS this love will be true and unpretentious. It will become apparent in combination with the deceit and pretence of Dornička's evil sister – especially if the sister is performed by an actress without Down's syndrome.

Our couple in love is charming, but it does not look like the one on the cover of a fashion magazine. The character of the king played by Martin Kříž is not a well-built man with a firm walk and voice, but he expresses masculine energy, which, unwrapped in a fashionable package, is all the more authentic. Dornička does not have the movements of a ballerina, but her dance has a special girly charm thanks to her deep theatrical resonance.

Kristýna Kučerová, actress and teacher, for whom working on *The Golden Spinning Wheel* was the first meeting with actors with Down's syndrome, describes their acting as follows:

*On stage, they do not stick to established concepts of thinking. They have a different approach to their presence on stage. They create the combinations of words, arrangements, movements, and meanings in unusual correlations. I feel the tangible and strongly believable meanings of words and actions. For example, in the wedding veil, they see not only the veil itself but something living with its story.*

*(KUČEROVÁ, 2019)*

The otherness of both movements and speech makes us abandon external evaluation. We focus on what is inside and common to all people. Actors with Down's syndrome are the actors of archetypes.





*Pure love.  
Photo: Eduard Novotný, 2020.*

*The sincere feelings of actors  
with DS. King – Martin Kříž.  
Photo: Jiří Kottas, 2021.*



*Deceptive love.  
Photo: Jiří Kottas, 2021.*



*The sincere feelings of actors with DS.  
The young servant – Hana Bartoňová.  
Photo: Eduard Novotný, 2020.*



## Conclusion

*The Golden Spinning Wheel* by Karel Jaromír Erben as a site-specific play posed a great challenge for our actors: they could no longer 'be' only themselves, but had to **play real roles**. They had to **rehearse in difficult conditions** (in the dark, rain, sun, mosquitoes). Moreover, they were not on stage all the time during the performance, so they had to **rebuild their dramatic and stage tension over and over again**.

However, the effort has borne fruit. The actors with DS proved to be '**actors of the archetypes**', and the story was even more impressive thanks to their participation. The **site-specific** genre brought actors and viewers closer together. The viewers then talked about the transformative experience.<sup>44</sup>

The acting of our actors is developing in the following direction: it is gradually moving from the 'acting of spontaneous action' to the 'acting of characters'. Everyone already has a role to play in *The Golden Spinning Wheel*, but this role does not usually contain many dimensions. It is also frequently based on the personality predispositions of the actors. However, the upcoming production of Sophocles's *Antigone* will be the touchstone of the adventurous voyage of our actors.

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<sup>44</sup> See the chapter Inclusion through Theatre Observed by a Psychologist.





# The Production 3

## Sophocles: *Antigone*

### Annotation:

Is it good to comply with rules and regulations, even if they are bad?

Two brothers die in a duel. The ruler Creon orders one of them to be buried with all honours, but forbids the burial of the other. The brothers have two sisters. Ismene decides to obey Creon's command. Antigone rebels against it and, despite the ban, buries her second brother. Creon sentences her to death. Antigone walks to her death, and Creon realizes that his command was against the will of the gods. However, his awakening comes late: Antigone takes her own life, and others will die with her.

### Production team:

Script and direction:	<i>Jitka Vrbková</i>
Music:	<i>Jan Kyncl</i>
Scenography:	<i>Zuzana Hejtmánková, Tomáš Madro</i>
Costumes:	<i>Kateřina Dvořáková, Alice Šindelářová</i>
Light and sound:	<i>Vendula Kacetlová, Josef Fiala</i>

### Cast:

Antigone:	<i>Eliška Vrbková, Iveta Kocifajová, Zuzana Škopová</i>
Creon:	<i>Lukáš Suchánek and Lukáš Rieger</i>
Ismene:	<i>Hana Bartoňová</i>
Haemon:	<i>Martin Kříž</i>
Guard:	<i>Tomáš Král</i>
Polynices:	<i>Jakub Zahálka</i>
Eteocles:	<i>Jan Kyncl</i>

**Premiere:** June 28, 2021, Bezbariérové divadlo Barka  
(Barrier-free Theatre Barka), Brno

**About the production on the theatre's website:**

<https://www.divadloaldente.cz/en/inscenace/antigone/>

**Trailer of the production:** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jwKglhuKjac>





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# SOFOKLES ANTIGONA

PŘEKLAD: FERDINAND STIEBITZ  
REŽIE: JITKA VRBKOVÁ  
HUDBA: JAN KYNCL

**28. 6. 2021 V 19:00 (PREMIÉRA)**

**29. 6. 2021 V 10:00**

**DIVADLO BARKA, SVATOPLUKA ČECHA 35A, BRNO**

**REZERVACE: [WWW.DIVADLOALDENTE.CZ](http://WWW.DIVADLOALDENTE.CZ)**

ČINNOST DIVADLA ALDENTE JE FINANČNĚ PODPOROVANA STATUTARNÍM MĚSTEM BRNEM.

# Dramaturgy

## The Ancient Tragedy in the Third Millennium or: A Defence of Today's Viewers<sup>45</sup>

Many experts are angry that the charm of original ancient tragedies is seldom preserved by directors. On one hand, directors may insist on formally updating the work (i.e. they dress the actors in modern costumes and let them use mobile phones all the time or communicate via Zoom). Or, they may try to inspire modern interest based on incorrect assumptions of what ancient tragedies actually looked like. (No! Ancient does not mean white! The ancient world was colourful!).

We must agree with the experts.

At the same time, however, we would like to defend today's viewers, their thinking and feelings. Some experts also get unnecessarily angry when the text is edited and shortened, or when the only scenes performed are those described in ancient plays. For example, death was never shown on the stage of ancient Greek theatre. Many things that had a strong effect on the viewers two thousand years ago would not be considered important today. Therefore, one must look for forms that will show today's viewers the strong themes of the play with similar intensity.

Let us call it 'internal actualization'.

### Famous old stories

Ancient tragedies often deal with right and wrong actions and their consequences — with guilt and curses, which are often passed down from generation to generation. Therefore, in addition to the story discussed in the play, in every ancient drama there are references to many other stories that preceded it. It was enough to mention a few names or themes to ancient viewers, and they immediately recalled these stories (and emotionally lived them out).

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<sup>45</sup> In this chapter, we use the following literature: Eva Stehlíková: *Antické divadlo. [The Theatre of Antiquity]* (STEHLÍKOVÁ, 2005) Richard Janko: *From Catharsis to the Aristotelian Mean.* (JANKO, 1992)

On the other hand, today's viewers, although they might have studied ancient times and might therefore catch the allusions, usually do not imagine anything at all when stories other than the one that is taking place on stage are mentioned. **Ancient stories are not part of their lives. Today's viewers have not 'internalized' them.**

Therefore, a certain simplification of mournful monologues, which explain the backstory of the characters or explain the relationship of the play to ancient religion, is not theft from the audience but an attempt to help them. If we covered our modern audience members with a pile of heavy gems and sent them to the sea of ancient verses, they would not be richer for it – on the contrary, they would probably drown.

### **The ability to listen versus the ability to watch**

Many writers and dramaturgs lament that we have lost the ability to listen. The fact is, however, that the multi-page monologues, in which various mythological stories and religious ideas are narrated at length, are very difficult to digest for today's viewers, no matter how well-read they may be.

Our modern viewers are, in fact, just as clever as their precursors in the fifth century BC, only in different ways. **Modern viewers live in a visual age.** Thanks to computers, they are able to perceive very fragmented images in which various items of information jump out at the top of the screen, at the bottom, on the left, on the right, or elsewhere. They have to select what they are interested in and what they will deal with, and filter the rest out. Ancient people, on the other hand, were not often able to read and write, so they communicated everything orally. They were trained to retain even very extensive amounts of spoken information. We moderns are trained to forget as much as possible – otherwise, we would go crazy. Our memory is external, and it is usually encapsulated in our mobile phone; all we have to do is remember that we took a photo of the red leaflet on the bulletin board, and the photo on the mobile phone will then reliably reveal its contents. **We do not even hear most of the information – but we do see it.**

In today's auditorium, therefore, there is no point worrying about the laziness of viewers not prepared for remembering the spoken word. **In today's theatre, viewers are equipped with completely different abilities** than the original audience of ancient tragedies. Today, we do not have to express many situations through words but can use images. Several images can even overlap, and today's viewers will find their way around.

### **Catharsis then and now**

Today's viewers usually infer that catharsis is 'when there are enough corpses on stage at the end'. Moreover, the more educated ones suspect that these corpses must have experienced their misfortune through no fault or their own. But how are we supposed



to experience some kind of awakening as a result, when we see so many corpses in computer games or in the news every day?

In his *Poetics* (ARISTOTELES, 1996) Aristotle explains that, in a tragedy, the characters cannot be obviously evil, because when bad things happen to evil characters, nobody minds. Likewise, in ancient tragedy, the characters cannot be obviously good, either, for if bad things happened to good people, it would be uncomfortable, incomprehensible, or even repulsive. Thus, the characters in the tragedies are neither all good nor all bad, but they are guilty of something – they transgress, to a certain degree, divine or human order.

The problem is that this guilt is often passed down from one person to another, so many characters do not even have a chance to make the right decision. For example, Antigone must choose between breaking the law of the polity or the laws of the gods, mainly because of her father Oedipus's sin. He unknowingly killed his father and married his own mother. However, this happened because his ancestors ... etc. Antigone cannot make any correct decision, and the plot naturally leads to the catastrophe. But the catastrophe itself is still not catharsis. **Catharsis is a psychological process in which, through the experience of fear and compassion while watching a dramatic event, the viewers process their own emotions** that may have accumulated over time. It was Aristotle who called this catharsis, 'purification'.

At the time, the ancient tragedy also had its **political and educational significance**. The audience consisted of a large part of the population of the city-state. The performance lasted the whole day – from sunrise to sunset. The viewers could perceive nature and the flow of time – phenomena which transcended them. At the same time, they saw their participation in the performance as a civic duty and a service to the homeland. But in today's theatre, can we have this religious experience of spiritual awakening or enlightenment, and at the same time perceive the right order of the world – both of which transcend everything human? Or the feeling of inner purification through fear and compassion? Is there such a thing as 'the order of the world' today? No, none of this seems to apply to many of us attending the theatre today.

But what we do have is the eternal theme of Antigone – **an ethical dilemma and a moral issue**: how does one choose between two bad options?

What we also have is **the physical presence of the actors and viewers** along with their ability to create something together that goes beyond the 'artifact' of the rehearsed production.

Today's viewers, like ancient ones, are deep-thinking people able to perceive images and emotions. They are also able to create, jointly with the actors, something that transcends all of us, although it is difficult to pin down exactly what that means. If we can call this **the catharsis of today**, by all means let us do so.

## The Adventures of Translation and Ancient Greek Interjections

Like the director, the translator always faces the question of whether to keep the formal aspects of the original (e.g. the meter) or to deviate from them so that the text can 'grow' more towards the language of the modern performance.

Ferdinand Stiebitz's translation skillfully meets these two requirements. It keeps the language sounding ancient by maintaining the basic formal elements of the original text (iambic verse). At the same time, the translation is understandable for today's viewers despite it being from 1927. In addition, Stiebitz's verses contain '**gestus**', **an emotional movement** that tells the actors how to deal with the words physically, and thanks to which even actors with Down's syndrome can stage the verses without many difficulties.

But there is one thing that no Czech translator can do.

In ancient Greek, poets used a number of interjections, which were quite long and very **onomatopoetic**. However, if Czech translators try to translate them, it is very difficult for them: the Czech onomatopoeia 'ach' ('oh/ah'), 'ó běda' ('oh woe is me') or 'ajajaj' ('ay, ay, ay/oh no'), sometimes seem ridiculous instead of tragic. Therefore, we decided to insert several original Greek interjections into the text. The interjections also open up the possibility for the actors who cannot say a complex sentence to express their emotions aloud.

### The demonstration of ancient Greek interjections and their meanings:

<i>Pheû, ió moi moi, ómoi</i>	The expression of intense desire for something to happen (in English, for example: Yes! So!)
<i>Aiai aiai, ió ió moi moi</i>	Wishing someone (including oneself) misfortune (Woe upon you!).
<i>Oímoi</i>	Regret for something that was done (We wish we had not done it).
<i>Â â â</i>	Euphoria/warning.
<i>lú iú, ió ió</i>	Pleasure, joy.
<i>Apapapapai, eleleu eleleu, ototototoi, oi gó</i>	Pain (physical and mental, even grief).
<i>ló ió, ototototoi popoi da, é é</i>	Awe, horror.
<i>Éā éa éa éa</i>	Surprise.

Óé  
Eîa

Attracting attention.  
Encouragement to do or  
continue something.

(Professional consultation: Eliška Kubartová)

## The Choice of the Play and its Interpretation over Time

### May 2018: the first idea

We are writing an application for a grant provided by the Technology Agency of the Czech Republic. We are looking for a play that – in accordance with the intention of the project – would place the **highest demands on the actors with DS** from all three selected productions. The idea of performing Sophocles's *Antigone* emerges.

However, the choice of an ancient tragedy – a drama in verse – also leaves the back door open in case the actors do not reach the stage where they are able to recite a long text: ancient tragedies are – unlike Shakespeare, for example – very **visual**. Thus, they allow us to adapt the text much better, as well as **to interpret part of the story through images**.

At the same time, in *Antigone*, we find a topic very close to people with DS: to follow the choice of one's heart rather than the regulations of the rulers. People with DS are characterized by a certain tendency to ignore norms, as well as by an insufficient understanding of the consequences of their own actions (within their own community).

### October 2020: The epidemic disrupts rehearsals and topics

In 2020, when we start rehearsing, a new event unexpectedly pushes its way into our dramaturgical interpretation – **the coronavirus epidemic**. The phrase 'to comply with government rules and regulations, even if they are bad' suddenly takes on new connotations. We do not, of course, want our production to be interpreted as a proclamation of defiance against epidemiological precautions, yet it is not possible to ignore Covid's existence completely: **it is what we all experience most intensely at the moment**. The coronavirus interrupts our rehearsals and causes us to yearn for action, for the creative act, for meeting other people. However, it still is not clear how this experience will be reflected in the production.





### December 2020: wedding instead of catastrophe

Anti-epidemic measures are being softened. We are starting to rehearse, at least in small groups. Martin Kříž, playing the role of Haemon, begins a never-ending discussion: according to him, **the story must turn out 'clearly' – that is, with a wedding**: he (Haemon) must marry his fiancée, Antigone. However, in the play, Sophocles lets the engaged couple die. We think that during the rehearsal, Martin will understand 'what the story requires' and will back down from his demand for a happy ending – in the same way that some actors, when we were rehearsing *The Golden Spinning Wheel*, protested that 'it is not possible to kill your own sister and even gouge out her eyes'. However, in the end, they performed both of these gory actions on stage with undisguised pleasure.

### March 2021: wedding and death, Antigone and Covid

It is becoming obvious that Martin will not back down, something which we have to take into account. At the same time, however, we do not want to downplay our own emotions, which are more in accordance with Sophocles: if the viewers are to feel the weight of bad decisions, the plot should end badly. We are looking for an escape

option. We even think about the end of the story being decided by the viewers themselves. Thus, we would have to rehearse two different versions of the ending.

Slowly, we realise that we are forced to do each of three things: to express 'despair at the Covid situation', to wrap up the story both well and badly at the same time, and to leave the decision to the viewers to a certain degree.

A solution emerges: we will add a prologue and epilogue to the play.

The prologue begins with the following scene: Antigone, wearing a wedding dress, walks across the stage to the 'fore-forestage'<sup>46</sup> towards Haemon, who stands among the viewers in the middle of the auditorium and stretches out his hand to her. The scene is interrupted by our technician Honza, who is angry that the actors are rehearsing in the auditorium, not on the stage. Subsequently, he begins wondering why they are acting out a wedding when they are supposed to perform an ancient tragedy. There is a passionate discussion among all the actors about what the ancient tragedy is, what catastrophe and catharsis are, and whether the story can end in a wedding. In this discussion, the actors introduce the Covid pandemic, which – according to some – was also a catastrophe and 'cleansed' them perfectly: their diaries and bank accounts both got cleaned out. The discussion is conducted in a humorous spirit. In the end, everyone involved agrees to start performing. It will turn out by itself what the story 'is asking for': either a wedding or death.

The text of Sophocles's *Antigone*<sup>47</sup> follows, until the moment when Antigone walks to her death the same way she was supposed to walk to her wedding. On stage, Antigone walks the same route as at the beginning of the performance, with the same wedding veil. On the other side of the stage, it is not Haemon who stretches out his hand to her, but her late brother Polynices. Thus, metaphorically, Antigone gets engaged to death. Sophocles's text flows smoothly into the added epilogue, in which the characters (or, in fact, now only the actors) argue over how the story should continue:

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46 Even before the forestage itself, we built a practicable that reaches the front row of spectators. In this way, we have extended the forestage and we call this extension 'fore-forestage'.

47 In our version, Sophocles's drama is shortened. In our script, the order of the scenes is also changed. The scenes follow each other chronologically: first the death of the brothers (which Sophocles only talks about) is depicted, then Creon's accession to the throne follows, during which Creon forbids burying Polynices. Only after these two scenes, Antigone enters to the stage with Ismene, which is the scene that Sophocles's drama actually begins with. The main reason for these changes is the effort to catch the viewer's attention. This is the way the viewer grasps the story much easier.

Tom: And Antigone is locked in a dungeon waiting to die.  
Honza: No, she's not waiting to die, she's too proud for that, she'd rather die by her own hand.  
Martin: She doesn't have to die, her fate can be reversed.  
Tom: It cannot be reversed. She must pay for her defiance.  
Hani: Her defiance?

Antigone: To blame me for a pious act and call it impiety:  
If the gods approve of this punishment,  
Perhaps I'll know in Hades that I was wrong;  
But if these are mistaken – let worse evil avoid them than  
what they wrongfully do to me.

Martin: She means Creon, doesn't she?  
Honza: Yes, Creon.  
Martin: What about him? Will he be stubborn until the end?  
Tom: I think he will.  
Hani: He won't, I think. He'll rescue Antigone from  
the dungeon and prepare a wedding.  
Martin: A wedding for Antigone and Haemon.  
Honza: And they'll live happily ever after.  
Hani: And at the marriage, everyone will be reconciled –  
Creon, Haemon, Antigone, and Ismene.  
Tom: And they have ten children together.  
Honza: But that's not the way it works.  
Tom: You mean that's not the way it works in a tragedy?  
Honza: It doesn't work that way in life, either.  
Martin: And how does it work?  
Honza: Creon will not change his mind, but rather will  
let Antigone die.  
Tom: And Haemon will kill himself out of desperation, too.  
Honza: And Haemon's mother, Creon's wife, will also commit suicide  
because her son has died.  
Tom: And she'll even curse Creon.  
Martin: No! Creon will wake up and change his mind,  
and there will be a wedding!  
Honza: Creon will wake up and change his mind,  
but it'll be too late.



Tom:                There'll be no wedding.  
Honza:             Antigone will be already dead.  
Tom:                Haemon will be dead.  
Honza:             His mother will be dead.  
Tom:                And Creon will remain with his guilt and his curse.

(SOFOKLES and VRBKOVÁ, 2021)

Before the tragedy is over, Haemon says that the story could continue differently. During the final musical sequence, he pushes Polynices away and takes his place. The play ends with a visual image in which Antigone, wearing a wedding veil, stretches out her hand to both Haemon and Polynices. The viewers themselves can choose which one has won: life or death.<sup>48</sup> Theatrolgist Eliška Kubartová reflects on this solution by saying:

*I have been interested in ancient theatre for many years, yet the Aldente Theatre's production of Sophocles' Antigone was a revelation for me. Like probably many other spectators, I was subconsciously expecting a self-conscious adaptation 'that would make the ancient play more comprehensible to the actors and actresses with DS', I reasoned. A self-conscious adaptation it indeed was, and the Antigone became much more comprehensible that evening – to me. On that night, for the first time, I fully realised how crucial the concept of marriage was to this tragedy, and what it meant to conceive of the ending of the play as an inverted wedding ceremony of Antigone deprived of the sought-of union with Haemon once for ever. All this got emphatically embodied on stage from the first moment, in the seemingly improvised discussion of the cast whether or not the play should end with a marriage, and remained omnipresent until the very end. While Antigone's death is often presented in a detached and somewhat cold manner in Czech theatres, in the production of Aldente Theatre it felt painful as a knife slash, contrasted with the unbridled, captivating energy of the actors with DS.*

(KUBARTOVÁ, 2022)

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48 After a few runs, we have also added the possibility for the audience to vote after the performance. Like the free citizens of ancient Greece, our audience can express their opinion on what they have seen – using the beans on stage to vote for a tragic ending or a happy ending. As a rule, the tragic ending wins, but the voting is always thrilling.

With this solution, we not only accommodated the different opinions and needs of the production team's individual members but also dealt with the problem that modern troupes always have when staging ancient tragedies: today's viewers do not appreciate the power of the story because they do not understand the connection with other stories and with their own lives. They perceive only those 'corpses' which, however, simply cannot have their intended cathartic effect. On the contrary, they can make a ridiculous impression.

However, the open ending encourages the audience both to contemplate and interpret the story in their own way.

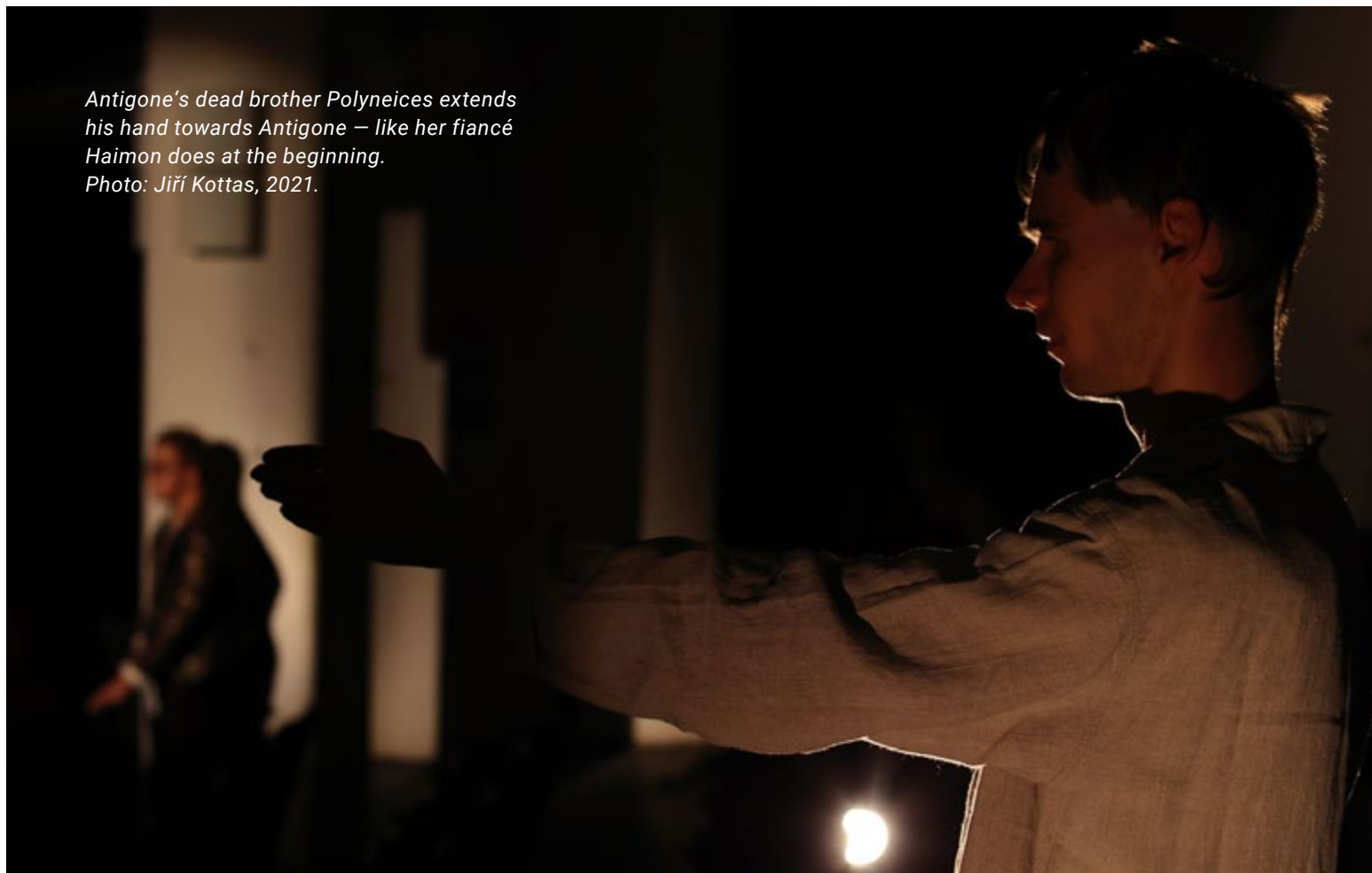


*Haimon, at the beginning of the prologue among the spectators, extends his hand towards Antigone in her wedding dress. Photo: Jiří Kottas, 2021.*

*Prologue: the cast argues  
about what catharsis is.  
Photo: Mila Vašíčková, 2021.*



*Antigone's dead brother Polyneices extends  
his hand towards Antigone — like her fiancé  
Haimon does at the beginning.  
Photo: Jiří Kottas, 2021.*





*Epilogue: Antigone, in her wedding  
dress, walks to her death.  
Photo: Jiří Kottas, 2021.*



### **May 2021: *Antigone* – a story about love and family?**

We are starting to rehearse at full steam again. The actors with DS are deeply involved in creating the message of the entire production, especially through their own roles.

While others tend to interpret *Antigone* more politically, our young actors with DS are looking for their own themes. And they do find them: although the theme of love between two young people or between siblings is, at the start of rehearsals, marginal to the drama (which was initially meant to communicate something else), our actors bring these themes to the foreground. Hana Bartoňová, playing the role of Ismene, says:

*Antigone is about grief, about love between sisters, about family, about love between Antigone and Haemon.*

*(BARTOŇOVÁ, 2021)*

In her comment, she perfectly expresses her inner feelings about the play (*Antigone* is about sadness), as well as about a theme which she (very aptly) perceives from her position as Ismene.

Ismene is completely guileless: she does not think about political problems, only about her love for her sister. This quality is, in Hana's rendering, more than believable. Her fragility and sincerity, along with the fragility and sincerity of Martin Kříž's Haemon (which is, of course, more masculine), contrasts with the acting of the roles played by actors without DS. Both the prologue and epilogue work on the same principle: Martin and Hana **give no compelling reasons** as to why the story should end in a wedding. Nevertheless, their speeches are so sensitive and sincere that the viewers perceive **the validity of this demand** and ask themselves the following question:

**Why do we always need 'unhappy endings' in our 'world of those who live without disabilities'?**



*Ismena begs Kreont (Lukáš Suchánek) for the life of her sister.  
Photo: Nikola Minářová, 2021.*



*Ismena (Hana Bartoňová - right) tries to persuade her sister Antigone (Eliška Vrbková) not to risk her life.  
Photo: Jiří Kottas, 2021.*



*Ismene mourns her sister.  
Photo: Jiří Kottas, 2021.*



*Haimon (Martin Kříž) fights  
for the life of his fiancée.  
Photo: Jiří Kottas, 2021.*



# Performers with DS in an Ancient Tragedy or: The Challenges of Directing and Acting

All these challenges appear daunting at the beginning of the project. However, our efforts to meet them may bear fruit later on, fruit that we would not reap without this struggle. In the case of *Antigone*, these 'problems' and their transformations are laid out in the following table.

Challenge ('otherness' as a problem)	Solution ('otherness' as an advantage)
complicated textual structure, unknown words (literary expressions, etc.)	text as emotional record (emotional 'gestus', rhythmicity)
limits due to actors having a learning disability	performer 'with otherness' as an interpretative key to the situation
performer who cannot speak	multi-level interpretation of the characters due to the collective role
demanding nature of rehearsal	absence of overacting

The next four chapters will explain how these 'magical changes' occurred.



## Text as an Emotional Record, or Understanding Text through Emotions

It may look like sheer folly to turn up in front of actors with DS and tell them the story of *Antigone*: the story is complex and dark, and they do not seem to understand it – especially when it comes to actors who are only 15–25 years old.

If you expected us to prove that this is not the case, you will be waiting a long time, because that is quite simply how it is. **Storytelling, dramaturgical examination of a play's themes, or psychological analysis of characters will definitely not bring Antigone any closer to actors with DS...**<sup>49</sup> We, therefore, set out on a different (and perhaps even faster) path. Let us put it this way: with actors without DS, we walk up and down the stairs, whereas with actors with DS we use an elevator. We almost completely skip the interpretation of the text. Actors with DS come to understand the plot and themes very well **by playing their characters in specific situations and feeling the relevant emotions**. They perceive the intensity of the verses and the 'gestus' that is hidden in them.<sup>50</sup> From the very beginning, paradoxically, they interpret verses much more authentically than their colleagues without DS, who seem to think too much about the text. The meaning of the words and the unconventional composition of their lines hamper them. **The actors with DS understand the story and its situations internally**. And they live them out to the fullest. They put their own beliefs and current issues into the story.

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<sup>49</sup> *The actors were not very interested in the plot. But they cared about what text they would say and what they would do on stage. This is, basically, what most professional actors without disabilities are also interested in, but they do not reveal this to their colleagues and quite often they do not even admit it to themselves.*

<sup>50</sup> *See the chapter The Adventures of Translation and Ancient Greek Interjections.*

# ANTIGONE - FRAGMENTS OF REHEARSALS

1.



3.



Hana Bartoňová (the actress of Ismene, 15 years old) depicts bringing Antigone to Creon.



## A Performer with DS as an Interpretative Key to a Situation

Above, we have shown how the performers with DS bring their own themes to the production (see *May 2021: Antigone – a story about love and family?*). We will now describe in detail how performers with disabilities influence the interpretation of specific situations.

### Polynices: the weaker one

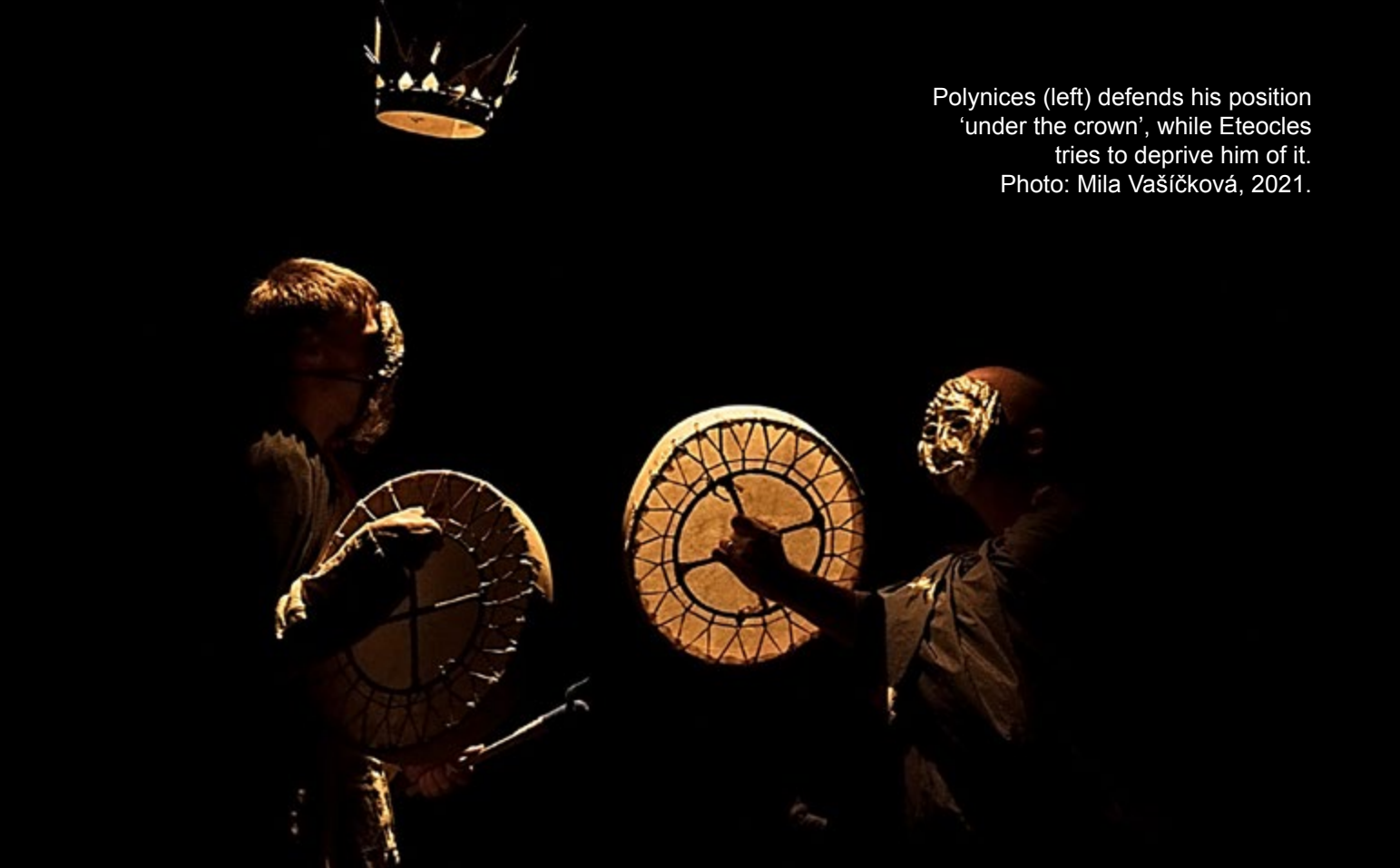
The drama begins with a struggle for the throne between two brothers, ending with the two brothers killing each other. Sophocles does not depict this passage, but only talks about it. We decided to show it because, for today's viewers, a visual message is stronger.

Eteocles is played by Jan Kyncl (without a disability), Polynices by Jakub Zahálka. Jakub does not have DS, but he has a physical disability which causes him prob-



lems with motor skills and makes his limbs look different. In the fighting scene, the two brothers simultaneously notice a crown hanging from the ceiling in a cone of light. At the same moment, they both rush to the stage to conquer it. We originally planned the following scene: the brothers would reach the crown together and would render their fratricidal battle with a duel of drums, circling around a cone of light and fighting by pounding on shamanic drums. Nevertheless, we found out later that Jakub looks weaker as a fighter, and that it was is not only difficult but completely pointless to hide this. So we changed the duel scene: both brothers now see the crown at the same time, but whereas Eteocles is on stage in an instant, stepping under the crown into a cone of light and bathing in glory, Polynices struggles to get onto the stage at all. Once he finally reaches the cone of light, Polynices suddenly cries out. Eteocles, who does not expect the cry, gets frightened and steps out of the circle. Polynices, who is now defending his position, enters the circle below the crown. Eteocles circles around him. Then, in the final clash, the two brothers kill each other.

In Sophocles's version, both brothers plan to take over the government, but Eteocles expels Polynices from the country. Polynices therefore gathers an army and invades his homeland. Creon forbids the burial of Polynices because it was he who had attacked the country, and in so doing Creon ignores the fact that it was Eteocles who first showed aggression and expelled Polynices. In ancient Greece, however, interne-cine aggression was not considered as transgressive as an attack on one's homeland, a judgement not necessary shared by today's viewers. In our production, the viewers' experience is also strongly influenced by the fact that they see two brothers struggling for the throne, one with a disability and the other without. Creon allows the 'healthy' one to be buried, while the second one is left to the vultures. In our version, we do not impose any specific interpretation of this visual image on the audience. They may perceive this situation as Creon being cruel to the weak – or not. For the director and actors, this situation worked very well, since it meant that **Jakub's disability became part of the plot.**



Polynices (left) defends his position 'under the crown', while Eteocles tries to deprive him of it.  
Photo: Mila Vašíčková, 2021.

### **Guileless Ismene and hedonistic Creon**

Even after a long time working with actors with DS, there were moments during rehearsals that we did not expect. For example, we discussed at length with Hana Bartoňová, Ismene's actress, whether she was ready for Lukáš Rieger to shout at her in his role as Creon. After all, she is a fragile girl, the youngest in the ensemble, and Lukáš is an imposing man. When we started rehearsing the scene, it was not clear whether Hana could handle it. She looked very unhappy. We were not quite sure whether this was Hana acting her role, or Hana the real person in real discomfort. After her line, *'Well, don't just have the idea in your heart /That what you say is the only right thing to say,'* she suddenly hugged Creon. This completely surprised Lukáš and everyone else at the rehearsal. By her actions, Hana emphasized Ismene's innocence and courage. The hug has been left in the production, and we are sure that no one without DS could have thought of this solution to the situation.

We experienced a similar situation with Lukáš Suchánek (he plays Creon together with Lukáš Rieger). Sometimes we encouraged him to portray emotions which he (the real Lukáš Suchánek) simply did not feel. His reactions helped us invent a more multi-fac-

eted Creon. One of his 'faces' was portrayed by Lukáš Rieger, who usually did something that had been agreed on with the director. Another 'face' was portrayed by Lukáš Suchánek, who stubbornly remained himself despite the director's instructions (for example, the woman's touch was not at all unpleasant for him). In the next chapter, we will say more about this interaction between the actors with DS and the actors without DS.



In addition to physical differences, the actors with DS often have certain personality traits which are more difficult to disguise than these of the other actors. Sometimes it is not possible to hide them at all. However, this is not always a disadvantage: with the right approach to directing, these characteristics can help the interpretation and bring unprecedented authenticity onto the stage.



## **A Non-Speaking Actor? The 'Collective Character' as a Path to a More Multi-Layered Interpretation**

*Antigone* was rehearsed by five actors with disabilities and five without. Two actors with DS were able to learn their lines almost like professional actors without disabilities, one actor had a non-speaking role and two actors with DS played the main characters (Antigone and Creon) even though their speech skills did not permit them to learn a single line in its entirety. We solved this problem by using a 'collective character': This meant collaboration with one (in the case of Creon) or two (in the case of Antigone) actors without disabilities. We had already gathered experience with 'collective characters' from *Cathy and Bajaja* and *The Golden Spinning Wheel*. But unlike with our previous use of this technique, in *Antigone* different actors contribute different meanings to the 'collective character', and the resulting mix gives the character its overall feel. What is more, in some situations it is still possible to distinguish the individual contributors to this 'collective character': they do not perform together or next to each other, but each is in a different place on the stage, each doing something different. This brings new possibilities for the mise-en-scène: new meanings, the multiplication of conflicts, or the strengthening of the resulting emotions. For example, Creon can walk around the guard 'from all sides', or in another scene, Creon can chat with Haemon, while (the second) Creon looks at Antigone, who is under arrest, and has a snack. Last but not least, every emotion expressed by our triple Antigone makes an impression three times stronger.

### **Creon: an easy-going guy and aggressor**

As already mentioned, the character of Creon was played together by Lukáš Rieger, a professional actor with no disability, and Lukáš Suchánek, an actor with DS. Although Lukáš Suchánek does not have any verbal block, he is able to perceive other actors in an unprecedented way. He is able to absorb, like a sponge, the nature of the stage situation that others have set up.

The following approach proved to be the most effective way of rehearsing: with Lukáš Rieger, we created the frame into which Lukáš Suchánek could pour his own content and expression. His (Suchánek's) expression stands at the crossroads be-

tween what he absorbs from his alter ego and what he himself is.<sup>51</sup> In this way, Lukáš Rieger rendered the character of Creon as a 'great aggressor' who only occasionally pretends to 'relax, sit in a chair and open a beer',<sup>52</sup> while Lukáš Suchánek was mostly easy-going: sometimes he 'absorbed' the aggression of his co-actor, but mostly he remained at ease 'in a chair with his open beer'.

It should be mentioned that in the final impression, Lukáš Suchánek did not look like an actor who could not hold his own. Thanks to his acting, Creon's character began to appear divided. **Inside himself**, Creon struggles between the compulsive need to solve everything immediately by aggression and the tendency to rest passively.

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51 *This is a sign that Lukáš Suchánek is a great actor in the first or second phase. The highest phase is still a matter for the future.*

52 *On stage, this tendency was in some places portrayed by the crunching of nibbles from the bowl.*



Lukáš Suchánek — „easy-going“ Kreon.  
Photo: Mila Vašíčková, 2021.



*The Creons threaten the guard.*  
Photo: Nikola Minářová, 2021.



*The Creons interrogate Antigone*  
Photo: Nikola Minářová, 2021.





*The Creons snack in front of the imprisoned sisters.  
Photo: Jiří Kottas, 2021.*

### **Antigone: persistent and animal**

While Lukáš Suchánek speaks in the whole performance with his incomprehensible language, the meaning of which we perceive through his co-actors, Eliška Vrbková as Antigone is able to say a few words or very short sentences. However, working with her was, paradoxically, more demanding: Antigone's text had to be divided into several streams. The most important words were left to Eliška, so that **her character could be the main one** among the three representatives of Antigone's 'collective character', not vice versa. In such a modified scenario, there was a problem with **the continuity of lines as well as with memory**: even after many rehearsals, we could not be sure whether Eliška would say her cues for the following dialogues. Therefore, it was nec-

essary to find a way for the other two actors playing Antigone to step in for Eliška if she found herself in a crisis and an unexpected pause in the action occurred.

Before we show the solution we found, let us take a closer look at Eliška's way of acting and examine why she was chosen for the role. Eliška can purposefully pursue her own goals, which is evident in all her expressions. Despite her fragile body, she is a strong, determined young lady. She does not always perceive the people around her, especially when acting. Sometimes, this is a disadvantage (when perceiving the other actors is necessary), but at other times, Eliška creates a kind of unstoppable ball of energy which 'explodes' in spite of everything and everyone around her. She naturally portrays Antigone as **a person who cannot talk with people**: Eliška, as Antigone, does not talk much, nor does she listen. She is persistent and unstoppable.

Eliška's nature and her energy worked in our favour, but we had to facilitate her dialogues with other characters (e.g. any dialogue between Eliška with DS as Antigone and Hanka with DS as Ismene was very problematic if nobody else intervened). We also had to sort out **how to maintain the tempo of the play** when actors slowed it down by forgetting their lines. At the same time, it seemed that when the other two performers of Antigone (Iveta Kocifajová and Zuzana Škopová) imitated the character created by Eliška, they were, in contrast to Eliška, rather dehumanized, austere, and even machine-like – it was not their true nature.

We solved this by changing the concept of the other two Antigones. We built all their speech on breathing: long, loud inhalations and exhalations together with song-like, prolonged speech. As a result, **more human emotions, bordering on animal passion**, are put into the characters. A female softness suddenly appears on the stage, something which contrasts with Eliška's conception of Antigone. At the same time, by using exaggerated breathing and the lengthening of words, the other two Antigones can whisper lines that Eliška will say later, or they can melismatically 'sing' the first word of the cue. The actresses often speak over each other, and in these cases the viewers cannot recognize whether a word was in the script or was just a prompt. There is also a change in movement connected with the additional breathing: whereas in the beginning we practiced holding statuesque postures (in some scenes Antigone is, in fact, portrayed as a statue), we now made Antigone move more like an animal. We let them turn to 'the main Antigone': Eliška is thus more connected to her colleagues and she acts better within the given scene. It also helps her to say her lines in time.

Antigone was both stubborn and non-communicative (Eliška), as well as very emotional and animalistic (the other two Antigones). Because Eliška represented the 'main' Antigone, one could get the impression that Antigone was tough on the outside, unerringly pursuing her goals, but very emotional on the inside, with sympathetic feelings for other people (as portrayed by Iveta and Zuzana).

*Eliška Vrbková as Antigone.  
Photo: Jiří Kottas, 2021.*



*Antigones perform a funeral ritual.  
On the left, Zuzana Škopová,  
on the right, Iveta Kocifajová.  
Photo: Nikola Minářová, 2021.*





*Antigones Eliška Vrbková  
and Zuzana Škopová.  
Photo: Nikola Minářová, 2021.*





*The three Antigones lament over the curse of their genus. In the middle, there is a reminder of their father Oidipus, who gouged out his own eyes.  
Photo: Nikola Minářová, 2021.*

## **The Performers with DS: More Fatigue and More Problems?**

In addition to specific problems with dramaturgy, directing, acting, we also had purely technical problems. Rehearsals were very demanding. There are often several characters on the stage at the same time and each of them has to do something different. It is difficult for the performers with DS to orient themselves in those situations, i.e. to remember when to enter and exit, what props to put where, etc. As a result, we had to carefully draw up a very complex chart showing which actors without disabilities would send which actors with DS onto or off the stage. In addition, behind the scenes, each actor with a disability had to have his or her own labelled chair, because otherwise the actor might peek around of the side curtains or disappear to the dressing room just before an entry.

The actors were also tired, so we had to encourage them repeatedly. The project was demanding and, unlike in previous productions, we could not allow any individual

actor to refuse to work on a certain part of the rehearsal. Thus, the actors had to submit to the needs of the group, something which they all managed very well in the end.

It should be mentioned that all the actors, whether they have DS or not, got very tired during rehearsals. The actor Lukáš Rieger recalls:

*When rehearsing, actors with DS experience exactly the same feelings as actors without DS. It's just that actors without disabilities are better at hiding those feelings. In addition to the joy of succeeding, one feels sadness, doubt, and anger that a production is not developing exactly according to one's own vision of it. While working on Antigone, I sometimes see myself reflected in an actor with DS who is causing just the kind of trouble that I would cause in that situation, if only I dared. I realise that sometimes I actually do things like that, too – only in a more subtle and efficient way, thereby making everybody else's work more difficult. Unlike my strategies, however, the incidents with these actors are easy to recognize and more funny than annoying. Their expressions of joy are definitely more spontaneous and more frequent. When it comes to arrangements, motivation, and text, they understand everything. The way they express it is as authentic as with other actors. But when they are acting, they hedge less than the actors without disabilities. They tend to play at full steam.*

*(RIEGER, 2021)*

The performers with DS are more spontaneous and filter their emotions less. Therefore, in some cases, the current negative emotion (I'm tired!) outweighs the need to grit one's teeth and persevere so that the rehearsal can arrive at some end. The obverse of the same coin is the fact that actors with DS do not hide their negative feelings. Fully in line with the statement of actor Lukáš Rieger:

*The actors with DS do not temper their acting, they play at full steam.*

*(RIEGER, 2021)*

As Martin Kříž, an actor with DS, puts it:

*I give my all, no matter what happens.*

*(KŘÍŽ, 2021)*



## Conclusion

*Antigone* was a touchstone: **is it possible to stage interpretive theatre in verse with very young actors with DS?** To answer 'yes' or 'no' would not be sufficient. The correct answers are:

Yes, even with actors whose speaking ability is minimal.

Yes, actors with DS, even those who do not speak, can fully understand what they are performing.

Yes, actors with DS contribute significantly to the interpretation of the text.

With *Antigone*, we aimed to achieve the third stage of acting – that is, **acting roles**, and we have succeeded with some of our actors. At the same time, we did not insist on it unless the actor was mature enough for it. Actors not mature enough were not excluded from the production, but on the contrary, their (first or second) stage of acting contributes to a more varied and layered artistic result.

Theatres with actors with disabilities are sometimes, a priori, considered political and community theatres or the theatres of the oppressed. Using the example of *Antigone*, we have shown how the characteristics of these individual actors can be used to positive ends, as well as how to overcome the problems that inevitably pop up. It is important to realise that co-actors without disabilities also experience both intense and problematic moments. However, in their case, these moments are not so visible. *Antigone* originated in an balanced and **equal dialogue**, where we complemented each other. Therefore, **we cannot speak of 'integration theatre'** here, because it is not clear who actually gets integrated and into what: the actors with DS into the world of the actors without DS, or vice versa?

Talking about actors with DS only in terms of how well they managed to learn their lines would be very shallow. They bring **new thematic layers** to the production, or emphasise themes that are often sidelined. They also **participate in the frequently non-traditional directorial-acting processing of individual situations**.

*Antigone* by the Aldente Theatre is the result of combining the life experiences and the worldviews of all the team members, regardless of age or disability. Only this kind of dialogue can create something that will **transcend each of us**.

An addition, a picture from preparations of the production: from the left side the actress Iveta Kocifajová, the scenographer Zuzana Hejtmánková and the director Jiřka Vrbková. The Aldente Theatre is used to dealing with various stuff, for instance the children's presence at the rehearsal. Photo: Tomáš Král, 2021.









# The Journey of an Actor with Down's Syndrome... or the Journey alongside an Actor with Down's syndrome?

On the previous pages, we have explored the journey of an actor with DS to cognisant artistic creation. Various possible problems and the corresponding solutions and options were described. There were even opportunities brought up by the actors' specific traits, which in everyday life is mostly considered a hindrance.

It is impossible not to notice that there was also another journey in parallel to the one of the actors with DS: the journey of an artist with no disability, walking **alongside** the actor with DS. At the beginning, this professional artist is the one who leads the other one, but then there are moments where the roles switch. It is noticeable that actors with DS gradually grow in stature; but how about the change in those who share this adventure with them?

Let us look now at the testimonies of several co-creators without disabilities:

## **David Tchelidze: Confrontation with unforced energy**

*At the beginning<sup>53</sup> (...) I thought that doing theatre with actors with learning disabilities would be more of a work of charity. (...) I definitely did not expect to be enriched in any artistic way.*

*Now, after a couple of years, I know that it is a powerful experience being on a stage during rehearsals or shows and being confronted with the unforced energy, emotional directness, and unusual group dynamics*

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<sup>53</sup> David Tchelidze speaks about his first experience from the production *Mommy, you are as important as boom barriers in a tunnel!*. Theatre Aldente produced this play in 2014. (Denisa Střihavková, Jitka Vrbková and collective: *Mommy, you are as important as boom barriers in a tunnel!*. Directed by: Jitka Vrbková. Theatre Aldente, in Brno 2014).

*of the Aldente Theatre's actors. One begins to think about how he himself is different. Many questions cross one's mind when meeting with an honest performance of moods and emotions by these actors, our colleagues: Would I myself be so thrilled to be on stage? And why am I thrilled now, or am I not? Is it noticeable? Or what are conditions that leave me, in contrast, so disgusted and unmotivated? And why have I learned to hide it and just continue? Is that good for me?*

*They remind us that everything is just in our head and can disappear, for example, when we yell at something out loud – meaning our world's rules, ideas about what is acceptable, what should be done and how, how one commonly behaves in a specific situation, and what a reasonable level of emotions is. Now, when I go to a rehearsal with the Aldente Theatre's actors, I expect to be inspired by them.*

(TCHÉLIDZE, 2020)

### **Zuzana Škopová: The authenticity of the moment**

*After a first rehearsal with the actors with DS, I felt absolutely fulfilled. I did not expect this to be routine theatre work, and I was not disappointed. Soon I understood that for actors with DS, everything is about the present moment and the authenticity of the moment, more than to any of the rest of us. To me, every rehearsal meant a connection of two worlds. We tried to show them, for example, the order and systematic work with which we create things. They showed us the magic of the moment when the most important thing is that we are together.*

(ŠKOPOVÁ, 2021)

Jan Kyncl, who has been working with the Theatre Aldente for a long time, offers more of an overall reflection. He began by leading music therapy sessions even before the three-year project TA CR began. Now he works in the theatre as a composer and actor.

### **Jan Kyncl: Actors with DS and archetypes**

*My work with Aldente Theatre's actors began during the music therapy sessions. There I noticed the very thin line between their artistic image and reality. They did not have to deal with the standard 'healthy' population's self-criticism of their own artistic activities. Every emotional change*

*was directly expressed with a sound or movement. But the absence of a control mechanism resulted in a rough, raw form.*

*During the music therapy sessions, I learned to work with these expressions, like a sculptor working in stubborn but beautiful granite. Over time, I was able to impose structure on these sessions, but not much. Due to my love of improvisation, I did not mind; it rather inspired me. I have improved in my flexible response to these literal 'outbursts of pure nature'.*

*Here I begin to think about the archetypal nature of the artistic content which emerged from these actors. (...) The complex of emotions from our sessions became more precise while they were preparing theatre productions. Everything happened in a river of time, where each individual actor descended one riverbank as an adolescent and aimed for the other riverbank, adulthood. During this process, their expressions became more precise, the need to have a role in life became more intense, and archetypes were developed. I could see brutal Mother Nature changing into a tender mistress, and a stubborn son fighting his father and becoming a grown-up hero. (...)*

*This whole process peaked for me when working on Antigone. Here, a clear antique world of tragedy met a dark world of living emotions emerging authentically. I realised what an amazing gift it was, seeing these actors being so purely truthful while working on Antigone, in the middle of an ancient text. Their ability to **stay true to the essence** is priceless in terms of the functionality of tragedy and theatre. Thus the spectator can perceive archetypal and potentially transforming experiences.*

*(KYNCL, 2021)*

All three of these reflections describe very well what it is like to work, as an artist, with actors with DS. It is never only about education and personality development for actors with DS. It will always be about the encounter of two worlds which enrich each other.

Our task was to help the actors with DS to learn how to shape their acting in order to extend their artistic opportunities. In return, they showed us the ability to be in the here and now, living in this specific moment with maximum subjectivity.

Now it is time to step back a bit from the journey we walk together with these actors with DS. How does this journey look from a greater distance or height? How does it look from the outside?



The last part of this publication will thus offer a more disinterested view. Theatre with actors with DS and its inclusive influence will be observed by a psychologist, a special education teacher and a theatre professional. Each will be from a different airplane with different monitoring radars. We, the creators, have already said what we wanted – now it is time to pass the word to the observers. Let us sit down and listen to the same story being narrated from another point of view, by another narrator.



*'To experience this moment  
with a maximum of concreteness  
and subjectivity!'  
Jitka Vrbková, the director  
Photo: Jiří Kottas, 2021.*



*'With Aldente, I am  
ready to be surprised.'  
Jan Kyncl, the musician  
Photo: Míla Vašíčková, 2018.*

*'Theatre Aldente? Here and now,  
which cannot be predicted.'*  
Iveta Kocifajová, the actress  
and pedagogue  
Photo: Jiří Kottas, 2021.





*'To work in Aldente is like bringing a gift  
to someone and realizing that I am the  
gift's recipient upon handing it over.'*  
Václav Dvořák, the actor  
Photo: Jiří Kottas, 2018.







**A View from  
the Outside:**

***Inclusion through  
Theatre***





# **Inclusion through Theatre Observed by a Psychologist: an Analysis of the Attitudes of Audiences, Actors with Down's Syndrome and Their Parents**

*Lenka Pivodová*

## **Research Objective**

The aim of this three-year research project, running from 2019–2021, was to describe as comprehensively as possible whether and how child actors with Down's syndrome influence society, and how society (audiences) and theatre itself influence actors with DS. We asked the following questions: What is it like for actors with DS to perform for mainstream society? What are the potential pitfalls? Can theatre featuring actors with DS have any specific benefits for audiences? Is the line between normality and otherness blurred, i.e. is it essentially different to be an actor with DS or not? What reciprocal benefits does this theatre have for both sides? Can theatre contribute to the inclusion and integration of people with DS into society?

As the research focused on two main objectives – the first dealing with descriptions by parents and actors with DS themselves, and the second targeting the audience members – we divided the research into two parts: the part addressing the actors with DS together with their parents, and the part addressing the audience.

# The First Part of the Research (Actors with Down's Syndrome and Their Parents)

## The Method of the First Part of the Research

The first part of the research investigates what benefits, changes, advantages, or disadvantages performing in front of mainstream society can have for the actors themselves. The ways in which the actors improve and what it is like for them to perform in productions for an audience was ascertained as follows: through the observation of rehearsals, through one-day and multi-day workshops, and through interviews with the actors themselves (see appendix), as well as by conducting semi-structured interviews with their parents in 2019 (see appendix), and then by an assessment questionnaire in which the parents answered questions assessing the past three years of rehearsals and repeat performances of the productions *Cathy and Bajaja*, *The Golden Spinning Wheel*, and *Antigone* (see appendix). This questionnaire also reflected the specific lockdown periods that affected rehearsals and performances. Interviews with the actors and parents were recorded on a dictaphone, transcribed, and coded. Each relevant utterance was colour-coded according to its meaning. At the same time, when a circle of similar meanings appeared, this category of utterances was given a name. The categories were then merged into larger units relating to particular areas. The actors themselves also answered a few questions about their performance and participation in theatre. Participation in all the types of interviews described above was voluntary.

### The description of the sample in the first part of the research

The ensemble of actors with DS grew over the course of the three years. The research took place from January 2019 to June 2021. At that time, the theatre company had eight permanent actors, six girls and two boys aged 13–19. In August 2019, these eight respondents answered questions about their participation in theatre. For the production of *Cathy and Bajaja*, the theatre troupe was supplemented with two girls, aged six and eight. Over the two years that the research was conducted, the ensemble took in three more boys. Thus, at the end of data collection in June 2021, the ensemble had eleven stable members, six girls and five boys aged 15–24, nine of whom have DS and two boys who have another type of disability. All these actors were observed



during rehearsals and performances. The parents of the children who participated in the research were aged 36–46 years. During 2019, two fathers and eight mothers of the actors with DS participated in semi-structured interviews. Four fathers and five mothers of the actors with DS completed the written questionnaire.

### **The ethics of the first part of the research**

The parents of the actors signed consent forms for research involving their children. The intention of the research was explained to both the parents and the children, and all data were processed anonymously. They were informed that the data would be recorded, transcribed, and coded. Participation in the research was voluntary.

## **The Results of the First Part of the Research**

In order to describe as accurately as possible the impact that involvement in theatre can have on actors with disabilities, we asked the actors themselves. We observed individual rehearsals and performances. We monitored how they learn their acting skills, their lines, how they interact, how they interact with actors who have no disability and perform together with them. In this context, their parents are also very important for children with DS. Since actors with DS often cannot express or describe some of the information themselves, or have no insight into some of it, we also asked their parents how they perceived the impact of acting on their children.

### **The statements of child actors with DS and the observation of the rehearsal process**

After transcribing and coding, the semi-structured interviews with the actors were analysed. The responses were usually brief and simple. Still, we detected four categories of responses that child actors used in order to characterize their participation in the theatre company. Some of the responses reflected earlier Aldente Theatre productions. They all said they **enjoyed theatre**. One actress (14 years old) stated, *'I enjoy being an actress the most. The important thing is being an actress and Julie.'* (Julie is one of the characters in the play *The Wall*). *'I enjoy theatre,'* mentioned the actor with DS (14 years old). *'I enjoy rehearsing and acting,'* said the actress with DS (14 years old).

Another category detected was the joy of being able to express what they currently like on stage, in individual productions. It was in the theatre that actors with

DS were given the opportunity **to utilise their individual abilities and kinds of otherness**. These statements were evaluated in this way by observing the actors in rehearsals. Thus, we got to know the actors better and were able to understand the meaning of their statements better. *'I enjoy the spinner a lot,'* mentioned the actress with DS, 15 years old (this actress liked it a lot, she liked to play with this toy on a regular basis, and she could bring it into the performance). *'I enjoy playing with the hairdryer, or when I say nonsense.'* The actress with DS (14 years old) refers to the fact that sometimes she says something that is not part of the play and it actually amuses others. Not just the ensemble itself, but the audience as well.

The next category describes the fact that individual members of the ensemble have strong bonds and **strong friendships with other members with disabilities**. They experience both pleasant and sometimes unpleasant interactions with each other. This is an important part of their social life. *'I like ...,'* the actress (15 years old) lists the names of all her friends from the group. We also received a negative reaction from an actress with DS (14 years old): *'She threw me out of the room and then there was a conflict between us. Now it's good.'*

The actors' statements also refer to **interaction with the audience**. They are aware of what the viewers like and when they applaud. They realise that they can entertain the audience and be funny: *'They like it when we sing songs, they like everything'* (actress with DS, 14 years old). They notice that they are interesting in some way – they do things that ordinary children do not do. For example, an actress with DS (15 years old) mentions this: *'It's interesting for them: I do para-vaulting and they were surprised, they had no idea what it was all about.'*

As we have had the opportunity to be at many rehearsals and workshops, we have noticed how important permanent membership in the theatre group is for them, and how beneficial it is for them both individually and collectively to meet those who have the same disability. At rehearsals, the actors were able to express their nature to the fullest. They could shout, laugh, and show different emotions – all of which is part of their nature. They usually communicate through emotions. By practicing these emotional expressions in acting out dramatic etudes, they learn to regulate their emotions in everyday life. Membership in an acting group is also a great motivation and a driving force for them. Thus, they learn not to spoil the performances of others.

## The statements of parents

From the individual statements, 21 categories were detected and divided into five ranges of topics:

- 1) a range of topics on cognitive abilities and personality skills,
- 2) a range of topics on acting abilities,
- 3) a range of topics related to the need for inclusion and to the benefits of a homogeneous group of people with specific needs,
- 4) a range of topics on the impact on parents,
- 5) a unique range of topics on the specifics of lockdown.

The individual thematic headings and their associated categories will now be described:

### 1) A range of topics on cognitive abilities and personality skills

All parents attested to certain abilities of their children, which, in their opinion, had been improved or enhanced by their performing in the theatre ensemble. Seven categories of statements were detected that characterized, mostly, the improvement or enhancement of those abilities. Many of them reported **improvement in language skills**. Children with DS usually have difficulties with pronunciation and expression. From an early age, many parents work with them to develop language skills, attending speech therapy. It seems that the learning and repetition of the texts themselves, as well as the motivation of performing in front of an audience, can improve their language abilities.

*'...he improved tremendously as he rehearsed 'Bajaja', he had to learn it, memorise it, and then perceive his pronunciation. Rehearsing helped him a lot...'* (father of actor with DS, 46 years old); *'...it definitely encourages the children to try to communicate better and more clearly verbally, it's a great motivation...'* (mother of an actor with DS, 46 years old). On the other hand, one mother (40 years old) noticed a disability caused by the great motivation to pronounce correctly: *'... in the pursuit of maximum acting performance, she started to stutter...'*

**Improvements in non-verbal communication skills** were also registered. Parents mention that thanks to the acting training, their children have improved in non-verbal expression, for example, in expressing themselves through facial expressions and gestures: *'... even at school they noticed that she has changed her expressions, they praise her now...'* (father of an actress with DS, 42 years old); *'...she has developed her communication skills, not only her speech, but also the way she walks, the way she wants to communicate something to others...'* (mother of an actress with DS, 45 years old).



**Improved memory** was also mentioned by parents. During this research, the text for three productions needed to be learnt. This learning required 'homework' in the form of memorisation. **The children's improved concentration time** has been mentioned several times by parents. Specifically, *'maintaining attention and concentration'* was mentioned by the father of an actor with DS (46 years old). The mother of an actress with DS (40 years old) says: *'I notice that her concentration has improved, it's also about her sense of responsibility – that she can't just sit down and say, I can't go on anymore...'*

Being a member of the ensemble means attending many rehearsals or workshops. The children spend longer periods of time without their parents. There is also **an improvement in independence**, which is always a challenge for children with DS and their parents. *'Becoming independent, managing several hours of rehearsals on their own ...'* mentions the mother of an actress with DS (40 years old). Another mother of an actor with DS (46 years old) mentions that *'... the summer camp was a completely new experience for me, when my son was left without my supervision to develop his own independence there, it is a priceless experience.'* Furthermore, parents mentioned **patience, perseverance or interest** precisely because their children (actors with DS) enjoy theatre. The fact that the children are part of a group and a long-term project shows perseverance and their desire to complete a task.

*'She still has an ongoing interest in and drive for theatre, she can learn something for a long time and still enjoy it, I've never noticed her saying anything bad about it...'* (mother of an actress, 40 years old).

**Improved self-esteem** was also recorded during the interviews: *'At rehearsals, her confidence is definitely bolstered when the director shows her that she is doing it right. When she gets something right in the theatre, it's good. They used to tell us, you have to activate her, otherwise it won't work...'* (mother of an actress with DS, aged 46). *'She feels good being on stage. She enjoys it, she is good at it, and she has confidence. It also helped her a lot that she was making a film'* (mother of an actress with DS, 40 years old). Parents also described that children learnt to be more **spontaneous**. These parents mentioned that they had been strict with their children in observing the rules so that they could best integrate into mainstream society. They then said that through theatre, the children learnt to behave and express themselves more spontaneously: *'... she's sort of relaxed now, she is able to be more natural, we put a lot of demands on her to make her fit into society, and maybe then she started to control herself too much ...'* (mother of an actress with DS, 44 years old). *'Her imagination and fantasy are poor compared to the other girls, but I was pleased to see her attempts to improvise, for example how she would like to be a flower, an animal...'* (mother of an actress with DS, 40 years old).

## 2) A range of topics on acting abilities

Aldente Theatre's first plays *Maminko, jsi důležitá, jak šraňky v tunelu* (*Mommy, you are as important as boom barriers in a tunnel*), *Who am I?*, and *Zed'* (*The Wall*) were so-called identification plays. They were original plays dealing mostly with the topic of Down's syndrome: how children and parents cope with it and how they are affected by it in society. In these plays, the actors mostly played themselves, or at least partly. Then came the productions that became the focus of this research. In them, there was a specific role for each member that was not thematically related to their disability.

As further progress, parents mention **the acceptance of a role, playing a specific character**: *'As a positive shift, I see her involvement in the structure of the performance, her accepting the role'* (mother of an actress, 46 years old). *'The children feel that they are acting something, they understand what theatre is, they feel that they have to perform something that they have to act.'* (mother of an actress with DS, 44 years old).

Another important category was belonging to the theatre and to a group of other young people, **the actor's identity**. As one mother of an actress with DS (45 years old) mentions, *'She has her own hobby. She realises that it is only hers, not her parents. They are simply actors.'* The father of another actor with DS (46 years old) also sees this as a possible disadvantage due to school education, *'He is less interested in school, he believes he'll be an actor.'*

## 3) A range of topics related to the need for inclusion and to the benefits of a homogeneous group of people with specific needs

Another phenomenon observed among the children was the need for or importance of 'being among their own kind'. At the same time, they are aware that they can perform for the rest of society and give something to them. And they can also perform with actors from mainstream theatres. In interviews, parents often mentioned a simple but important fact that children **do enjoy** being part of theatre.

For them, it is not just a leisure activity or hobby but also the sense of belonging to others and a long-term project. It is also something that teaches them new things and motivates them to improve themselves. The father of an actor with DS (46 years old) mentions the son's *'huge enthusiasm for acting'*. Another mother of an actress with DS (38 years old) confirms: *'She always looks forward to it a lot. She never said, 'I don't want to go to the theatre, I don't want to rehearse'...'*. For them, it is important to meet friends of the same age who have the same goal and, a phenomenon described in another category already mentioned: **the importance of a group of friends with DS and their cooperation with the ensemble**. Most parents mentioned that their children developed stable relationships thanks to similar experiences from workshops and camps. The mother of an actress with DS (44 years old) recounts: *'...my daughter*

*loves those children, she loves being with those people, among her own friends. She is integrated, she loves her school, but the older she gets, the more I see that she feels good among her theatre friends as well as with the others. That's why it's definitely good when she can meet them in this way. She feels good with her theatre friends as well as with others. Both milieus are important, each in its own way.'* The need for children with DS to meet together is also confirmed by another mother of an actress (40 years old): *'...she considers herself to be part of the theatre company, and she loves it. She made friends with the other children. It's good that they can spend time together.'*

Concurrently, parents describe encounters with the rest of society as beneficial. The mother of an actress with DS (38 years old) describes: *'... she invited her classmates to the theatre, they liked it, they could see her as a different person than the one they only know from school. They came to the theatre to support her, they liked it very much, they were surprised what she was able to manage.'* Another encounter with the rest of society is characterised by the fact that the Aldente Theatre consists of actors with DS along with actors with no disability from various theatres. These statements were included in the category of **encounters with the rest of society**. These encounters were also mentioned as positive by parents during interviews: *'...the cooperation with professional theatre makers was beneficial, they inspired her and advised how to express herself in various theatrical situations.'* (father of an actress, 46 years old). One actor's mother (46 years old) and father (48 years old) both say: *'Playing theatre is an amazing form of socialization for us in the first place. It is a great bunch, and the directors take our children as partners. They trust them and give them space for self-fulfillment. This is very important. It's an exceptional place where we as parents don't have to defend our children and fight for them so that they can be there.'*

#### **4) A range of topics on impacts on parents**

Originally, the objective of the interviews with parents was to gather as many findings as possible about their children with DS in their roles as actors. During the interviews, some statements emerged that were included in the topic of how long-term collaboration with theatre affects the parents of the actors themselves. The fact that their child with a disability is on stage and has something to say to others also changed some of their attitudes.

One of the impacts was the fact that **these kinds of performance 'transcend' themselves**. Specifically, it is the realization that even their child can enrich society. *'It works to raise public awareness, but she doesn't think about that yet, she perceives that she is different, but she doesn't worry about it'* (mother of an actress with DS, 46 years old). Another mother of an actress with DS (40 years old) mentions: *'There's a point in doing this activity. We want her to do meaningful things... What the director does is*



*meaningful. If it were just a tale about Cinderella, it would be completely different. But this has depth. Other mothers, including myself, were moved.'*

Another category mentioned was **coping with the child's disability**. Parents often described how they had tried to educate their children in the most socially acceptable way so that they could have the best chance of asserting themselves in society. (*'I often tell her, learn so that you can be accepted by school – she needs to be corrected much more than children without disabilities. She was mainly exposed to many orders and prohibitions, do this, don't do that,'* said the actress's mother, 39). However, they tend to be themselves in the theatre. Their specificity, i.e. disability, is often perceived as an advantage. In the theatre, they can be not what they are expected or supposed to be, but what they really are.

*'Sometimes it worries me that it (theatre) encourages things which are inappropriate under normal circumstances. It emphasizes their disabilities. For example, the screams. As a mother, I am much more sensitive to this, I have to cope with it'* (mother of an actress with DS, 45 years old). Another mother (44 years old) also describes a change in her attitude: *'... as a parent, I had to go through that ... when you see it on stage, you don't feel well when you see your child's disability. But you have to go through it. And then the situation gets more relaxed and you see it completely differently. So theatre helped me cope with having a child with a disability.'*

##### **5) A range of topics on lockdown specifics**

The opportunity to rehearse and perform was reduced by the covid pandemic almost for one full year. This fact was inevitably reflected in the statements describing some specific aspects of our work, and, at the same time, confirmed the categories already identified. Parents were used to taking their children to rehearsals and workshops by car. Suddenly, many rehearsals had to take place on-line. Parents mentioned that as a result, their children began **to orient themselves better in time**, as they began to be responsible for their internet connection themselves. In essence, this seems to confirm a further improvement in cognitive ability. Parents also mentioned their children's **feelings of sadness and longing for friends**. This confirms the strong bond between the individual members of the ensemble but at the same time it is exactly the same feeling that many of their peers without disabilities have. Parents also described their children's **gradual adaptation to the situation**, which basically means healthy development of the child.

## The Second Part of the Research (Audience)

### The Method of the Second Part of the Research

The second part of the research aimed to find out how the theatre with actors with Down's syndrome is perceived by the audience. We asked ourselves whether performances featuring actors with DS are something different for them, something specific in comparison with 'common' performances. We investigated whether through this specific encounter viewers can notice some of their prejudices about disabilities, or whether they can change their beliefs. The aim was to describe, as best as possible, whether the performance with actors with DS can have any benefits, or what the pitfalls for the perception of disability are across society. Whether and how the performance created by people with disabilities can contribute to inclusion in society.

But can we measure inclusion? In order to find out answers to these questions, we asked the audience about their first impressions immediately after the performance. We wondered if they perceived the performance differently precisely because of the disability itself, what appealed to them or what disturbed and bothered them in the performance.

These semi-structured interviews were recorded on a dictaphone, then transcribed and coded. The processing was similar to the first part of the research. The statements were colour-coded. Then, they were merged into individual categories according to their importance. After that, each category was assigned a name or description, initially in colour.

### The description of the sample in the second part of the research

The respondents taking part in the second part of the research were the viewers of the performances *Cathy and Bajaja*, *The Golden Spinning Wheel*, and *Antigone*. The research took place exactly from the premiere of *Cathy and Bajaja* in the autumn of 2019 to the premiere of *Antigone* in the spring of 2021. A total of 42 interviews were conducted with audiences aged 19–63 ( $r = 36.1$ ), of which 28 were women aged 21–63 years ( $r = 35.8$ ) and 14 men aged 19–62 years ( $r = 36.7$ ). Out of the total number of 42 respondents, 18 of them saw a performance at the Aldente Theatre for the first time, the remaining 24 attended a performance more times than once.

## The ethics of the second part of the research

Before each interview, we explained the aim of the research to the respondents. We informed them that the interview would be anonymous and that it would be recorded on the dictaphone due to the accuracy of the statements. Participation in the research was voluntary.

## The Results of the Second Part of the Research

The statements of all the viewers/respondents were sorted into 14 categories. Depending on the topic, these 14 categories were classified into the following three areas:

- 1) impressions and emotions,
- 2) I perceive/do not perceive the disability,
- 3) inclusion – breaking stereotypes.

In the first area, which was described as **impressions and emotions**, three categories of statements were assigned. In them, people described how the performance staged by actors with disabilities affected them emotionally.

Viewers often mentioned that they were **cheerful** during the performance, they had a smile on their faces: *'I was absolutely excited, I found myself laughing. I was incredibly happy all the time when I was here with you. The Golden Spinning Wheel is a sad piece, but I'm glad I can be here.'* (Male, 51 years old)

Another category was called **a funny disability?!**. It was the expression of a dilemma: the actors with DS sometimes seemed very funny to the audience and made them laugh. Some viewers mentioned the ambivalence – that they would like to laugh but wondered if laughter was not a ridiculing reaction. Others dared to laugh. This, too, could be overcoming the prejudice that people with disabilities can be funny, not ridiculous. The woman (30 years old) mentions: *'What surprised me the most was how the actors were terribly funny. That their disability was funny – but in the manner in which it should be funny. I felt that it was natural. The fact they were talking and moving differently was very beautiful.'*

According to the statements, the audience was often surprised. They did not expect the impressions that the performance would make on them. The category was named after the most common description: **unexpected, it took my breath away**. Ac-



According to the statements, some viewers went to the performance because they wanted to support the actors, but they were surprised by their acting and by the quality of the production (*'Unexpected, I want to come again,'* woman, 22 years old; *'It took my breath away, I didn't expect it,'* woman, 24 years old.)

The next area **I perceive/do not perceive the disability** included statements such as: Was the disability essentially perceived as a part of the performance? Or was it not perceived as important at all, with the artistic impression prevailing as a whole?

The individual expressions of the audience, who **perceived the disability only minimally**, formed the following categories:

**Focus on the performance as a whole:** The respondents mentioned that they perceived the production as a whole – they did not perceive the single aspects such as the disability itself. The rendition of the performance, including scenery, lighting, selection of roles for individual actors, and the acting maturity of individual actors with disabilities contribute to their 'holistic' perception. (*'They are just like professional actors, they play with dedication and perfectly, I can't distinguish them from professional actors,'* a 46-year-old woman; another respondent [a 62-year-old] added: *'I actually take it as a whole. In fact, you find that you don't notice the disabilities too much...'*)

**More focus on content, form, plot, and scene:** When expressing their first impressions of the performance, some viewers evaluated the form and the type of alternative or site-specific theatre rather than the fact that the ensemble consists of the actors with disabilities. (*'What was different for me was the structure of the show, I was expecting a story. I was a little disappointed at the beginning ... the music was great, it resonated with the performance,'* added the man, 43 years old.)

**Connecting actors with DS with actors without disabilities:** The finding often mentioned was about how professional actors and actors with disabilities work together on stage. Some viewers were surprised that this connection does not disturb the performance. It is often not known who is leading the performance, they cooperate as equal partners. (*'There wasn't a single moment when the actors without disabilities had problems. If you compare it to the 'common acting' of an amateur 'intact' ensemble, you often find some problems. It didn't happen here, acting and cooperation seemed to be very natural,'* said the interviewed woman, 29 years old.)

Some viewers – by contrast – perceived the production as exceptional in various respects precisely because the disability itself was 'added value'. It was something that does not usually appear in other productions – **I perceive the disability**. These statements consisted of the following three categories:

**'Added value', which consisted in the 'otherness' of the performance:** The respondents mentioned that the otherness itself made them perceive the performance

from a different perspective. One respondent – a male (25 years old, coincidentally an actor) – states, for example, how he perceived the mistakes or imperfections of the performance, which in this context turned mostly in ‘quality features’: *‘You can make mistakes, but it is not allowed in our society. The permission of that mistake... Suddenly you tune into a completely different wave of your acting. In the theatre without disabilities, if you, as an actor, make a mistake, you either let it go or you think, ‘we screwed it up completely’. In this performance, there is no mistake here. Everything is allowed and everything is integrated into the shape.’*

**Actors play and experience at the same time:** This category contains the statements that characterise the ability of people with DS to feel and experience a particular moment, as well as how this characteristic enriches them during the performance. People with DS are very sociable and emotionally developed. During the performances, the audience noticed how the actors played emotions, but also how they experienced the situation in their way. This feature was perceived as an advantage in comparison with professional actors without DS. (*‘The basic element of it was that they enjoyed it, it had rhythm, energy, and drive,’* male, 30 years old; *‘It works better than some feigned, pretended emotions – the viewer experiences something unique here, and that’s beautiful about it. When the King knows what to say, he must concentrate properly. And at the same time, he gives his part the unique meaning through the process of strong experiencing,’* said the man, 52 years old.)

**Community:** Due to the age of the actors with DS, their parents and relatives are of great help. They are the friends of the Aldente Theatre, who support the actors, take them to the venues, and are available when anything is needed for the theatre. These people are not visible during the performance itself, but they are a very important part of the team. At the same time, they form a kind of community. They already know each other very well, and many of them are friends. If there is some kind of workshop after the performance (such as after the performance of *Cathy and Bajaja*), or if the performance takes place in another location where the viewers have to travel and can stay after the production (such as *The Golden Spinning Wheel* in the parish of Lechovice, where the local viewers could sit down for a while, barbecue and have an informal chat with each other as well as with the actors and their parents), a certain community ‘overlap’ is created that would not arise after a ‘common theatre production’. In the audience, the performance resonates, and they can share their experiences. They can informally approach the people in the community with disabilities. The interviews show that the experience of the community dimension is a very strong element. It is ‘added value’ to the performance, which tends to interconnect these worlds more. (*‘It still creates the community of people, the community element is very strong here. Even in previous performances ... it’s an experience that isn’t exclusively theatrical,’* a 25-year-old male. *‘It’s about experiencing the community that invites these people and is open,’* a 24-year-old female.)

The third area, which connects the last five categories detected in the interviews, is called **inclusion**. These categories describe situations where the individual respondents had some expectations that were fulfilled differently. The respondents describe breaking various prejudices about disabilities, which they did not think they had. They pondered the purpose of these performances for the general public.

**The surprising disruption of stereotypes:** The respondents often mentioned how much text the actors with DS and learning disabilities are able to learn and, at the same time, authentically act out. They admired the fact that they performed in front of the audience without much stage fright, responded to the audience's reactions, and cooperated with professional actors. The woman (24 years old) describes her experience as follows: *'I was prejudiced that it would not be so interesting. But this was an initiation experience, it was great.'* Another woman (26 years old) says, *'I had an idea about those people that they weren't able to make it, that they had no capability of preparing, rehearsing and coordinating something like that.'*

The performances were often attended by the students of special education, the students of acting, and sometimes the students of psychology. They mentioned that watching the performance and possible involvement with the actors after the performance was a pleasant and enriching **connection between theory and practice**.

Another category consisted of statements involving **reflections on disabilities**. The respondents asked what disabilities mean to them. One respondent mentioned that she has a huge disability to speak in public. In her view, these actors actually surpass her in many ways. Another respondent mentioned that he would not remember such a complex text and would have a problem acting it out. Thoughts were recorded about which kind of disability is the most difficult: *'I used to work with children with learning disabilities, and it was very difficult for me because I was young and afraid of it. After I saw several performances under the direction of the author of this performance, I've become convinced that if we find our way to them, it works. In my opinion, the most serious 'disability' is human stupidity,'* said the woman, 49 years old.

At the same time, the voices of the respondents appeared, according to which an ensemble like the Aldente Theatre has a **big significance for the general public** (the purpose and meaning of their productions). Other respondents expressed their wish that the theatre would continue to operate (*'It makes great sense, it should continue,'* said the woman, 21 years old).

**The uniqueness** of this kind of theatre was also mentioned. So far, there is not enough theatres in Europe that include actors with disabilities and have a social dimension. (*'The quality of European importance,'* male, 25 years old).



## Discussion

The aims of this study are as follows: first, to describe as best as possible the influence of theatre with actors with disabilities, in our case specifically the Aldente Theatre, on the actors themselves (people with Down's syndrome); second, whether and how theatre can influence viewers in their attitudes related to disabilities. The general view of learning disabilities, and therefore of people with Down's syndrome, seems to be partly a cultural and historical issue. Compared to Western Europe, it is clear that the Czech Republic is lagging in the integration and inclusion of people from minorities into society. Many of us who grew up under the communist regime did not usually see people with Down's syndrome in the streets. We had no experience with them, nor with their behaviour and habits, nor with their typical expressions of emotions. If we do not know something, we are generally careful, reserved, and fearful, creating various ideas about what we do not know. This is often the case with people with disabilities. A theatre whose actors have Down's syndrome can be one of the specific activities of how people with DS can get closer to the majority of society and how this majority can get to know them better.

Our research shows that most viewers were surprised by the abilities of actors with DS. Many of them did not expect the actors with learning disabilities to learn longer texts, to perform seriously, and to 'stay in the role'. They were surprised by their courage to perform. Down's syndrome was often perceived as 'added value' to the show. Many viewers went to the theatre out of curiosity and some kind of compassion – that 'it was a right thing to do, it was good to support'. Most were then surprised at how much the performance itself affected them. They talked almost about the initiation experience, which is non-transferable. It is impossible to explain what exactly the trigger was. The respondents talked about the present experience during which the actors both played their role and experienced it at the same time. Their experience and enjoyment were often more noticeable than those of actors without DS.

The respondents also considered the activities after the performances to be a great benefit: the opportunity to chat with the actors, participate together in the workshop, or barbecue together after the production. The viewers could reflect on the echoes of the performance on the spot. At the same time, they had an opportunity to meet the actors, their parents or friends. A great benefit was shaping an open community around the theatre and actors. In these moments, there was natural 'mixing' of people with and without disabilities.

Part of the research, which focused on how theatre activities affect actors with DS, describes that playing in the theatre helps them feel useful in society. At the same

time, they perceive themselves as unique, as those who are able to do something different. They believe they are able to pass on this experience of their present moment and authenticity to the audience / majority of society.

The answers of individual actors and their parents resulted in a discussion about whether it is more pleasant for children / people with DS to be among their own, in a homogeneous society of people with disabilities, or whether it is beneficial for them to connect with the common majority. It turns out that these two opposing views do not have to go against each other. Both needs – to be among their own as well as in society at large – are equally important and equally necessary for individuals with disabilities. When they are among their own, they understand each other's worlds, and friendships are formed between them. And on the contrary, thanks to a wider societal milieu, they learn its rules very quickly and progress in many skills. When they are accepted, they perceive that they are important to society through their otherness, which is essential for their self-esteem and the perception of their self-worth in the world.

The research also described how the ensemble of the Aldente Theatre affects the community around the theatre. This community consists of parents of actors with DS, their other relatives, and friends. Since the theatre began as an amateur ensemble with actors who were initially children around the age of ten, their parents became a big part of the theatre's story. They are an invisible, but important support both for their children with DS who have gradually become adult actors and for the theatre as such. Parents often mentioned demanding time requirements. Their statements showed that they were able to cope with their children's disabilities precisely because they saw them on stage. Parents often mentioned that in their upbringing they tried to ensure that their children fit into 'ordinary society' so that the children could know the rules of its operation, could behave accordingly, and would not 'diverge'. However, their children's disabilities can be clearly seen on stage. Both authors and actors work with them. Sometimes the advantages of children with DS are emphasised. Initially, it was difficult for some parents to see their child with DS in the spotlight. Over time, they came to terms with this fact thanks to 'the stage'. Therefore, the participation of children with DS in the theatre has had a certain therapeutic effect on their parents.

Our findings show that getting to know people with DS through theatre is one of the tools they can use to get closer to society, enrich it and, at the same time, be important to it.

# Appendix

## *The questions for a semi-structured interview with parents:*

- 1) How long have your children been performing in the theatre?
- 2) While your children are active as theatre actors and actresses, what do you perceive as beneficial for them?
- 3) Does your children's presence in the theatre have any negative aspects?
- 4) Is there any area in which theatre develops them?

## *The questions for actors with DS:*

- 1) Do you enjoy playing theatre?
- 2) What do you enjoy the most?
- 3) Does anything bother you in the theatre?
- 4) Do you have stage fright, are you afraid to perform?

## *The questions for a semi-structured interview with an audience:*

- 1) How many performances have you seen at the Aldente Theatre?
- 2) What is new for you at the Aldente Theatre compared to other performances?
- 3) What was your first impression?
- 4) What appealed to you the most at this show?
- 5) To whom and why would you recommend this performance?
- 6) What is your experience with people with disabilities and what was it like to see disabilities in the performance?





# Inclusion through Theatre Observed by a Teacher of Special Education

*Ilona Fialová*

## A Person with a Learning Disability and Inclusion

We see the meaning of inclusion primarily in the fact that people with health and other disabilities are accepted by other people, regardless of their limitations. We understand this acceptance as a basic, completely natural acknowledgement of their deepest humanity. The life of people with learning disabilities (LDs) and their role in society have changed significantly in recent decades. We all have a desire for respect and understanding. These two qualities are just as important for people with disabilities as for other people. Although unquestionable progress has been made in recent years in accepting people with disabilities into society, many educators feel still uncertain **when educating students with Down's syndrome** and are afraid of this kind of teaching. Concerns are understandable, as Down's syndrome can be a problem for them, especially for those educators who have not yet met such students and cannot imagine how their inclusive education is supposed to function. Inclusive education as such must overcome the frequent barriers that exist, for example, in crowded primary school classes as well as in the impossibility of addressing this issue with specialists directly in the school environment. In this atmosphere, students with DS may be underestimated and their abilities may not be sufficiently developed. It is necessary to realise that patience and educational optimism are essential for high-quality and effective education of pupils with LDs.

In general, it can be stated that no other type of disability seems to members of the general population as special and different as a **learning disability**. It is very difficult to imagine and empathise with the situation of people with this type of disability. **It is impossible to reliably simulate their feelings and understanding of the world.**



*In fact, learning disability is a complex syndromic disability that affects not only learning abilities but the entire human personality in all its components. It also has a decisive influence on the development and level of intellectual ability, emotions, communication skills, the level of social relations, as well as on the possibilities for life and employment in society.*

*(Słowik, 2016:111)*

People with LDs are distinct, unique personalities who have, among other things, their own spiritual, cultural, and sexual needs, which no one has the right to deny them. On the contrary, we must help them find appropriate and proportionate ways to satisfy them. It is necessary to provide people with LDs with a degree of help, support, and care that comes from understanding their needs. However, understanding their needs and wishes is sometimes difficult due to their limited ability to communicate. Increased emotionality, spontaneity, and extreme openness can occur in their behavior. They thus show those around them innocence and a certain kind of helplessness, both of which contribute to the fact that society does not see them as personalities who have the same right to have their needs fulfilled as all other people.

Many of these individuals live relatively independent lives, work, establish partnerships, travel, do sports, and engage in hobby activities. We find among them athletically, musically, artistically, dramatically, and otherwise talented individuals. The misconception of some people is that people with LDs are not aware of their situation and that they do not care about their social status.

In the process of diagnosing special educational needs, it is necessary to look for the strengths of a person with a LD. Everyone excels in something else, everyone knows something different, everyone has a certain specific quality. One's own self-identity is closely related to one's emotions. This component influences people with LDs in their thinking and understanding of real possibilities and abilities. Therefore, their self-esteem is not completely objective, but rather lacks critical insight and is controlled mainly by emotions.

Learning disabilities can be viewed from various perspectives: biological, psychological, social, educational, and legal. We will be mainly interested in the **educational and social views**. The **educational approach** deals with a reduced ability to learn. It is based on the use of special educational methods and procedures. The **social view** perceives LD as disorientation in the world and in society, which limits the ability to manage one's own social existence independently without outside help.



Decreased levels of intellectual abilities can lead to prejudices in connection with the education of individuals with LDs. It can lead to the idea that this learning is not effective and meaningful. But this would be a mistake. People with LDs have to work harder to learn what other people learn quite naturally. As stated by Švarcová, *from this point of view, learning is the only form of therapy for people with learning disabilities.* (ŠVARCOVÁ, 2011:48) Decreased ability to learn is accompanied by lower memory capacity, so it is very important to repeat and maintain the acquired knowledge and skills throughout their whole lives.

## The Process of Rehearsing in a Theatre and How This Stimulates Diverse Skills

### Introduction

I got to know the Aldente Theatre a few years ago through an encounter with director Jitka Vrbková, who came to a lesson of Special Education to offer the students the chance to work together with the theatre. Subsequently, we took part in the theatre performance *The Wall*, where actors with DS played together with professional actors without disabilities. Most of us were fascinated by their performance. I still remember how an actress with DS went to rest during the performance because she was tired at that very moment. It looked like part of the performance and it was absolutely spontaneous. After the performance, we had a discussion with the parents of the actors with DS and with the other participants. I believe that this event has influenced the futures of many students and many people's understanding of the world of people with disabilities. Some continue to work with them. This encounter also brought me to the TA CR project (2019–2021).

## Important Factors – Movement and Communication

Theatre includes **movement**. It is necessary to realise that people with DS have weaker movement coordination, so it is necessary to constantly practice and improve in this area. When rehearsing a theatrical performance, skills are trained by means of activities and drills with various objects, materials, tools, and aids. This fact was confirmed during all rehearsals with actors with DS, and their movement coordination visibly improved. Theatre provides many opportunities to acquire, consolidate and further develop these skills. It would be a mistake for others to try to do things for them, as sometimes happens in families or schools. This could result in their *'incapacitation'* which would weaken the skills already acquired.

We are not able to imagine theatre without **communication**. Therefore, it is very important to pay close attention to the development of speech in individuals with DS from the very beginning of its development. At the beginning of human life, speech is a means of mutual communication and denotation. Only then does it become a tool for thinking and expressing human thoughts (KOHOUTEK, 2000). Speech skills in people with DS are affected by, for example, learning disabilities, hypotonia, and the orofacial pathology associated with anatomical and functional changes in the mouth, jaws, palate, teeth, and larynx (BUCKLEY, 2008). The improper position of the head, or of the whole body, as well as an incorrect breathing technique, can also have a negative effect on communication ability (CASTILLO-MORALES, 2006). The most common forms of impaired communication skills in people with this diagnosis are delayed speech development, articulation disorders, and reduced speech fluency.

In addition, there is a voice disorder typical of Down's syndrome which characterised by a rough, deeper voice and a reduced ability to use prosodic factors in speech (LECHTA, 2008). In order to prevent serious problems in communication, regular and effective work with speech therapists is necessary. Thus, during a speech therapy intervention, all the necessary skills are properly trained so that the impaired communication ability can gradually improve. The main goal of speech therapy intervention is to prepare people with impaired communication skills for a self-reliant life as much as possible, give them ability to express their needs, and establish and maintain their social relationships which will enable them to live full and happy lives. Our actors with DS also had speech therapy sessions. Within their theatre activities, they were provided with this help before rehearsals. Obviously, they enjoyed these activities which helped them develop in all respects.

## The Educational Process in Theatre versus at School

It is necessary to realise that **education and attending school are compulsory, unlike performing in a theatre ensemble**. No one has the opportunity to choose their classmates, teachers, and school. At school, it is therefore necessary to accept the given reality and complete education there.

However, I would also like to point out that in the current educational process, especially in the education of pupils with special educational needs, teachers should not limit themselves to only traditional teaching methods. Today's inclusive educators must be creative and use interesting teaching methods based on modern didactic techniques. They must respect the special educational needs of each pupil. In the school environment, however, **we must adhere to a certain order, observe rules, and meet educational goals**.

**In an artistic environment**, we cannot do without some rules, either. Actors with DS understand that they act and have their roles, which they then present to the audience at the performance. They know that they have to respect certain rules so that the play can succeed. They must remember the appropriate words and sentences. They need to follow the storyline, stay alert and engage in dialogues at the time. However, when rehearsing a theatrical production, the atmosphere is completely different from that at school. When acting and performing, actors with DS have fun and enjoy it. **Everyone has a role to play**, and they want to play it as best as they can. **They are part of the theatre team and they feel happy in it** (I realised that most fully while watching actors with DS during rehearsals and performances).

The main condition for the meaningful development of their personality is a certain level of activation, which depends on motivation, emotions, and the disposition of their personalities. Individuals with DS have a great need for emotional security. The theatrical environment is able to provide them with that, since it is an area where beneficial interpersonal relationships with peers and adult co-actors without LDs are created and maintained.

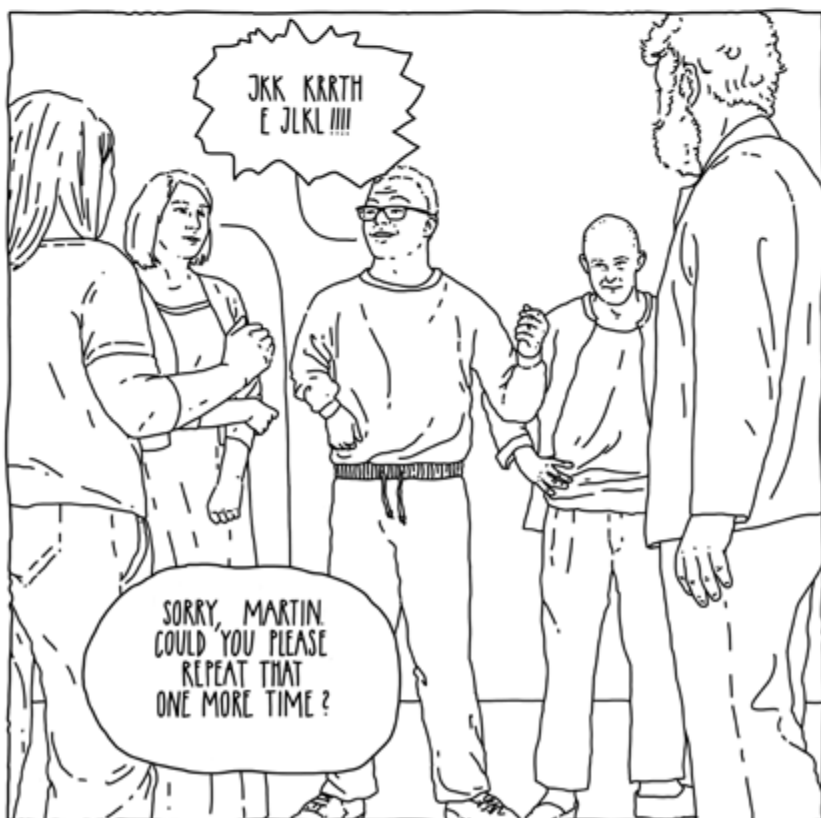
Although it is necessary to respect certain rules in both the school and theatre environments, there is a difference in the fact that the approach of an 'educator-artist' is based **on the inner freedom of each individual**. The 'educator-artist' works on the basis of **freedom and liberty**. The 'educator-artists' convey to actors with DS **the possibility of authenticity**. They proceed from the fact that individuals with DS have artistic inclinations. Therefore, they can make good use of actors' potential and inner energy. Emotions, mutual knowledge, enrichment, cooperation, and



support are released through play or games. Actors with DS attend the Aldente Theatre voluntarily because they want to act. They know each other, they like each other, and they solve problems together. They always have older friends who are an integral part of their community, who enter their world, who look at things from their point of view and don't try to **modify them to the 'parameters of the majority society world'** all the time.

In contrast to the educational model of a typical school which predominantly requires order, theatre offers an alternative: an educational model based on freedom and liberty. Both models can then be blended and enrich each other.

# THEATRE AND DISABILITY







# A Theatre-Maker's Look-Back

*Zoja Mikotová*

## The Theatre Faculty at JAMU and Actors with Specific Possibilities

After the restoration of the independence of the Theatre Faculty in 1990 under the leadership of the Dean Prof. Josef Kovalčuk, not only traditional fields of study developed but also new ones were established.

The establishment of the Studio of Drama Education for the Deaf was very innovative. The study programme conceived in this way, designed especially for deaf students, was the first of its kind in the Czech Republic. At the same time, the study field of Drama Education was established at the Theatre Faculty for hearing students. It has also become a special and flexible field – today called Theatre and Education – that is not afraid of experiments and crossovers with other specialisations and subjects of study.

The intentions of the Studio of Drama Education for the Deaf (today called the Studio of Theatre and Education for the Deaf) could be implemented thanks to a consistent search for new educational interventions. Above all, they were implemented through the search and use of theatrical resources that were close to deaf students. Thus, they opened up new communication opportunities for pupils and students with their teachers, but especially for the communication between actors and an audience.

The productions of this studio not only interacted with their specific audience but also opened up the possibility of universal theatrical communication. We could see this process at domestic and later at many foreign festivals.

This development was possible due to the social phenomena that occurred in our country after 1989. We were able to ensure that our activities were not viewed only from a medical point of view. As a minority, the Deaf fought for the recognition of sign language as well as for the professionalisation of their artistic activities. An important moment was the creation of the so-called 'identification model' especially in the field of education. A hearing disability has many forms, and many combined defects are

increasing. And if people with disabilities are called 'people with specific needs', their special sensitivity must also be acknowledged. In this respect, the term 'people with specific possibilities' should also be adopted.

I think that since the 1980s, our society has become conscious of many important things in this area. The Sign Language Act has been passed. There are theatrical performances created in many specific groups. It is important to continue strengthening our respect and sensitivity to otherness. Not without reason, it is said that the level of any society can be judged by how it is able to take care of vulnerable people – and how it can cope with otherness.

The creative concept of the Studio of Theatre and Education for the Deaf as well as some projects of the Studio of Theatre and Education including individual projects acquired by doctoral students (such as the three-year artistic research by Jitka Vrbková discussed in this treatise) are the proof of increasing sensitivity to otherness.

The question arises of whether to provide students of all the study fields at the Theatre Faculty with the opportunity to purposefully create a project in this area. I believe that there would be opportunities for creative work for dramaturgs, scenographers, directors, producers, photographers, cameramen, actors, and especially movement performers... Not everyone is called to work in this area. During their studies, the potentially interested students should have the opportunity to check whether they have the skills for this specific job or not. This offer could also be interesting for Erasmus students.

The development of society as a whole is still marked by a number of negative circumstances and prejudices against otherness. They can take different forms, such as intolerance and aggression. We still feel the walls of prejudice. It is important to disrupt these imaginary walls and overcome them as effectively as possible.

## A Short Long Way

Before I focus on the work of the Aldente Theatre in the years 2019 to 2021, I will offer a certain look-back, which, however, will enable us to better understand the present. I also want to clarify the history of the Faculty's positive attitude to the so-called otherness and to 'the theatre in specific groups' (see consideration above).

Three years (project duration) is not such a long period of time, it depends on one's point of view.

However, from the perspective of a six-year-old child, it is half of their life, and then it can mean something crucial. Three years, which flew by terribly fast from the viewpoint of an older person, can be an important and interesting period from the viewpoint of a young one.

These three years (2019, 2020, 2021) were also extremely significant for the Aldente Theatre. It was also a period supported by a grant from the Technology Agency of the Czech Republic within the ETA Programme.

And it is also a period when the experience gained so far by all the members of the ensemble and its permanent co-operators, but especially by the leading personality of the Aldente Theatre, Jitka Vrbková, was being utilised – particularly her professional and human experience. A graduate of directing and dramaturgy and a talented performer in the area of dance and singing, she founded this theatre in 2008 primarily for site-specific productions. The profile of Aldente as a theatre of actors with Down's syndrome was shaped in 2014. The birth of Jitka's daughter Klára, who was diagnosed with this syndrome, directed Jitka towards new artistic and life tasks. Not everyone would be able to transform this change of life into a work that has both creative and social aspects. She began to engage in social activities, which are – at the same time – primarily quality theatrical activities. She started working regularly and pedagogically with children with DS.

In the Czech Republic, various theatrical activities with actors with DS have been taking place, but most of them have been based on groups within hospitals or sheltered housing with adults. In Jitka Vrbková's staging activities, it was the children who could not only apply their spontaneity but also acquire new life tasks that developed their personal potential.

During this work, the director gradually made many things clear for herself. Each of the created productions showed traces of her own personal search. The first production in 2014 called *Mommy, you are as important as boom barriers in the tunnel!* had the subtitle *A theatrical celebration of mothers compiled from the texts of writers with Down's syndrome.*

The first production was followed by the theatrical revue *Who would fear this?* in 2015. The next production *Who am I?* from 2017 had the subtitle *The world does not understand me, I do not understand the world.* (In 2019, the performance was also staged in English and successfully presented at the international conference *Experience as a Research Method in Performing Arts* at the Theatre Faculty at JAMU in Brno.)

In 2018, the production called *The Wall* followed. It is *The Book of Genesis* staged in a distinctive interpretation of actors with DS.

With each new production, a certain aspect of Down's syndrome is looked at, as well as how this disability is perceived by society. There is a criticism of the sim-



plistic social view and 'pigeon-holing'. The question of 'who is actually normal' is also raised. If there are many such questions in the production, we feel that they concern its authors rather than the actors. Nevertheless, these productions are important milestones in the ensemble's work. They lay the foundations on which the Aldente Theatre builds further on. In all the productions mentioned above, we can feel how they gradually develop. This development lies in the ability of the authors to encourage the activity of actors with DS, to be their sensitive partners and to accompany them on stage. As if it were a necessary incubation period to move on to the next stage of creative work: acting out a theme, acting out a story, not just dealing with one's own problems, and yet further 're-melting' everything through one's unique personality.

Therefore, the time came to stage a poetic text by Vladimír Holan, *Cathy and Bajaja*, in 2019.

The Czech poet Vladimír Holan is said to have been persuaded by his friends to write his only book for children. His friends saw his material poverty because he was not allowed to publish his poems during the 1950s. At Státní nakladatelství dětské knihy (the State Children's Book Publishing House), a charming book was published on the intercession of the artist Jiří Trnka and with his beautiful illustrations. Its protagonists are Cathy, a little girl, and Bajaja (the one who could not speak), a fairy tale hero. The poetic text is set in the enchanting environment of Prague. Cathy is the poet's daughter, and he is worried about her. Parents are usually worried about their children, so these feelings are not uncommon. Also, the mention of a girl's flat nose, doubts about her age, or the mention of books read and torn may not offer any special clues.

However, at the time when Vladimír Holan was writing the book *Bajaja*, he thought mainly of his daughter who had Down's syndrome. Only the closest friends knew about this fact. At the time of her birth (1949) and her childhood, not much was known about this disability. At the beginning of the 19th century, it was called Cretinism. The syndrome was first described by the English physician John Langdon Down in 1862. But its nature was discovered and explained (the trisomy of the 21st chromosome) by the French physician Jérôme Lejeune as late as in 1958 (somewhere mentioned in 1959).

At that time, people did not know much about DS and they probably did not even want to know. The stigma of disability was pushed to the margins of society, and what was unseen did not have to be solved. When I was interested in Vladimír Holan's correspondence, I found the greetings sent to his wife and daughter in the letters that he had received from abroad. I came across a specific mention of his daughter Kateřina (Cathy) much later, in the 1990s, when the memories of Josef Hiršal were published:

*Like a phantom, a small child burst into the room. She was holding a potty and babbling something. Mrs. Holanová quickly ran after her and pulled her away. The baby screamed terribly. Mr. Fikar quietly told me: 'This is Cathy. She looks like a two-year-old but she is already...' He waved his hand desperately. 'And they don't want her in any institution, she can't stand other children. This is Vladimír's tragedy. He takes it as a curse.'*

(HIRŠAL and GRÉGOVÁ, 1993:129)

From the outside view, we are not able to judge what the fabric of the relations between Vladimír Holan and his daughter was. With her death, he completely stopped writing. In the last three years of his life, he did not write a single line.

Jitka Vrbková's production, *Cathy and Bajaja*, therefore benefits from Holan's poetic text. She chose Holan's couplet as the motto: *Books, though, they remain. The good ones destroy every evil.* The explanatory subtitle for an audience is: *About love for the daughter, for the homeland, for the verses...*

The little girl Cathy is acquainted by her father with the beautiful corners of Prague, with the weather, with the seasons of the year, with books and verses, and with other things. The production has a simple, artistically effective scenography, with the possibility of many changes. Live music sets the rhythm and brings a variety of emotional moods. The verses are presented simply and logically by both actors with DS and their colleagues without disabilities. The atmosphere and specific actions in individual situations are important. Little Cathy is presented as a 'triple character': the youngest, cute and unaffected little Klára, older and wiser Jana, and the third, Barbora, the eldest and grown-up, who is, nevertheless, still a child...

I think that this production of the Aldente Theatre successfully recalled the fate of a poet who, among other things, was able to write: *I am not indifferent / to a single step and fall / of a child in nettles...* (HOLAN, 1964:28) A poetic image in which simplicity, straightforwardness, understanding, and compassion are clearly recognisable. At the same time, we can also feel his active approach, expressing the rejection to be indifferent to the problem.

It seemed that the ensemble of the Aldente Theatre was beginning to reap the rewards of their efforts. Another production followed soon. *The Golden Spinning Wheel* was described by the director Jitka Vrbková as an encounter with the rhythm of the text. The performance was based on the rhythm of the verse as well as on the rhythmic contrast between the actors with and without otherness. The screenwriter's and director's subtitle was: *True love and true emotion of the actors with Down's syndrome.* And I would like to add: 'Sincere feelings of all participants'.

The ensemble gathered its strength to stage an admirable performance. When rehearsing, they lived and worked at the rectory in the village of Lechovice, without their home and family background, in a tolerant community way. The actors mastered a lot of rhymed texts, demonstrated discipline and independence as well as the ability to be inspired by and resonate with the environment. The production was conceived as a site-specific project taking place in the exterior of the rectory in the village of Lechovice. (At the parish, the ensemble found refuge and could establish a functional background base thanks to the invitation of the local priest and writer Marek Orko Vácha.)

The viewers, of whom there were many at the premiere and reruns, moved to the individual playing venues. At this point, the actors showed patience and responsibility: They calmly waited for the viewers, and then acted with precision. The change in weather sometimes necessitated an immediate response. When it started to rain, it was necessary to move indoors. The parish church received both actors and viewers. All of them witnessed flexible adaptation to the new performance space without the possibility of previous rehearsal.

This situation says a lot about the social and professional condition of this theatre ensemble.

The final project, made possible by the grant from the TA CR, is the production of *Antigone*.

This is a classic Greek drama, so the important dramaturgical question is: why this drama right now, why with actors with DS?

The premiere of *Antigone* took place at the Barrier-free Theatre BARKA on June 28, 2021, with the subtitle *Is it good to comply with the regulations, even if they are bad?*

It is admirable that in the time of Covid restrictions, the theatre administration managed to keep in touch with the actors. They sought and found rehearsal opportunities, and they managed to maintain the continuity of this intermittent process. As a result, they managed to create a production that, in my opinion, has the parameters of a socially important work with interesting and challenging acting. The dramaturgical adaptation of the text sensitively shortens and emphasizes the themes so that they seem completely natural and topical. The visual and musical components of the production offer a great experience. This production confirms that the ancient text can speak to the people of the 21st century. Only the authors need to have a clear idea of why they chose it. And they have that in the Aldente Theatre.




**The productions that the Aldente Theatre puts on the stage are like pieces of glaciers rising above the surface.** However, we can see only a small part of those glaciers. The big and hidden part remains below the surface and buoys the small and visible parts up. Such is the great and hidden work of many people, parents, relatives, friends, and experts, as well as the great efforts and work of the actors themselves, which also remain hidden. Similarly, the reflection on the three productions cannot capture the total amount of physical and mental work, including all the work that accompanies and complements the activities of the Aldente Theatre. The following question arises: What have the past three years been like? What has the path of the theatre been like? Short? Long?

The activities of the Aldente Theatre in this period definitely confirmed the legitimacy of artistic research into the creation of theatrical performances with actors with DS as an effective means of social inclusion.







*The actors of the Aldente Theatre are expressionist actors. Everything – every word, every gesture – is exceptional in a way unseen in other theatres.*

*Milan Šotek, dramaturge of the National Theatre Brno*






*Genuineness. There is no acting. The performance is lived through. I like the lightness of the whole company and the freedom of speech, which is nicely contagious.*

*From the spectators reflections*










*Watching the Antigone by Aldente Theatre, I fully realised, for the first time, how crucial Antigone and Haimon's relationship and their failed wedding are to this tragedy. Similarly, in The Golden Spinning Wheel, Dornička and the king's love featured with poignant intensity - the finale with their wedding resembled a wave of joy that swept away the actors as much as the audience. If these two experiences can be generalised, it could be perhaps said that while ancient dramas, the New Testament, or Shakespeare's Sonnets teach us that love is the driving force of human life and the whole world, actors and actresses with DS embody this essential capacity of love in an unparalleled way.*

*Eliška Kubartová, teatrologist*



# About the Authors

**MgA. Jitka Vrbková, Ph.D.** is a theatre director, dramaturge, scriptwriter and an occasional actress. In 2008 she founded the Aldente Theatre, which has focused on the work of actors with Down's syndrome since 2014. She also reflects on this work in the form of artistic research at the Theatre Faculty of JAMU in Brno, first as a part of her dissertation (*Theatre Actor-specific: Down's syndrome as a theatre stylization*), and now as a part of the TA CR project.

**Mgr. Lenka Pivodová, Ph.D.** specialised in developmental psychology as a part of her doctorate. She worked at the Department of Psychology at the Faculty of Social Studies of Masaryk University in Brno as an assistant professor. Currently, she teaches seminars about children with learning disabilities and Down's syndrome. In her practice, she provides counselling and therapy to children and families who are in a difficult life situation (e.g. conflicts between parents and their impact on the child, how to manage their child's otherness, whether it is an ADHD, anxiety or a learning disability, etc.). She works in a Domestic Violence Centre, where her focus is trauma therapy, mostly children therapy.

**PhDr. Mgr. Ilona Fialová, Ph.D.** works as an assistant professor at the Department of Special and Inclusive Education at the Faculty of Education, Masaryk University in Brno. In her research and pedagogical work, she has been devoted to the issue of inclusive education of pupils with specific educational needs or those with chronic or serious illnesses. At her home faculty she teaches courses related to inclusive didactics and pedagogy.

**prof. Mgr. Zoja Mikotová** is engaged in directing and choreography in drama and puppet theatres in the Czech Republic and abroad. In 1992, she founded the Studio of Drama Education for the Deaf at the Theatre Faculty of JAMU. She still teaches in this studio and with her students, she creates original productions for children and adults, many of which have attracted the attention of the public and critics. Among other awards, Zoja Mikotová is the recipient of the František Sáleský Medal for her cooperation in integrating the Deaf into public life and the 2017 Brno City Prize in the field of 'dramatic arts'.

# Summary

A learning disability is one of the least accepted types of disability in the society. This is due to the fact that it is difficult to empathize with the person with this disability. Theatre is a way to overcome these barriers.

Theatres working with actors with otherness (actor-specific theatres) have to ask themselves how they want to work with the specificity of the actors: will they consider otherness as a challenge and try to overcome the barriers that arise from the actor's disability? (Otherness as a challenge.) Will they, on the contrary, consider the actors' otherness as an opportunity to use it to create a specific theatrical poetics? (Otherness as an advantage.) Finally, will they use theatrical tools that in fact conceal the actors' otherness? (Otherness as a ghost.) Each theatre chooses its own path, which may be a combination of these options.

The Aldente Theatre mostly chooses the path of 'otherness as an advantage', but at the same time it looks for 'challenges' to take the actors a step further: during the three-year project we defined three phases of acting that we tried to guide our actors with Down's syndrome through.

The first phase is called 'acting of spontaneous action' — the dramatic situation and the atmosphere on stage is created by professional co-actors without disabilities, music, lighting, set design. Actors with DS then spontaneously join the action on stage. It could be said that the actors without DS direct the performance and the actors with DS are its essence.

In the second phase of 'acting of a personality', actors are slowly grasping the principles of theatre-making: they are already aware that, with their actions and its dynamics, they are influencing both the dramatic situation on stage and the audience.

In the third stage, the actors are able to create a character of their own, in other words, a character that is someone other than themselves.

If we want natural and authentic acting, we should not push an actor prematurely into a phase they have not reached yet. Moreover, lower phases of acting do not necessarily mean lower artistic value. We strive for a higher phase primarily to expand the register of artistic resources and to advance actors with DS in their personal growth. In the creative process itself, however, it becomes apparent that the variability



of the actors and their current abilities can, with good dramaturgical and directorial work, contribute to new thematic layers of the production and to finding new creative solutions.

Psychological research on audience perception has shown that theatre performances clearly contribute to breaking down stereotypical ideas about people with disabilities. The audience was surprised not only by what actors with DS could do, but also by how much the performance affected them. Some have spoken of a transformative experience that is not transferable. The otherness was often an added value for the audience and an important part of the artistic experience.

The potential of actors with DS lies primarily in their ability to show emotions in their nakedness and their ability to be 100% honest and authentic. It seems that actors with DS are actors of archetypes. This characteristic is especially visible when confronted with actors without disabilities, who in turn usually have a wider range of expressive means. The artistic message is then created in an equal dialogue between them. One cannot speak of an integrative theatre, because it is not clear who is actually integrated where. Thus, the research was not only 'the journey of the actors with DS', but definitely also 'the journey of the creators without disabilities' and last but not least, 'the journey of the spectators'.

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*Jitka Vrbková,  
Lenka Pivodová, Ilona Fialová,  
Zoja Mikotová*

**Inclusion through Theatre**  
**A Journey of an Actor with Down's Syndrome to**  
**Cognisant Artistic Creation and Social Acceptance**


Photograph on the front cover: *Eduard Novotný*  
Photograph on the back cover: *Veronika Bartoňová*  
Cover, graphic design and typesetting: *Ivana Dudková*  
Translation: *Karel Pala, Markéta Štefanová*  
Proofreading: *Adrian Hundhausen*  
Comics: *Jitka Vrbková (story) a Martina Nováková (drawing)*  
Illustrations: *Martina Nováková*  
Photographs: *Jiří Kottas, Mila Vašíčková, Veronika Bartoňová,  
Eduard Novotný, Nikola Minářová and others*

First edition, Brno 2022  
Published by Janáček Academy of Performing Arts.  
ISBN 978-80-7460-204-7







A woman with her hair in a bun, wearing a white halter-neck dress with a gold-embroidered bodice and white trousers, leans against a white pillar. She is looking upwards and to the right with a slight smile. The scene is dimly lit, with a strong light source from the left creating a soft glow on her face and the pillar.

**'We are the actors.  
And actors are  
normal heroes.'**

*Hana Bartoňová, the actress  
of the Aldente Theatre*