

# Open Space: Handling Therapeutic Experiences in the Theatrical Settings.

ITAC THINK TANK: March 2019

*Hosted by Zdenka Svitekova (Czech Republic)*

This is the transcript of one of ITAC Collaborative's monthly Think Tank sessions. Each session focuses on a new theme and is hosted by someone from a different country.

In March of 2019, Zdenka Svitekova shares her intergenerational work with the group Ostruzina in the Czech Republic. Their work is centered around participatory experiences that bring audiences onto the stage to engage in what they call "open space" and "free play". These experiences are liberatory and healing - unlocking surprising reactions among youth and adult participants.

Instances in which the text is in [brackets] indicates when the transcriber was not certain of the speaker's original word choice. Ellipses in parentheses indicate when the sound was indecipherable for transcription.

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**Zdenka** 00:10

Thanks everyone for joining. For us and for me, this is the first time we're doing this. We, here today: my name is Zdenka, this is Eva and this is my colleague Bara. And, together, we created a project that was the origin or the motivation to start this talk.

**Zdenka** 00:43

With Bara, we have been working - so (...) I'll do a little introduction - a short one, so you know who we are and what we're working with. And then I'll go (...) through the project - through showing you a video - a short work, so you have an idea (...) what it is and how it looks like and then sharing with you the questions that we have connected to that work. I'm very curious to hear your experience thoughts or questions or ideas that you might have related to that work.

**Zdenka** 01:24

So with Barbora, we've been working together now for almost 10 years, mainly in connection to the work for young audiences. Creating pieces (...) and we we are coming from the dance background. So, we both are dancers and creators. And then I'll leave Eva and Barbara to say maybe something short (...) about themselves. So I don't talk for them.

**Eva** 02:09

Yeah, so I am just about to graduate from school here in Prague. I'm studying mostly directing and dramaturgy. And I've been (...) working with a focus on (...) inside the work or where the audiences are the core of the material of work. And that's how I sort of (...) work on this.

**Zdenka** 02:39

Eva worked with us as a dramaturg or as a dramaturgy advisor.

**Bara** 02:47

Yeah. (Zdenka said almost everything) so ... I'm a dancer and I live here in Prague (... ..) I think it's kind of a longer journey we made because we wanted to (...), we always wanted to move more something (...) or learn from the normal pieces, or like what we know is happening here. Maybe I cannot speak for other lands, but here in Czech. So this was like for us, maybe like the biggest piece that we really allow (...) - based on audience and us or other people who (...) the most interactive pieces.

**Zdenka** 03:58

So this is an interactive work where people are with us on the stage the whole time. And I think what Bara said that it's special for the context of the Czech dancing. Maybe for other contexts, it might be quite normal. But here it's still a fresh approach and also sometimes the programmers they don't know what to do that. Yeah. And also audiences how much they're used to it. I would like to show you a short video. So the name of the work is the Interplay and... yeah.

04:48

(Video can be found on Ostruzina's Vimeo Page: <https://vimeo.com/ostruzina>.)

**Zdenka** 04:55

This was - it was like (a fast dance ...). The whole thing is set for 60 minutes. For now, we're performing it in (non)theatrical environment. The question of the space is also one of the questions that we are having. To give you a background of the piece or what (...). We are advertising it as a moment to get together - to interact and collaborate through a playful - using play as a means. And it's intended for families. So our goal was to invite family collectives, meaning parents, children, grandparents, cousins, whoever,

**Eva** 06:04

Friends.

**Zdenka** 06:05

Friends, also. We also limited the number of participants. So it's 30 people. We are four performers, two men and two women. So the two performers are Bara and myself. And then we have two more, which is showing there - the two males. One of them is a more of a musician. So he was also responsible for the musical part. And the fourth member, he has more (of a)

drama background. And he also has studied something which is called the developmental transformations. Is anyone familiar with this?

07:04

(Discussion Break)

**Zdenka** 07:09

I will leave that for later. Yes. I have not heard about it. Yes. Yeah. So well, I'll give you a short information as I'm googling. Yeah. Yeah, I'll give you a short introduction into that later. Because I think it's also (...) one of our big questions, since that's why also, we wanted to speak about this borderline between art and therapy, and what happens and how they (...) form each other, or maybe how they influence each other, maybe how they invade each other in the (treatments) on art - of the art. So the art is suffering and how much the artists -

**Zdenka** 07:54

I can give you also then a website. And also, just to tell you that I was googling it myself also (...) Unfortunately, he couldn't be present here today. So, I'll speak for him only as far as I know. So so (...) this is the context of the play - of the thing. And I think it's also important to say that (...) it's a result of a longer collaboration that - it's not that it popped up like this and we woke up one day and said we'll do a piece where everyone is on stage. We were going through steps.

**Zdenka** 08:15

First, (...) with the dance performance for children, where they're on stage with us, sometimes watching sometimes interacting. Then we did these for adults, where people are on stage with us interacting as they want and if they want so, they can very well be just audiences and observers, but they are constantly invited to interact with us. It has been a moment where we push the furthest because there is a moment in piece or in the work which we call "open space" or "free play" and there any (... ...)

**Bara** 09:43

(... ... ...) what is created and what is the same all the time. The rest is more about tools -how to be with the people - rather than to have like choreography or text or - and there is nothing like this, which is different from other pieces - that there was always something settled in dance or in theatre ...

**Zdenka** 10:15

You mean like fixed choreography and fixed movement?

**Bara** 10:19

This is really like open score. And it's been fixed.

**Zdenka** 10:24

Yes. Yeah, content wise it's very open. Structure wise we - structure and time wise is very fixed. So, maybe also to give you have an idea how it is structured, there is an opening song, at the beginning, happening outside of the space. And then we enter the space. And there is a first period of the work where people are guided - the four of us, we guide them through series of warm up.

**Zdenka** 11:03

(...) guiding them through body, through voice, through rhythm, through -

**Eva** 11:09

Communication with the others.

**Zdenka** 11:10

Communication with the others, and that they can create by themselves. So, they are proposing movements, ideas, and we follow them. Then, there is a moment where we split in four groups. And there the idea is to introduce the possibility that anyone can be leader and we all collaborate with them.

**Zdenka** 11:41

And, then there is a big chunk, which will last for 20 minutes, where everybody's the creator, and everybody's (...) contributing to what's happening. So this is the "open space", the "free play", as we call it. The four of us are more of facilitators. That was also like, what are we doing there? What is our role? How do we support? How do we hold space? And how do we hand over to the people participating - that they are actually the creators of the event? The content?

**Madeleine** 12:22

We've had a question just to interrupt slightly. (...) In the group chat, that sort of links to what you were just saying about what is the responsibility of the artist? And I think that question came in relation to what you were talking about developmental (...). So, maybe just if you want to talk a little bit more about what you were just saying there. That seems to be helpful.

**Zdenka** 12:48

Which when you mean the developmental (...)?

**Madeleine** 12:53

Yeah, I think you were just talking there, before you move on to something else, about the role of the artist and where your responsibility comes in. And when you hand it over, and navigating that support, and how you help with that. So, could you describe that a little more? And oh, sorry, just again, they followed up with "Yes, in terms of being careful not to cross (...) the line into therapy.

**Zdenka 13:20**

(...) This is our big questions. Also, so you were curious how we are handling it?

**Bara 13:31**

Well, I think we are also - to be honest, I feel we are kind of (...) disagreement - the group of artists, the four of us. (...) ultimate about it, where actually we are - (...) each of us has a little bit different experience and somebody is more really experienced into therapy. This guy, man, and for him, it's clear like he's kind of - he's always like saying, (...) this gonna be where you are crossing some borderline. (...) on the side that we still think (the therapy session would need) much more time and this is still like, it's enough (...) but we are not doing therapy here. And then we are aware of that we are doing theater, it already can help us mature enough so (...)

**Bara 14:49**

But I think it's very important what we think like us - artists - what we are doing there and if the goal is (...) And, also we see on parents and kids - we see there is some things happening. It's created, we can observe it. But we are not...

**Eva 15:21**

Analyzing?

**Bara 15:22**

... analyzing it, and we are - also we don't have time to open it more. So it's still - that's why it's still kind of like hope in the box of game.

**Eva 15:38**

Artistic experience and (...)

**Bara 15:43**

Artistic experience is also the question of (... ... ...) Like, because tomorrow, not supposed to be like, no, this is his performance. But now, no, it's not performance (...) that people are seeing some (...) and also the kids, in the end, they some of them, they used to say and then we'll be a theater. So, it depends on - some of them say that they are going to theater and (... ... ...) so this is for us very important type of (...) gift with people read about what is it? I think they are?

**Zdenka 17:02**

I'm curious, like, the the people who are there with that? What is your - what are your thoughts or experiences about this borderline? And how - what is the responsibility? And what to take care of or what to look after? So, maybe if we could - share thoughts around this responsibility and actually, what is the boundary? Or when when do we cross it?

**Bara 17:36**

Because I think it's presented all the time. So like, until the moment you decide as a person wants to have a treatment, then I think it's the therapy. But in - if when you go to the theater, as

an audience, or as interactive audience, or - it is art, but it has, it can it has a therapeutic effect. Always! Even if you like it or don't like it. (... ..)

**Madeleine** 18:16

So, if people feel more comfortable typing rather than speaking. That's fine. I'm happy to read out whatever is in the messages. But if anyone feels comfortable enough to speak out, and remember, you might be muted. But you can respond to that question. However, it's best.

**Guest 1** 18:38

Hi, everybody. I'm Grace. I'm currently doing a project where I'm working with older adults who have dementia, many of them have Alzheimer's. And we've been using applied theatre to create moments of joy. But, there have been times where we've brought up feelings where people are crying or not - not terribly happy, but I guess remembering happy times from their childhood and are, you know, tearing up like, you know, and we are - we're working within an institution within the recreational therapy department.

**Guest 1** 19:30

We're not therapists. They have a recreational therapy staff. And I have to say, I'm not very impressed with what I'm seeing as the professional staff and the services that they're providing. They don't seem to be engaging people as individuals in the same way that we are, but I'm just curious if - what others think about that, you know, in - I don't think that we've crossed the line where it's been too too triggering or too, too upsetting? But, we've definitely brought up emotions. For the most part, it's been very light hearted and fun and silly. And, you know, a lot of laughter, but here in there, there have been tears. So that's what I was curious about.

**Bara** 20:30

And I have a question. Is it the regular experience? Or is it something (...)

**Guest 1** 20:40

We've been going - it's a once a week project, and we've been going 11 - we've gone 11 times so far, with mostly the same group of people, about eight people. Some days, there are people who don't come. But mostly it's the same group of people, you know.

**Guest 2** 21:04

I think my quote - I wrote the long question.

**Madeleine** 21:25

(...)

**Guest 2** 21:27

I think it's very connected to the point that grace brings up but in in a different context. I mean, the short question is, without, without the training, without the moniker, "oh, I'm a therapist", or

... it's just very difficult to - to feel empowered, to live in that work with your artists, especially when they're, like from the - whether it's the audience or the general public.

**Madeleine** 22:14

I have a question, to those of you who are working professionally in this - in this sort of way? When do you institute your own rules, then, as to - at what point you then become not the person to support that individual? Or how do you recognize at which point you're opening up feelings in response to the artwork versus when do you institute that limit? Is that something you decide on your own? Is that a group decision? How do you - how do you recognize that place?

**Guest 1** 23:00

Me, I think it's a - it's a ongoing learning experience to recognize that place. One thing that we have talked about as a group is knowing where to go for additional resources. So, in this case, you know, we're working with these older adults, there are professional, therapeutic, recreational therapy folks that we can turn to - we defer to. There are nurses, there are social workers, etc.

**Guest 1** 23:33

I have done work with youth. And in those cases, because often you don't know what themes are going to come up, they just come up. So, the organization that I've worked with, has a lot of resource materials on hand, you know, suicide prevention hotlines, information from different organizations, contact information - a lot of different organizations. So that, you know, we don't feel too alone, you know, in dealing with it. But I'd like to hear more from other people.

**Guest 3** 24:27

I'm usually working in schools situations. And so we have staff that are on call if something gets too hot to handle - some emotions, children's behavioral issues or things that we can call on. That's my experience. Doesn't mean that it always works. Sometimes that kicks back to you and, and there hasn't been a resolution to that problem. And it still falls to the artists to deal with that or to bring it back into a group situation if it's conflict between two actors or two students in the program, that - that brought up some something because of an emotional history or past so - but usually we just we know when to hand off if it becomes outside our realm of expertise.

**Guest 4** 25:30

I am an author of this. I also work with people who are afflicted with Alzheimer's and dementia. And I have come to also, just as Grace has mentioned, to - when I come and I do art with them, and I sit with them, I have noticed that, you know, they're tearing up as well, especially one particular participant. And she used to do art before when she was younger. And obviously, that whole art process brings up a lot of emotions, a lot of memories. I think it's a very fragile and a very thin line between when is it art and when is it therapy? Because everyone responds differently. So I think the most important part is just to be really sensitive of how does the person respond right now, and can I hold them? Can I give them that framework of just making them feel comfortable and safe? Right? And that is what my experience is.

**Guest 4** 26:40

I have also - I offer expressive arts for youth. And I myself still struggle, because sometimes some emotions come up when they express but I don't want to - it's not a therapy session. So it's just expressive arts having to get out and be more in touch with the emotions - become self aware. And there I realized you have to be really sensitive. It's almost like a (...). But it's, you know, just how do I now come in contact with this person, if they all of a sudden become emotional, and they all of a sudden feel like, you know, it's really affecting them. And then it's really important just to hold, you know, like, hold that space for them and talk through that, I think, if you (...) therapists, and it's just becoming really sensitive of what are they going through right now and not being scared to talk about it.

**Guest 4** 27:38

A lot also happens in the reflection time. So when we sit and we reflect upon the pros, what's happening right now, that's when I noticed, okay, I need to be sensitive of how do I hold the group right now and sort of lead them. And if I do see one or two people are, you know, more sensitive right now, then I sort of just gently close the group in the discussion, if it's in the reflection time, and the therapy session has - anyway has closed, and then I still go and talk with them individually. And just make sure that they okay. In that sense, with the older participants, it's not that easy, I find? But I just really go low skill, low level and try to sort of end off with a more positive note and (...) space, but it is, it is it's a very thin line. I personally, I feel.

**Guest 5** 28:43

I know, too. It's Margie from Toronto, when - I work a lot with youth, in devising theatre. And, of course, it comes from a place that matters to them. So we often get on subjects that are quite deep, like mental health or something. I often - I allow them the space to speak, but also really try to drive them towards character and story. So to take that emotion and use it in a way of creating outside of themselves. So it's not therapy, because I'm not able to - I'm not a therapist, so allow that - I agree - that space to talk about it and then use that to fuel the art.

**Guest 3** 29:33

I'm curious, for those of you who work with physical dance, how - what kind of limits do you set on people interacting, touching, hugging, and keeping people's personal space versus - because people have very different senses of what's appropriate where my personal space ends and yours starts and ... so it must be curious, do you set boundaries to start with? Or do you just try to keep a handle on how people are feeling and intervene if need be to give somebody the space that they need?

**Zdenka** 30:23

Maybe as you are, as you are reflecting upon the question, I had a question that came to me while listening to you. And that was the question like, when I heard the the reflecting part. So I thought, like, what is the - what is the structure? Or what are the elements of those sessions when we work with those contexts that are necessary or important to have like - as when I



heard reflection that sounded like something very important to be there. And also in relationship to our work? We don't talk so much (...) about direction, maybe some verbal interaction. And so I was - I was having the question like what to do when we don't have the speech, or when there is no time for like a longer discussion? How to - how to handle these things. Yeah.

**Zdenka** 31:31

And maybe in terms of the the reflection at the end, which I forgot to mention, that if there are sheets of paper on which we can draw, so maybe that's (...) where what happened can be processed, and everybody was on the same level, sort of, we stopped to be performers and the guides, and we just meet as people. So that's - that's the moment I guess, for us for reflection happening. And I also - also wonder that, from what I heard, either it sounds more like moments of that are recurrent, or over longer periods, and maybe more as a closed group? Or what are - what are the contexts in which those... those forms or activities you do?

**Zdenka** 32:34

And some people might come back or not, they are coming back. So also different contexts and - and recurrences of - ... that's like three questions in one. Yeah, so the structure, the elements, the importance of reflection, talking versus nonverbal things now, whether you're not - ...

**Guest 4** 33:02

If I just quickly - come back on that. So, I think that's perfect what do you do with the reflection afterwards. So, the reflection I sort of mean that everyone sort of sits back and thinks back on what everyone experienced right now. And then sort of talks about the process. That's obviously getting quite sort of therapeutic say, like, "Oh, this came up, or when we danced," or I think in your case, for example, something like, if I was going to go with my sister, or my mother, or you know, it reminded me when I was a child, and - ...

**Guest 4** 33:44

So these personal emotions come back in the reflection when we sort of think of the process of, in your case, the day after the dancing the performance. So I think that's if you - if you say... you bring up big sheets of paper and you draw, I think that's perfect as well. I think that's - even though it's not verbal, it brings out that kind of emotion in a different art form. And I think that's very, very powerful as well. So one doesn't always have to talk. You're right. Yeah, yeah.

**Zdenka** 34:25

Bara has an interesting insight that we we mentioned feelings very little. Or there is very little talk about feelings. How do I feel right now?

**Guest 4** 34:36

Yeah, okay. Yeah.

**Bara** 34:39

Because somehow it goes into - like the drawings are more describing the story, which happened - like the environment when we were - when we were in this open game. And usually kids draw the environment or the roles they go. They and - they wanted to have these roles, they dislike (...). So it's not completely (...), but it's more like they are naming where we are and who we are. But I discovered we don't - we don't mention how we (...) which is quite interesting.

**Bara** 35:26

But I think people they see, somehow, feelings because it's so open, that who is happy is really happy and who is like, unclear or unsure or worried? It's on the body. So maybe we never speak about the feelings.

**Guest 4** 35:53

And I'm sure (you can see it with) the posture and the movements that, you know how, how it is both across them?

**Bara** 36:01

Yeah.

**Guest 1** 36:03

I was just gonna say, in response to what Beth asked about, limits, setting limits? The youth groups that I've been involved with have group agreements. And the group agreements come from the participants, like, what would make you feel comfortable? What would make you feel uncomfortable? Can we agree on what that is, and, and it's drawn up as sort of like a contract that's either posted or typed up and handed out to everyone - if it's like one group that's going to be working together, like over the course of a semester or a year. If it's a drop in group, the facilitator usually just kind of goes through a quick, like, they might play an opening game and then before getting into anything, goes over a quick, "Okay, what are the rules?" Boom, boom, boom, you know, nothing super heavy, but it's kind of, "this is okay, this is not okay". And maybe demonstrating, you know, which is good. So yeah.

**Guest 3** 37:13

I was gonna ask about your - you were saying that you don't express emotion or you don't talk about your emotions much in the - in the dance that that you do. In the - in the open play time. Do you find that people take opposite characteristics when they say I am, I'm this role? So, you have little bitty children that say I am the night and I am the - do you ... do you find that they take on roles that are different, or outside of their normal persona?

**Bara** 37:50

Like, I see so many times, like exchange the roles between parents and kids. Like (...) that to be leaders with (...) freedom of - to lead parents and telling them what they now do for them. But also, we use a lot of like physical (... ...) In the sense of lifting or crossing over. So it's like these physical games are also connected to someone's taller and somebody's smaller or younger and older. And the kids also (... ...), they want to be the strongest one, or they want to let the mother

out. So this is the - I think we always play with this. And always there is somebody who wants to prove it. Not everybody, but I say it's kind of the experience, because we didn't play there so many times. Six times.

**Eva** 38:57

Yes, we have experiences with that, but it's fresh.

**Bara** 39:02

Fresh. Yeah. And last time, like, which was quite strong, and I think it's connecting to this borders, was that - we had a group of boys, three boys. And when this was opening this, the leader game in small groups, and when they became leaders? They would shoot and kill everybody, and it became the fight. And for the man who is one of us (...) online space, and we actually kind of like - we don't know what (...) should do in this case, because it can be already quite dangerous and also kind of (...) Or, you know what - in the free game you should allow, but where is the border and what we can hope to transform into something?

**Madeleine** 40:11

Sorry to interrupt, can I ask you to just repeat that slightly closer to the microphone I think some people are having issues with connectivity.

**Bara** 40:25

Last time we had a problem - that it's connecting to the borders, how far we can go in this like opening game and how big the freedom can bring, and that we had last time experience with three boys, they were like eight-nine years. And in this moment, when they leave the small group, they start to kill everybody. They wanted to shoot and kill, and they became quite like, violent. So it became the issue, what to do with it - how to... because in our rules, it was very open. And it was like saying, you can lead us and do what actually - what you want (...) with this freedom. But how to react to it - how to transform it or what to do with this kind of energy? We don't know yet. So what happened is, was that they left the place for a while - they start to drink water. And then they come back with this - our colleague, who was the lead inside a small group, but it became the question of the border also - like of the freedom I think. It's also the issue of how to hold it, what - how much we have to hold it or not.

**Zdenka** 41:49

Yeah, maybe what is your experience when - when those violence situations may arise, how to handle them, or how to handle these - these moments.

**Guest 3** 42:01

I have no idea if this would work. But the first thing that occurred to me is if you kill everyone, you have no one left to lead. So everybody's just lying on the ground. And they're still - you are a leader of no one now.

**Guest 5** 42:19

The other tactic I use is, one say I also allow them to use their guns or whatever method first, and then I say, "Okay, that was really interesting. We've seen that, what else can we see?" So it's a form of more creative or imaginative.

**Eva** 42:35

I mean, because until now, we've sort of talked about sort of the therapeutic effect that these performances can have, which I think is - is very interesting, but I think with this, we actually took it a little bit further and actually - almost appropriating a theory of a therapy technique to make - to create this performance. So maybe we can talk a little bit about that.

**Bara** 43:25

Yeah, yeah.

**Zdenka** 43:27

Yeah, this actually brings me to the - also to the thoughts that we have around this creation: that how much the art is actually informing the therapy, and how much therapy is informing the art. Because this developmental transformation - so to give you a short, because we are also approaching this one hour of - of the time set for the conference, so it was developed by David Johnson (...) on Grotowski Theater, so it's - it's informed by Grotowski Theatre. And then he used the perspective of cognitive development, psychoanalysis, and as well authentic movement and dance therapies. So, I would say that there is a lot of input from, actually, art forms. And there are four - four elements, or four components which are essential to that - to that approach: that it's embodied, so the whole body is engaged, the whole sensory system; the basic ideas of transformation - everything is unstable and you're looking for stability. It's based on encounter: that the - the therapist and the client are in a - in a play space, what they call play space and everything is happening through the interaction and through the play. Yeah, so this is sort of the basic setting.

**Zdenka** 45:28

And succession, it can be either individual or it can be done as a group thing. So the whole group is playing. And the therapist is very equal to everyone interacting and reacting. And there is a space, which is called like a rug, like an island where they can go and make observations on what's happening or allowing insight for the client, which is sort of outside of that play space. Yeah, and this idea of the play space was probably something that we - ... has come from those from this developmental therapy. But at the same time, I would say that when we go into opening improvisation, or already sort of improvisation, it's exactly the same situation.

**Madeleine** 46:31

So, thank you so, so much to our hosts. Thank you, participants.