

Pigs lost in space

by Balázs Simon,

main artistic director and lead actor of Spec.Theatre Creative Community

Pigs in Space is a title from the 70s – a popular recurring sketch from the Muppet Show television series. Whenever I find myself in chaotic circumstances, I think of this beautiful image: pigs inside a space shuttle, lost, with little hope for returning to Earth. It also reminds me of a scene from a bitterly cold winter in 2010: a group of actors confined in a van - far away from any theatre – desperately looking for signs of habitation: houses, mayors' offices, minority government offices, on a dark winter afternoon. Those early steps of our theatre project, Theatre for Everyone, the incredible adventures we had, encounters with a world we did not know — there was almost no event we organized that did not involve odd surprises. These initial 'ghost stories' of ours in the Cserehát region had no romance about them, given our lack of contact with the inhabitants of these dark villages we were travelling to.

Simply put, the people of Cserehát appeared to be living in a different space and time. The streets were dark, but what was worse is that it had also dimmed the spirit of the people who lived there — spirits we wanted to rekindle through theatre art. When we got acquainted with them, we begin to open up and understand one another. Was it necessary for us outsiders to step into the lives of others? For me, yes, up to a point. Our project wouldn't have worked without understanding the material and emotional life of the target group. I also believed it was equally important to understand our own strengths and limitations with regard to the nature of help we were able to offer our target group. We needed to gain their trust first by differentiating ourselves from schools and social institutions – generally, from all forms of authority.

After three years of insecurity about the future of our mission, our work received a real boost when we joined the project 'Giving Wings to the Pigs' ([Szárnyakat adni a malacnak](#)). It helped us operate at a higher level of efficiency. The Malacka network — and servings of pogácsa! — helped begin a new chapter in our adventure. With the help of Malacka we were able to easily reach thousands of children, young adolescents and adults and involve them successfully in our theatre, engaging them in different levels of dialogue, not just related to theatre but to real concerns in their lives. The positive effect was mutual: aside from our events, our colleagues from Malacka (social workers, development professionals) connected with locals more easily. The theatre event was an occasion for the whole community to enjoy not just the performance but to be involved at a deeper level: after each show, the actors would play with and engage the children, giving parents and mentors time to work together, a rare opportunity for parents and caretakers to have quality time for themselves.

This strategy of 'split group event structure' that we employed was able to break the passivity of even the most 'difficult' settlements in Cserehát like Gagyvendégi or Felsővadász. This strategy combines

The Place for Everyone - "Area-Based Interventions for making the most of EU Fund for Sustainable Housing and Inclusion of disadvantaged Roma (explicitly but not exclusively targeted) in pilot areas in Romania & across the border to Serbia, FYR Macedonia and Turkey" implemented by UNDP Bratislava Regional Centre

theatre/drama/participatory events with forum talks that follow the performance. It is a simple idea that we originated, whose potential we feel we have only begun to explore. We are proud that at the forum talk that followed the show in the settlement of Selyeb, the participants agreed to establish a social cooperative.

To put it in more technical, psychological terms: The interactive theatre performance where the locals have roles both on stage and as audience prepares them through a series of cognitive shifts for the moderated dialogue that follows between them and the theatre group. The dramatic empathy created by the performance (i.e., the increased ability to understand another person's feelings or circumstances, which allows actors to convincingly portray people very different from themselves) lays the ground for increased mutual understanding among participants.¹ These uninhibited encounters greatly helped the participants to verbalize their problems. Unfortunately, we didn't carry out any research to develop empirical evidence about these outcomes, with measurable indicators. It is still difficult for decision makers to believe that even the very first encounter with a potent piece of art can act as a life-changing experience — and that the change lasts in the long term. Involving the audience in various activities of a stage production, and harnessing the stage as a development vehicle, has long been proven to be an effective method of empowerment. Interactive theatre techniques have been shown to play a role in bettering the life of youth and their broader community.

Our artistic conviction stems from our own experiences that affirm theatre's ancient function of creating a community and improving its collective state of mind by giving expression to the role-playing fantasy which lives in every human being.

We aim to preserve the experiences of everyday drama in our performances by keeping them closest to the sites of inspiration in contemporary, everyday life. But theatre is not merely about meaning. The physical body, acrobatics and jugglery are crucial elements in our performances, as they attract the attention of audiences who would otherwise perhaps not be as engaged, and highlight the talents of the actors. The use of Commedia dell'Arte masks also helps audiences relate better to the characters.²

Our theatrical techniques and equipment are adaptable to a variety of locations: We can set up and perform anywhere within 30 minutes of our arrival, without using a single electrical cable. Over the last few years, our work has significantly moved from theatre to more direct pedagogical work with the groups and communities involved. Our work was acknowledged by the Embassy of the US in Hungary with the November 2012 Active Citizenship Award.

¹ <https://www.aasa.org/SchoolAdministratorArticle.aspx?id=7378>.

² Commedia dell'Arte is a masked form of physical theatre that involves the use of comedy. It is improvisational and characterized by its masked characters who became known simply as the masks. It is a style that emerged during the Renaissance, in the second half of the 16th century in Italy.