

PARTICIPATORY THEATRE

**as a
tool for social change**

GUIDE



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INTRODUCTION

For years, we have been conducting artistic activities, observing changes, tensions, and breakthrough moments. At the same time, we lacked tools that would allow us not only to describe the process but also to critically examine its effects. We waited a long time for a reliable analysis of the impact of the tools and methods we use. We wanted to know what actually happens in participatory theater processes – and do they lead to real change?

This guide was born out of the need to pause at these questions. We needed something that would take artistic practice, the experience of participants, and research reflection seriously. We looked for reliable ways to analyze the impact of our own actions – not only to confirm their effectiveness but also to better understand the limitations, tensions, and responsibilities associated with them.

The publication was finally created within the framework of the WOMEN interACT project implemented by four partner organizations: Stowarzyszenie Kobietostan from Poland, Restart Theater Athens from Greece, Društvo ZIZ from Slovenia, and SWPS University. In each of the three countries, we worked with women experiencing various forms of marginalization and social exclusion. Our tool was participatory theater – one that invites the audience not only to share their perspectives or stories but also to co-create an artistic form.

Although local contexts, working methods, and languages were different, it quickly turned out that we return to similar questions: about safety, agency, boundaries, power relations, visibility, and responsibility. We were interested not only in participatory theater as a creative tool. We were also interested in how art functions in spaces associated with social exclusion – what it enables, what it hinders, what relationships it intentionally strengthens, and which ones it may unconsciously reproduce.

The guide consists of two parts.

Part I – the research perspective focuses on analyzing the impact of participatory theater on the activation of groups at risk of social exclusion. It contains theoretical frameworks, research methodology, as well as an analysis of the experiences of the project's participants and organizers. This part was written in a more analytical language and can be particularly useful for people involved in research, evaluation, designing social actions, and impact analysis.

This part can also be useful for practitioners of social and participatory art. It can help name intuitively perceived mechanisms, better understand the processes taking place in the group, more consciously design activities, and find a language to describe one's own practice.

Part II – the practical perspective grows directly out of the experience of the artists and facilitators co-creating the project. It is a meeting of different practices, methods, and ways of thinking. We did not try to smooth over differences or build one binding methodology. We were rather interested in showing how different practices meet around similar questions.

That is why the direct voices of the artists are so important to us. Quotes do not serve as an addition or illustration here – they are an equal part of this publication. They often drive the narrative forward, give it direction, and allow us to look at the process from different perspectives.

Many topics return in both the research and practical parts. We read this as an important signal: the intuitions of artists and facilitators often found confirmation in the voices of participants and research results. Thanks to this, similar questions – about safety, agency, power relations, building a community, boundaries of participation, or the durability of change – can be seen from several sides simultaneously and check how theory meets practice.

We also do not assume that this publication must be read from beginning to end. You can treat it like a map and build your own path. Start with tools if you are leading a group. Or from the research part if you are interested in social impact. Return to it in moments of crisis, when designing new activities, or after years of practice – when the same questions begin to mean something else.

This publication is not a textbook nor a closed system of methods. It is a record of practice, an attempt to name experiences, and an invitation to further develop, transform, and challenge the ways of working described here. We hope that it will become not only a source of tools but also a space for asking questions – about art, responsibility, co-creation, and change.



RESEARCH PERSPECTIVE

The impact of participatory theatre activities
on mobilization of participating groups at risk of social exclusion

1. Definitions and functions of participatory theatre

In the view of Claire Bishop, one of the most important theorists in the field of participatory art, it is a practice in which:

People constitute the central artistic medium and material, in the manner of theatre and performance.

(Bishop, 2012, p. 2)

The author emphasizes that since the 1990s, the view has been adopted that participatory art is the "ultimate political art" (Bishop, 2012, p. 1), and that by encouraging the public to participate, the artist can promote new, emancipatory social relations. Participatory theatre can therefore serve an emancipatory and political function (Boal 1979, Freire 1970), but also a socio-community (Erel, Reynolds & Kaptani, 2017), educational (Freire, 1970), and even therapeutic one (Shaughnessy, 2016). One of the key functions that such theatre can offer is social inclusion and the representation of marginalized groups (Siwiak, Klaić, 2014).

The assumptions described in this way are consistent with our adopted research approach. Our overriding goal was to systematize knowledge about participatory theatre as a tool for activating groups at risk of social exclusion and its potential in shaping social changes.

The research was embedded in the field of social sciences, within the disciplines of social communication and media sciences, as well as management and quality sciences.

As part of the adopted definition and the study of the functions of participatory theatre, we distinguished four areas that were the foundation of the analyses in the WOMEN interACT project:

- communication;
- social exclusion;
- participation;
- social change.

2. Key theoretical concepts

2.1. Communication as the negotiation of meanings

Already in the initial stages of education, we learn that communication is a process involving a sender and a receiver, or that communication is reaching an understanding or exchanging information.

The communication model of Jakobson (Jakobson, 1960/1987) cited at the beginning assumes the flow of a message from the one who encodes the message (sender) to the one who decodes it (receiver). Among the elements that guarantee the effectiveness of communication, the author (apart from the message itself, of course) lists:

- context (point of reference);
- contact (channel);
- code (understandable to both parties).

A critical analysis of this concept, as well as the other two (communication is reaching an understanding, communication is transmitting information) was carried out, among others, by prof. Michael Fleischer (Fleischer, 2020).

Selected remarks on Jakobson's concept	Selected remarks on communication equated with reaching an agreement	Selected remarks on communication understood as transmitting information
According to Fleischer, the general level of this model makes it usable to illustrate both the course of communication and the circulation of electricity. This concept is too broad, it explains neither the mechanism nor the phenomenon of communication. The author uses a clever comparison, that it is like describing a dog as an animal that has four legs and a tail. And while (usually) this is true, the same can apply to a horse or a cat. Incidentally, the author notes (almost in the margin) that Jakobson drew the presented model from Shannon and Weaver, who formulated this concept strictly in the context of information theory in 1949.	The author points out that in this approach, an equals sign is unjustly placed between the result and the producer of the process. Agreement is one (certainly not the only) of the results of communication or the reasons for undertaking it. If, as a result of communication, an agreement is not reached, communication still remains communication. In other words (following Fleischer): sowing a carrot is not a carrot, and a watchmaker is not a watch.	Fleischer notes that seeking simplification, we very often treat information as a synonym for a message. If we equate information with something we learn, the concept becomes so broad that it is functionally empty. Within Shannon and Weaver's information theory mentioned in the left column, information is the removal of ignorance / gaining of knowledge. In this view, information can be given and measured only for a single organism, it is an individual process. Only a single system of consciousness can remove ignorance. It does so on the basis of its individual, current knowledge. Information cannot therefore simply be "transmitted" from one system to another.

Table 1. Three traditional concepts of communication. Own elaboration based on: Fleischer (2020, chapter 4.2).

Fleischer, as well as those who follow his path, base their activities on the achievements of constructivism. Under this approach:

[...] communication is a process of negotiating meanings, which results (inadvertently) in the generation and keeping in motion of the social system. Nothing less, nothing more. On the other hand, wanting to network communicative phenomena with the social system,

and this with the biological system and with the physical system, the above findings imply the possibility of formulating the following algorithm, based on the three organizational modes generating these systems: interactions are the generator of physical systems, perception is the generator of biological systems, and communication is the generator of the social system.

In short: $\{[(\text{interactions} + \text{organism}) = \text{perception}] + \text{signs}\} = \text{communication}$

(Fleischer, 2020, p. 180)

The cited definition can be considered in terms of an answer to the question of what communication is. Since we "know": what?, it is worth searching deeper and considering: what for? Following Fleischer, we also quote a list of reasons for speaking (understood as all methods of communicating).

- *we speak primarily in order to keep speaking in motion,*
- *we speak to participate and belong (to something), because through this we can suppose (believe) that we are members of groups, organizations, societies, etc. and we feel good about it,*
- *we speak because everyone else also speaks,*
- *we speak to check if the way we speak is also used by others,*
- *we speak to check if the constructs used for this purpose are also used by others in the same way and are semantized in the same way,*
- *we speak to find out during speaking whether others also say how and what we say,*
- *we speak because we want to and can orient ourselves through it,*
- *we speak to find out if our state of knowledge is the same as the state of knowledge of others,*
- *we speak for individual reasons, to satisfy our personal needs,*
- *we speak because socializing institutions force us to do so,*
- *we speak because functional social systems force us to do so,*
- *we speak to avoid restrictions of a social kind,*
- *we speak because appropriate institutions, organizations, devices are so oriented that they are kept in motion by our speaking,*
- *we speak because we have no other choice and are not given any other choice.*

(Fleischer, 2020, p. 181)

In the context of the WOMEN interACT project, one of the most important justifications for speaking is the issue of belonging mentioned by Fleischer. It also translates directly into why we speak the way we do (Fleischer, 2001).

The justification should be sought, among others, in the cultural and linguistic picture of the world, as well as in the stratifications directly related to them:

- culture (cultural groups, subcultures, individual culture, interculture);
- discourse (discourse, interdiscourse, specialized discourse, intercultural discourse).

Belonging is also largely connected with the issue of social exclusion, which was another important area of analysis for us.

2.2. Social exclusion as restricted access or participation

In the report titled Joint Report on Social Inclusion, which is one of the most important strategic documents in the history of European Union social policy, social exclusion was defined as:

Social exclusion is a process whereby certain individuals are pushed to the edge of society and prevented from participating fully by virtue of their poverty, or lack of basic competencies and lifelong learning opportunities, or as a result of discrimination. This distances them from job, income and education opportunities as well as social and community networks and activities. They have little access to power and decision-making bodies and thus often feeling powerless and unable to take control over the decisions that affect their day to day lives.

(European Commission, 2004, p. 10)

There are many definitional approaches to social exclusion in scientific circulation.

A valuable systematization of them was made by, among others, Jolanta Grotowska-Leder (Grotowska-Leder, 2005). The author notes that the theme of social exclusion entered wider circulation in the 1960s, when it ceased to be identified only with a political or economic phenomenon in favor of a sociological approach (the blurring of social bonds). Among the theoretical sources she lists, among others:

- conflict concepts of unequal distribution (of resources / privileges - more broadly: the thought of M. Weber, F. Parkin, B. Jordan, R. Collins, R. Dahrendorf);
- cultural theories regarding human rootedness in the social structure; concepts of "strangeness" and "presence" (more broadly the thoughts of E. Durkheim, G. Simmel, R. Park and E. Stonequist).

Grotowska-Leder also adds the achievements of M. Foucault to the list of theoretical sources. Following Szacki, she essentially characterizes his thoughts.

She notes that, according to Foucault, in every society there are fringes (margins), and therefore on the social ground there will always be exclusions. Among the systems of exclusion she lists after him:

- exclusion from work and economic production;
- exclusion from the process of reproduction;
- exclusion from the production of symbols (from discourse);
- exclusion from ludic activity.

Importantly, a given individual can experience a single or multiple systems of exclusion simultaneously. Grotowska-Leder additionally emphasizes that we owe to Foucault the thesis that exclusion should be considered as a universal and gradable phenomenon.

Besides the theoretical introduction, the author also makes a very valuable analysis of the definitions of social exclusion. She distinguishes three basic categories:

- analytical - characteristics of the phenomenon and the mechanisms behind it; reference to causes and manifestations;
- working - operationalization of exclusion for the purpose of conducting research;
- official - indicated in various types of documents, e.g. policies.

From the point of view of this project, we considered the abbreviated description of the first two types to be the most important, an example of the third we provided at the beginning of this subchapter.

According to Grotowska-Leder, analytical definitions can be divided into:

- participatory - placing emphasis on the thread of (limited) participation of individuals and groups in important areas of social life (mainly political, economic, social) or in single situations where systemic barriers or individual deficits constitute a blockade;
- distributional - related to (limited) access to services and resources (primarily to the labor market, education, health care, social and welfare benefits, as well as consumption).

Among the definitions that operationalize the approach to exclusion for the purposes of scientific research, the author also characterizes two main approaches:

- departure from a holistic approach to exclusion in favor of analyzing specific aspects or groups that are at risk of it (e.g. people in a crisis of homelessness, people with disabilities);
- concentration on the aspect of participation (taking into account indicators such as e.g. activity on the labor market, participation in social life).

Among the most widespread concepts of the causes and mechanisms of social exclusion, which we also considered important in the context of research activity within the WOMEN interACT project, Grotowska-Leder lists the approaches of Hilary Silver and Ruth Levitas.

Silver emphasizes in her analysis that social exclusion is not a uniform phenomenon, and thus it is difficult to unambiguously define it (Silver, 1994). She refers, among others, to economic, political or cultural dimensions. She notes that the way it is understood is largely connected with local culture (primarily political) and the dominant way of thinking. She considers this aspect to be particularly important in the context of designing integration (inclusive) strategies.

The author points out that social exclusion can be captured within three concepts, paradigms:

- solidarity (rooted in French republicanism) - a specific trait of an individual as a threat to the culture/identity of the group; exclusion as breaking the bond between the individual and society (lien social);
- specialization (rooted in Anglo-American liberalism) - society as a network of exchange; differentiation of society (e.g. in the economic dimension) leads to exclusion understood as lack or limited possibilities of participation in exchange (discrimination);
- monopoly (rooted in social democracy) - exclusion as a result of monopolization of

access to resources (e.g. material, cultural goods) by privileged groups; creating barriers to protect "own interests".

In turn, Ruth Levitas (we cite after: Grotowska-Leder, 2005) distinguishes three concepts of the causes of social exclusion:

- redistributive approach (exclusion as a consequence of poverty; lack of sufficient resources to fully participate in activities typical for the community; inclusion through the increase of benefits);
- reintegrative approach (exclusion as a consequence of being left in a situation without the possibility of gaining means of livelihood; inclusion through increasing the number of jobs and professional activation of excluded people);
- moralizing approach (exclusion as a consequence of human behavior; learned helplessness and dependence on aid programs reproduced in subsequent generations of the underclass; inclusion through strengthening the agency and independence of excluded people).

An extensive review of issues related to social exclusion, both theoretical and practical, was also made in the monograph titled *Various areas of social exclusion in Poland* (Becker-Pestka et al., 2017). In the publication divided into 3 main thematic threads, the authors placed consecutively: an analysis of the processes of social exclusion in Poland (against the European horizon), a review of sociological theories and approaches to the issue, as well as practical examples of support provided to people at risk of exclusion. In the multitude of approaches they cited, we considered it particularly important from the perspective of this project to draw attention to the differences in scientific and colloquial approaches.

In colloquial terms, the concept of social exclusion is sometimes identified with, among others, discrimination, poverty or social inequalities. It is not infrequently also given as a synonym for marginalization.

However, this is not reflected on the theoretical ground, according to which these phenomena differ in the level of intensity.

While marginalization refers to limiting the participation of individuals or groups in the basic institutions of a given public order or marginal participation in important aspects of social life, social exclusion stems directly from the degree of intensity of this phenomenon.

(Łojko, 2017, p. 9)

Despite the multitude of theoretical approaches to social exclusion, it should be noted that in most approaches it is referred to as a process. Majka Łojko, the author of one of the chapters of the cited publication, synthesizes the remaining threads that return in subsequent definitions.

The presented approaches to exclusion accentuate the problem of limitation and often also alienation from the social and institutional life of individuals or social groups. In most

definitions, social exclusion is considered in terms of the inability to participate in important aspects of the socio-economic and political-cultural life of a given society, which is not the result of an individual choice of the individual but of the obstacles they encounter.

(Łojko, 2017, p. 11)

2.3. Participation as an antidote to social exclusion

The concepts of social exclusion and participation complement each other: lack of participation can mean exclusion. We looked at research perspectives that allowed us to analyze the threads of participation in the project of people who applied as being at risk of social exclusion. We wondered what motivates them, what are the reasons for their decision to join this undertaking.

One of the theories describing the issue of motivation to implement change is Edward Deci and Richard Ryan's self-determination theory (1985, 2000). It is one of the most important contemporary theories of motivation - it focuses on the internal mechanisms of human motivation and on the conditions that foster or inhibit development, engagement, satisfaction. According to its assumptions, people are most motivated and engaged when three basic psychological needs are met:

- autonomy - the feeling of having an impact on one's own actions and decisions;
- competence - the feeling of being a competent person in performing one's tasks;
- relatedness - the feeling of having positive and supportive relationships with other people.

In the context of the issue of exclusion, i.e. how inclusion in agency processes can reverse this experience, we specifically looked at four groups of theoretical concepts that can constitute a kind of analytical framework, namely:

- Arnstein's ladder of participation (Arnstein, 1969);
- empowerment theory (Rappaport, 1981, 1987);
- concepts related to the creation of social capital (Putnam, 2000; Bourdieu, 1986);
- service-dominant logic (Vargo, Lusch, 2014) - co-creation of value by excluded people.

All four groups point to the same fundamental problem of exclusion: it is not only a lack of material resources, but a lack of agency, recognition and participation in the processes that shape living conditions. Participation is therefore not an addition to anti-exclusion activities, but their core.

Sherry Arnstein's ladder of participation (Arnstein, 1969) is a direct response to the observation that social programs often only seemingly engage excluded groups to legitimize decisions already virtually made. This eight-rung typology presents the level of involvement of citizens in decision-making processes: from lack of influence (manipulation) to full power (citizen control).

It is divided into three main groups:

- “nonparticipation”;
- tokenism (apparent participation);
- citizen power. (Arnstein, 1969)

The two lowest rungs - manipulation and therapy - Arnstein calls simply "nonparticipation". The middle three rungs (informing, consultation, placation) are tokenism: excluded people have a voice, but they have no influence. A real change in the position of the excluded group occurs only when partnership, delegated power and full citizen control appear. In the context of participatory theatre, the ladder can serve a dual function. Firstly, it is a diagnostic tool; it allows defining at what level participants from excluded environments are really engaged (are they invited to tell their story, which will then be processed by the organizers according to their own vision (tokenism), or do they have a real influence on the form, content and meaning of the performance). Secondly, it can be a design tool, when the conscious pursuit of higher rungs of the ladder becomes a measure of the ambition of real inclusion of participants in the project.

Julian Rappaport (1981, 1987) as the creator of the theory of restoring agency ("empowerment"), defined it as a process through which individuals, groups and communities gain control over their own lives. This theory is directly immersed in the problem of exclusion, because it starts from the diagnosis of powerlessness as the central mechanism of marginalization. Rappaport points to three mutually reinforcing levels of empowerment:

- individual level (it is about transforming the subjective sense of agency, when an excluded person learns that their actions have meaning and consequences);
- group level (empowerment is realized through collective action and building a common identity; the excluded recognize their experience as shared, not only private);
- structural level (means changing the institutional and systemic conditions that reproduce marginalization, or more broadly: exclusion).

For participatory theatre, this three-level structure is extremely productive. The theatrical space can function as an environment in which all three levels of empowerment are activated in parallel: the participating person practices agency within the creative process (individual level), recognizes the community of experiences with other participants (group level), and the project itself becomes a voice directed towards institutions and decision-makers (structural level). All this has a chance to happen if the restoration of agency is a real effect of the action, and not just a declared intention - the participating persons (at risk of social exclusion) must define their needs.

Robert Putnam (2000) and Pierre Bourdieu (1986) describe a related mechanism: social exclusion is largely an exclusion from the network of relations, resources and recognition. Putnam distinguishes bonding capital (bonding), i.e. relations within the group, building solidarity, but potentially closing the group to the outside, as well as bridging capital (bridging), which creates weak ties between different social groups. Exclusion often means an excess of bonding capital and a deficit of bridging capital: excluded groups are highly internally cohesive, but cut off from networks that give access to resources, institutions and

decision-makers. Bourdieu adds a symbolic dimension to this analysis: cultural and symbolic capital determine whose practices, languages and forms of expression are considered valuable in a given social field. Participatory theatre can therefore act as a space of meeting for different social groups, generating bridging capital: it creates ties between people who normally do not interact.

Vargo and Lusch (2014) propose a fundamental shift in understanding value: from value embedded in a product to value co-created in the use process. In the service logic, every participant is a potential entity that brings knowledge, skills and experience to the value creation process. Combining this perspective with the problem of exclusion reveals a mechanism in which traditional models of social assistance and cultural activities treat excluded people as recipients (beneficiaries). Meanwhile, according to Service-Dominant-Logic (SDL), this scheme is reversed: the experience of exclusion is a resource that neither institutions nor people "on the other side" possess. An excluded participant of a participatory theatre brings resources that are not available to anyone else. Thanks to such a shift (if the participating people co-create the enterprise), the value of the project can be defined by them. Then project management becomes the management of the co-creation process, and evaluation must take into account the value created by the participating people themselves, not just the value "delivered" to them by a given institution.

2.4. Social change as the result of a 3-stage process

In Margaret Archer's morphogenetic approach (1996, 2019), social change is understood as the result of a sequential process in which social structures and human actions remain analytically distinct, although they interact with each other.

Social change occurs in a morphogenetic cycle, which consists of three phases:

- T1 Structural conditioning, i.e. existing structures and institutions determine the context of action, creating opportunities for some actors, while imposing constraints on others;
- T2-T3 Social interaction, within which actors, equipped with reflexivity, undertake actions in response to existing conditions, negotiating, reproducing or questioning the existing order;
- T4 Morphogenesis or morphostasis, where the effect of the interaction is either structural change (*morphogenesis*) or reproduction of existing arrangements (*morphostasis*).

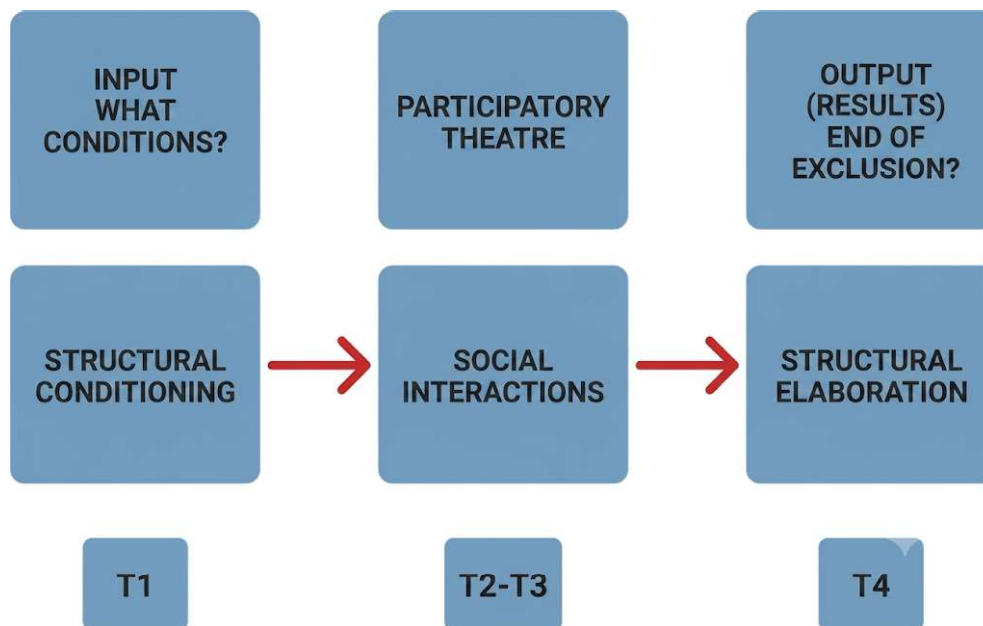


Fig. 1. Margaret Archer's morphogenetic approach (in the context of participatory theatre). Elaboration by the authors of Part I, based on: Margaret S. Archer, *Kultura i sprawczość*, Narodowe Centrum Kultury, 2019.

Levels:

T1 (input) - social conditions around the experience of exclusion

T2-T3 (theatre) - a tool of participation; the moment of social interactions

T4 (output) - results - the durability of re-inclusion, i.e. can theatre as a tool of participation be one of the effective tools of social change?

In our research analyses we partially also refer to Kurt Lewin's theory of (organizational) change management (1943, 1946, 1947), which is based on three main pillars:

- force field dynamics;
- three-stage model;
- action research.

Force field dynamics concerns social situations that are defined as a field of tensions between driving forces that push towards change and restraining forces that maintain the status quo. The balance between them is a state that Lewin calls a quasi-stationary equilibrium.

The three-stage model concerns successively:

- unfreezing (consists in the destabilization of the current state of equilibrium);
- change (this is the phase of active search for new behaviors, values and ways of acting);
- refreezing (consolidation of the new state).

Action research concerns a model of change based on a spiral: planning-action-observation-reflection-replanning.

Lewin's approach is based on the belief that social change is a research process: it cannot be designed without understanding the dynamics of the field in which one acts, and the participation of the interested parties themselves is not an addition to the change process, but its necessary condition.

3. Analysis - organizers' and participants' perspective

3.1 Research methodology

The aim of the research we conducted in the WOMEN interACT project was to identify the impact of participatory theatre activities on the activation of participating groups at risk of social exclusion. We applied an interpretivist research approach. It allowed for the analysis of structural conditions in the context of factors that refer to the issue of activating social groups at risk of exclusion. The subject of the research was participatory theatre as a tool of potential social change, activation of the surveyed groups.

Among the respondents we distinguished the following groups:

- process participants (people selected through open calls that were conducted independently by 3 organizations implementing the WOMEN interACT project: Društvo ZIZ from Slovenia, Restart Theatre Athens from Greece and Stowarzyszenie Kobietostan from Poland; as researchers we did not participate in the development of criteria regarding the experience of exclusion for the purpose of recruiting project participants);
- project organizers (representatives of each of the three aforementioned organizations, moderators of participatory theatre processes).

Below we present once again four issues that constituted the starting point for us in planning and conducting the research:

- communication;
- social exclusion;
- participation;
- social change.

In the case of the analysis of the communication issue, we based the research primarily on the achievements of constructivism and Michael Fleischer's general theory of communication (Fleischer, 2007). Regarding social exclusion, we referred to selected sociological approaches, including the work of Hilary Silver (1994) and Ruth Levitas (1998).

The area of participation was based on several theoretical approaches, including:

- Edward Deci and Richard Ryan's self-determination theory (1985, 2000);
- Arnstein's ladder of participation (Arnstein, 1969);
- empowerment theory (Rappaport, 1981, 1987);
- concepts related to the creation of social capital (Putnam, 2000; Bourdieu, 1986);

- Service-Dominant Logic (Vargo, Lusch, 2014).

The thread of social change was embedded in Margaret Archer's morphogenetic approach (2019), as well as Kurt Lewin's theory of change management (1943, 1946, 1947).

In the research, we used data triangulation to ensure greater credibility and reliability of the results:

- desk research;
- focus group research;
- with participants (at the beginning and at the end of the project; divided by organizations);
- with organizers (at the beginning of the project and at the end of the project);
- overt (non-participant) observations of participants - during the dress rehearsal or preparations for the premiere show.

In the case of focus group research, we adopted the principle of conducting it at the beginning and at the end of the project, which gave us a chance to observe aspects regarding potential change, in accordance with our adopted research assumptions.

We divided the focus group research into four parts, according to the research areas we identified. These areas did not change depending on the group (organizers/participants) or the moment the research was conducted (beginning/end of the project).

For each area we developed different research questions, which constituted a starting point for the respondents' conversation. As a result, we developed four scenarios of focus group research, which differed depending on:

- group:
 - participants
 - organizers
- moment of conducting the research:
 - beginning of the project
 - end of the project.

FOCUS GROUP SCENARIOS WITH ORGANIZERS

BEGINNING OF THE PROJECT	END OF THE PROJECT
COMMUNICATION	
What is communication and what is it used for? What is communication in theatre used for?	What forms did communication take and what goals did it achieve in this project?
SOCIAL EXCLUSION	
What do you think social exclusion is? What are its dimensions? What socially excluded groups are most often discussed in your country? Point out three examples of the most frequently occurring exclusions. Do you notice any socially excluded groups that are omitted in this discussion? Why do you think that is? What is your experience in working with excluded groups?	After this project, do you have any new thoughts on social exclusion? What are they? Did the thread of exclusions experienced by the participants affect your work in any way? How? What do you consider important in terms of running projects that are directed at groups at risk of exclusion?
PARTICIPATION	
What do you associate participation with? Why participatory theatre, and not just theatre? How do you think a model/exemplary process of working with the participatory theatre method proceeds? What increases and what decreases engagement in the process of working with the participatory theatre method?	Do you think that the process you were participants and moderators of had a participatory character? Why? After this project, do you have any new thoughts on participatory theatre? What are they? Did the level of engagement of the participants increase or decrease during the process? Did you moderate this engagement in any way, how?

BEGINNING OF THE PROJECT	END OF THE PROJECT
SOCIAL CHANGE	
Can participatory theatre be a tool for social change? Why? When working with socially excluded groups, do you talk to them about their situation? Do you design a change of this situation? How? Does further cooperation with excluded people occur? Do you conduct further activities strengthening the positive (expected) change?	What changes did you observe in the participants (individually and in the group) during the process? In your opinion, what should happen for this change to be permanent? Do you think that this project can be an element of shaping a broader social change? Why?

Table 2. Focus group scenarios with organizers (at the beginning and at the end of the project).
Elaboration by the authors of Part I.

FOCUS GROUP SCENARIOS WITH PARTICIPANTS

BEGINNING OF THE PROJECT	END OF THE PROJECT
COMMUNICATION	
What do you think communication is? What is it used for? What is communication in ZIZ/Restart/Kobietostan? What does it give you, what does it enable?	What does communication through theatre mean to you? Do you think you can use the rules of "communication through theatre" in everyday life? In what way?
SOCIAL EXCLUSION	
What do you think social exclusion is? Do you sometimes feel excluded in your everyday life? When? Why?	After this experience, do you have any new thoughts on social exclusion? What are they? From the beginning of the process until now - did you feel a sense of belonging to the group? Did this feeling change at some point?
PARTICIPATION	
Do you feel in your everyday life that you have an influence on something? If so, on what? Do you feel that you belong to this group? What do you have an influence on here? Are there any rules binding you here? Who set them? How do they affect your functioning? How is your cooperation with the representatives of ZIZ/Restart/Kobietostan going? How would you describe their role? What are they responsible for? In your opinion, what is the most important thing during rehearsals? How do you feel here? What conditions must be met for you	What do you think was the most important thing in the preparations for the premiere? Did you feel that you had an influence on this process? In what way? Do you think that this sense of influence will change the way you act in everyday life? Have you noticed that people in the group started taking on specific roles (for example: leaders)? Would you like to participate in such a project again? Why?

BEGINNING OF THE PROJECT	END OF THE PROJECT
to feel an important part of this group? If you compare this experience with your previous ones, is there anything special about it? What makes it stand out?	
SOCIAL CHANGE	
Do you think that participation in this project will affect your future? What could change? Has participation in the project already affected you? How? Do you already notice any benefits now? What would have to happen, what conditions would have to be met, to maintain positive changes after the end of the project?	Do you feel that this project has changed you in some way? If so, in what way? Do you think that this change will stay with you for longer? What could help maintain it?

Table 3. Focus group scenarios with participants (at the beginning and at the end of the project). Elaboration by the authors of Part I.

We based the overt observations on two areas: communication and participation (due to the lack of possibility to analyze social exclusion and social change during the observation). The observational research concerned exclusively the participants (also in the context of their relationship with the organizers). During the observation (before the premiere show in each of the three countries) we systematically recorded behaviors and interactions. During the analysis of the results, we used a narrative analysis, which allowed for the interpretation of the sequence of events that we observed.

OBSERVATION SCENARIO OF PARTICIPANTS - RESEARCH QUESTIONS

COMMUNICATION	PARTICIPATION
In what way do the participants communicate with each other?	Are the participants involved in the implementation of the project?
How does this communication proceed?	To what extent?
Do conflicts occur?	What are the manifestations of involvement?
Does the impression of understanding prevail?	In what way do they behave towards each other?
What are the manifestations of verbal and non-verbal communication?	Do they show belonging to the group?
In what way do the participants communicate with the organizers?	Do they care for other people in the group?
Does communication prevail on the group forum, or in subgroups/individually?	Do team roles emerge in the groups?
Does anyone take on representative functions?	

Table 4. Observation scenarios of participants. Elaboration by the authors of Part I.

3.2 Focus group research

Organizers' perspective at the beginning of the project - focus group research

In the focus group research, which we conducted on January 10, 2025, two and three-person representations of three partner organizations took part:

- Društvo ZIZ from Slovenia;
- Restart Theatre Athens from Greece;
- Stowarzyszenie Kobietostan from Poland.

We conducted the research in English, using a research scenario, which consisted of a total of 14 questions or sentences, divided into four main thematic threads:

- communication;
- social exclusion;
- participation;
- social change.

The statements of the people who took part in the research were transcribed, and then subjected to qualitative analysis and abbreviated description, which we presented below.

Part I Communication

What is communication and what is it used for?

What is communication in theatre used for?

Team 1 – Restart Theater Athens

The representatives of this theatre intuitively identified the thread of communication with communication on the theatrical ground. This fact may prove a strong attachment to the performed activity and perceiving the world through its prism. In a broader sense, communication is for them primarily a dialogue and democracy. In their statements, they referred to the roots of Greek theatre, which in its assumption was a form of social communication (dialogue).

In their opinion, the quintessence of theatre is communication, which takes place between:

- people from the team during preparations;
- performing people during stage presentation;
- performers and the audience (local community).

The third aspect was indicated by the respondents from Restart Theater Athens as crucial, not only in the context of the exchange of verbal messages, but also energy and shaping a specific atmosphere.

Among the goals mentioned were mobilizing to:

- action (strengthening agency);
- social integration (counteracting isolation/exclusion); concentration on common experiences: emotions, problems.

Team 2 – Društvo ZIZ

According to this representation, communication primarily takes place during live meetings (in verbal and non-verbal forms). In this form, it is an integral element of being human. Crucial is the ability not only to listen/look (reception of stimuli), but above all - to hear, to see (empathy, attempt to understand, interpretation). Communication is primarily used to share knowledge and verify our individual beliefs or observations with others. The representatives

of this organization also referred to different circumstances and groups between which communication on the theatrical ground takes place. They mentioned:

- communication in the team (during preparations and presentations);
- communication between the stage (the content of the artistic expression) and the audience:
 - conscious - people who came to the performance,
 - accidental - people who, for example, stay in the park where rehearsals take place.

Among the activities and goals of theatrical communication they mentioned:

- content;
- promotion;
- community building (inside and outside the theatre):
 - "How to integrate the team during preparations and take care of freedom and equality of expression?",
 - "How can stage presentations integrate the audience - local community during and after the shows?",
 - "Does the message from the stage mobilize the local community to change their thinking/shape new habits?".

Team 3 – Stowarzyszenie Kobietostan

The project coordinators defined communication through a social prism.

In their opinion, it is primarily used for:

- cooperation, which in their opinion is a guarantee of achieving better results: "two people working together can achieve much more than one person alone"; "without communication there is no cooperation";
- reducing the risk of misunderstanding;
- solving conflicts.

The representatives of Kobietostan distinguished three levels of communication on the theatrical ground:

- stage - audience - stage (the content of the performance and evoking specific emotions - reactions; audience response - verbal and non-verbal reactions);
- stage (during the performance, during preparations - training of non-verbal communication in order to manage unforeseen stage events);
- process (people appearing in the preparation process; learning NVC (non-violent communication); establishing rules of cooperation (contract).

Part II Social exclusion

What do you think social exclusion is? What are its dimensions?

What socially excluded groups are most often discussed in your country?

Point out three examples of the most frequently occurring exclusions.

Do you notice any socially excluded groups that are omitted in this discussion? Why do you think that is?

What is your experience in working with excluded groups?

Team 1 – Restart Theater Athens

The representatives of the organization, in their definition of exclusion, noted that it is a method of the elites to control society and manage the distribution of goods. In their opinion, dividing people into different categories makes them perceive themselves hostilely, which often prevents communication that could lead to unification and social change.

The respondents identified the experience of exclusion with feelings such as: powerlessness; anger; injustice; restriction of the freedom to be oneself and self-expression.

According to the representatives, the experience of social exclusion can lead to two scenarios:

- shaping a sense of powerlessness, adopting a victim posture, susceptibility to aggression;
- arousing anger, which can become a source of strength and shape the attitude of an "agent of change". In this process, activism and meeting with other people who share similar experiences is helpful.

According to the respondents, theatre can play an important role in reducing the feeling of exclusion (part of a community/belonging to a group).

According to the representatives, the excluded groups most often discussed in Greece are:

- refugees (the country actively receives refugees from various regions: Africa, Asia and from war zones, which is associated with a large population); this situation has contributed to the increase in popularity of neo-Nazi parties and fascist ideology; at the same time, people with progressive views fight for justice and look for ways to integrate;
- LGBTQ+ community (especially in the context of same-sex marriages, adoption, trans women);
- women (especially: women experiencing violence; the wave of violence and femicide as one of the major social problems).

The respondents pointed out that women in Greece are excluded in various ways - e.g. through financial and professional exclusion.

The representatives mentioned excluded groups that are often omitted in the discussion, such as:

- people with disabilities or mental problems;
- the Roma community;
- people who express opposition to the system;
- youth and the elderly;
- sex workers;
- unemployed people.

The respondents justified the lack of conversation or social sensitivity towards the mentioned groups with the following reasons:

- government decisions regarding the limitation of subsidies for people with special needs;
- fear (e.g. criminal context associated with the Roma community or anarchists);
- ignorance or difficulty of recognition (e.g. in the context of mental illness);
- demographic structure (Greece's society is aging; at the same time: there is a lack of adaptation of spaces to the needs of the elderly (nursing homes are very expensive, families are responsible for caring for seniors, who often spend whole days at home - lack of visibility).

The representatives pointed out that although their organization is young, as its leaders, they had the opportunity to cooperate with each other much earlier. Since 2010, they have implemented many social projects, performances and numerous workshops, in which diverse groups of participants took part. As Restart, as part of one of the projects, they announced an open call, to which they invited both men and women, including people from various groups at risk of social exclusion. However, only women responded. This is how the "Women's Voices" project was created. It was the first time they worked in a completely female group. The participants themselves did not want men to join the team - they believed that it would change the energy and the way the group functioned. The representatives noted that thanks to this project they discovered a completely new group work dynamic and felt that they wanted to explore it further.

Representatives of Restart had the opportunity to cooperate with, among others:

- women who experienced violence (including sexual violence);
- unemployed people of pre-retirement age and seniors;
- people from the LGBTQ+ community;
- widows who have ended their professional careers and struggle with loneliness (at this point, the respondents added that many older Greek women organize alternative forms of housing from the bottom up, sharing apartments and healthcare costs, which the state does not provide).

The respondents emphasized that until now they had not used the term "socially excluded groups". Their recruitment was open to everyone, regardless of age or life situation.

Team 2 – Društvo ZIZ

The representatives of the organization in their statement listed the following manifestations of social exclusion, as well as the mechanisms that determine them:

- fear/lack of acceptance towards otherness/diversity;
- social inequalities;
- stereotypes, prejudices, labeling, generalization (creating an image of the whole group based on individual examples), systemic ostracism towards people who do not observe (unwritten) norms that prevail in a given group;
- competition.

According to the representatives of Društvo ZIZ, the excluded groups most often discussed in Slovenia are:

- the Roma community;
- the LGBTQ+ minority;
- migrants;
- seniors;
- people in a crisis of homelessness;
- the "erased".

After the war, when Slovenia regained its independence, some people from the former Yugoslavia did not apply for citizenship. As a result, they live in Slovenia but are not registered as citizens of any country, so officially they do not exist. This is important because these people (or their parents) have never received any compensation for the wrongs they experienced during and after the war. The topic of this group is not popular in the mainstream media, but social activists try to raise public awareness about it. According to the representatives, theatre can be a form of public intervention and raise awareness on important topics.

The respondents noted that in Slovenia there is not often discussion about groups such as:

- people with disabilities;
- elderly people;
- people in a crisis of homelessness;
- minors who have committed prohibited acts;
- single mothers and those who enter into a relationship with someone other than the biological father of the children;
- all other groups that experience exclusion, but we are not aware of their existence.

Among the reasons, aspects such as:

- lack of visibility in public space (social isolation, special facilities for the sick or elderly);
- avoidance of discomfort;
- belief in justified exclusion (their choice / their fault);

- attitude of people who belong to these groups (they do not fight for their visibility and audibility, they do not initiate discussions, perhaps there is also a lack of allies).

The representatives of the organization pointed out that they do not have experience in implementing projects oriented towards cooperation with people from a specific socially excluded group. At the same time, they noted that both in their team and in workshop groups, there are people who represent various groups that experience exclusion (e.g. due to lack of employment, sexual orientation, age, physical disability or mental problems). The respondents also shared a reflection important from the point of view of WOMEN interACT project management. They noted that a significant challenge, and even a risk, can be the organization of recruitment (open call) profiled in terms of social exclusion. For many people, aspects related to the experience of exclusion are not those through the prism of which they want to define themselves or be defined (example: when you organize a workshop aimed at unemployed people, in a way you label them and by distinguishing them - you exclude them).

Team 3 – Stowarzyszenie Kobietostan

The representatives of the organization made an attempt at a systemic diagnosis of social exclusion. In their opinion, as humans we build homogeneous communities to ensure our safety and, as a result, our survival. This mechanism is associated with making a distinction: us/them - others. To maintain cohesion, we exclude those individuals who in some way disrupt it. In this way, we also wash away responsibility and guilt, being able to blame person or group x for problems/shortcomings (scapegoat mechanism).

According to the representatives of Stowarzyszenie Kobietostan, the following groups are most often mentioned in the Polish media:

- the LGBTQ+ minority (right-wing government, functioning law and restrictions);
- migrants (international situation, events on the border);
- women, especially those who took part in protests against the tightening of abortion laws, support abortion, consciously resign from parenthood, and break traditional ideas about the role of a woman.

The representatives of the organization listed several groups that are relatively rarely included in discussions about exclusion:

- people with disabilities (and those who care for them);
- the Roma community;
- people serving a prison sentence (currently or in the past);
- people living in poverty;
- people in a crisis of homelessness.

An important reflection from the point of view of the discussion concerned the so-called gender gap in the context of talking about individual excluded groups. The respondents pointed out that when we think about people who are serving a prison sentence or are in a crisis of homelessness, our subconscious most often directs us towards male figures.

According to social ideas, a woman does not fit the typical image of an inmate or a homeless person. In addition, the low representation of women in these groups makes them invisible.

The project coordinators indicated the following reasons for the lack of discussion about the mentioned groups:

- belief in justified exclusion (e.g. in the context of people who are serving or have served a prison sentence - it is their fault);
- decrease in numbers - decrease in visibility;
- lack of substantive preparation for discussion and difficulties with classification (mainly in the context of people with disabilities, their caregivers);
- risk associated with exposing incompetence (one's own or the system's)
- fear of additional emotional burden (talking about the difficult, and sometimes tragic situation of other people can be too burdensome);

The representatives of the organization admitted that in a sense they specialize in working with socially excluded groups. This is related to the nature of their activities and the fact that they visit places where these people stay (often isolated from the rest of society). Among these groups are, among others:

- people serving a prison sentence (especially women);
- families of inmates (especially children);
- wards of educational centers and correctional facilities;
- women in a crisis of homelessness;
- women with experience of mental illness.

Additionally, the Kobietostan representation referred to its experiences from the implementation of social projects (mostly theatrical), which were addressed to women in the formula of an open call. Such a form naturally resulted in a large diversity of participants. The group included, among others: migrants from Ukraine and Belarus, a single mother raising 6 children, a mother of a child with disabilities, and women with experience of mental crisis. This group also drew attention to the challenge related to project communication. In order not to use the term: socially excluded women, the organizers developed an alternative reading: women with different experiences.

Once again, the topic related to the risk of negative labeling and the necessity of mindfulness not to duplicate social schemas appeared in the discussion:

Sometimes theatre can be useful as a tool of advocacy for a specific group. However, when we have in a group women with different experiences who talk about the hardships of womanhood, we do not want the audience to perceive them through the prism of exclusion. We do not want them to perform in the role of representatives of given groups. We care about the audience seeing specific people and listening to what they have to say.

Part III Participation

What do you associate participation with?

Why participatory theatre, and not just theatre?

How do you think a model/exemplary process of working with the participatory theatre method proceeds?

What increases and what decreases engagement in the process of working with the participatory theatre method?

Team 1 - Restart Theater Athens

For this team, participation is an emotionally positive concept. Their first Stowarzyszenies were joy and happiness. They captured participation as being fully present, with a strong emphasis on personal expression and self-development. The relational dimension recurred in the statements:

- exchanging energy with others;
- co-creating and learning from different cultures and perspectives.

The respondents also drew attention to the philosophical tension of interest to them between being a whole as an individual, and simultaneously being part of a larger group. From their perspective, theatre was originally participatory by nature (reference to civic choirs in ancient Greece), and the label "participatory" became necessary only after the professionalization of theatre and the loss of this feature.

For them, participatory theatre is distinguished by three factors:

- first - the power dynamic between the stage and the audience is fundamentally different: the audience is not expected to sit passively, and its physical and emotional reactions are welcome;
- second - the creative process itself is different, because actors and actresses are authentic collaborators, not tools in the hands of the directing person;
- third - time and dialogue count, the performance is a warm-up before the real meeting, which takes place in the conversation after it, sometimes during a shared meal.

The respondents also made a distinction based on values - conventional theatre aims to impress and create stars, while participatory theatre focuses on serving the community.

After 15 years of experience, the team's main conclusion was that there is no perfect process in terms of tools or methods. What counts is ethics, the specific internal attitude of the facilitator. They described it as awareness and ideological freedom and authentic curiosity about other people. A key warning concerns motivation: if the artist is driven by the need for personal recognition, the work may seem participatory at first glance,

but in reality it "sucks" energy from the participants, instead of exchanging it equally.

Truly participatory work, in their opinion, requires serving others, not one's own ego. In practice, this also means great flexibility - readiness to improvise, abandon plans and work with the unexpected.

This team focused on two main factors of engagement:

- building trust through safety, integrity and honesty; they noticed that communities are often initially suspicious of artists, assuming that they want to use the participants for their own purposes, and overcoming this required consistent, authentic engagement;
- equal attention: making sure that no participant feels left out or less valued than others; on the other hand, the team pointed out dominant people who take up a disproportionate amount of space, time and attention, which can overwhelm and effectively silence less active participants.

Team 2 - Društvo ZIZ

This team approached participation from a social and civic perspective. They emphasized dialogue, inclusion and teamwork as key elements of participation, noting that authentic participation requires stepping out of the comfort zone. The representatives indicated 4 key conditions for meaningful participation:

- safe space;
- empowerment (activity, not passivity);
- connection;
- non-judgment.

They also drew attention to an important political argument: passive citizenship is perceived as dangerous, because it allows extreme or irresponsible entities to fill the vacuum. Participation is therefore seen as a civic duty. Their key argument was that participatory theatre is holistic, it engages the whole person (mind and body) in the entire process (from preparations to presentation). Importantly, they emphasized that participants do not have to be theatre professionals. This authentic human engagement creates a deeper connection with the topic. They also emphasized the therapeutic dimension: the experience is personal, meaningful and exploratory in a way that it rarely is in conventional theatre.

The respondents noted that Društvo ZIZ bases its work, among others, on the methodology of the Theatre of the Oppressed. They value it precisely because participation is inscribed in every stage: from sharing personal stories that become collective stories; through co-creating texts; to performances in which the audience is invited on stage. This process is described as fluid and open, almost organic - people can come and go, re-enter, the group shapes this journey together. The respondents also noted that open discussions with the audience are often continued after their performances, which often shapes subsequent editions of stage presentations.

The group presented a fairly optimistic approach to engagement: every stage of the process, if conducted well, builds engagement. A safe space is key.

The representatives also emphasized the thread of emotional risk: sometimes the work touches a sensitive or painful point in a participant. The facilitator faces a choice: gently push so that something meaningful can develop, or risk a move that may cause the given person (and potentially the group) to withdraw completely. They distinguished individual pain, important in the context of communicating something to the world, from the responsibility for empathetically dealing with it. Crossing the boundary (not the level of emotional depth, but reaching it inappropriately; too much pressure) was identified as a key factor that can break engagement.

Team 3 - Stowarzyszenie Kobietostan

This team took a more structural and conceptual approach. The leaders defined participation as a mechanism that enables people to be active:

- in theatre: influence on, among others, content, set design, logistics;
- in democracy: where being a citizen does not automatically mean participation.

Their most characteristic contribution to the discussion was the direct linking of participation with exclusion and inclusion: a truly participatory process excludes no one, and exclusion is understood as a direct result of the deprivation of the possibility to participate. In their opinion: there is no theatre without participation, without it it is just an empty building.

The respondents outlined the spectrum of participation, from passive physical presence, through emotional engagement and speaking out, to: co-creating one's own role, character, play, and even the theatrical organization itself. Crucially, this team linked the level of participation directly with the scale of benefits. The more participatory the process, the greater the individual and social benefits, including:

- building community;
- conflict resolution;
- auto-therapy;
- claiming one's rights and democratic practice.

This team also rejected the idea of a perfect process, while proposing a specific checklist. A process close to the ideal requires, according to the leaders, transparency regarding what is and what is not participatory. The participants should:

- know which decisions belong to them, and which to the leaders;
- be aware of clearly defined responsibilities and duties;
- have a sense of full voluntariness.

Their most important argument was that participation cannot be forced: the moment it becomes mandatory, it ceases to be true participation. Safety again emerged as a non-negotiable foundation. Besides it, as a factor that contributes to an increase in the level of engagement, the leaders pointed to playing together. In their opinion, these two elements lower barriers and make participation seem valuable, not threatening. It decreases when there is a lack of trust, and especially when people are afraid of being judged or faced with expectations they are unable to meet. Their approach suggests that fear is the main enemy

of participation, and the role of the facilitator consists mainly in creating conditions in which fear will be limited to a minimum.

Part IV Social change

Can participatory theatre be a tool for social change? Why?

When working with socially excluded groups, do you talk to them about their situation?

Do you design a change of this situation? How?

Does further cooperation with excluded people occur? Do you conduct further activities strengthening the positive (expected) change?

Team 1 - Restart Theater Athens

According to this team, the main argument for change is that participatory theatre brings together people who normally would never have met, and during this process, initial judgment and reluctance gradually transform into authentic friendship. The representatives, besides emphasizing individual change, described the theatre group itself as a miniature society in which participants can practice democracy, empowerment, and even an alternative economy - sharing skills and resources that affect their daily lives long after the workshops have ended. They pointed out that they formulate change carefully, respecting ethical dimensions. From the very beginning, they accept that change will vary depending on the individual. In their statement, they clearly noted that manipulating or controlling the way people change would violate their code of ethics.

The team spoke openly about the structural problem: external funding practically makes it impossible to maintain formal cooperation after the project ends, which threatens to halt the change. Instead, informal interpersonal relationships survive: some participants return to help with future projects, others become regular spectators, and still others organize meetings years later. Regarding lasting change, the respondents emphasized: without a dedicated person to maintain new norms and the quality of social life after the moderators leave, groups tend to revert to old habits. True, lasting change at the community level requires long-term structures, not one-off projects.

Their deeper stance is based on the belief that social change occurs one at a time: more internally liberated individuals gradually create a healthier social fabric, even if this process is slow and difficult to measure.

Team 2 - Društvo ZIZ

The team confirmed the potential of theatre as a generator of social change, while speaking honestly about its limitations. In their opinion, participatory theatre is a starting point, that is,

something that moves people. At the same time, lasting social change requires a structural implementation that goes beyond theatre itself. The respondents also emphasized that in their opinion the key mechanisms of change are: empowerment, dialogue, self-awareness and the ability to think locally while acting globally.

The team admitted that when the project ends, it has limited possibilities to continue activities towards social change: it usually loses contact with the participants and has no way to measure lasting change. Their approach consists in providing tools and creating experiences, trusting that the participants will use what they need. They do not direct people towards change, but open space for it. Despite this, they are always accompanied by a specific goal: every project starts with an intended social impact, and working without this sense of purpose seems impossible to them. Like most NGOs, their work is entirely dependent on grants, which creates a "start-stop" rhythm that prevents authentic community building around the theatre.

Their central, open question of how to conduct participatory theatre activities outside of a project-based framework remains unresolved.

Team 3 - Stowarzyszenie Kobietostan

In their statement, the representatives of Stowarzyszenie Kobietostan emphasized the perspective of visibility and accessibility. They drew attention to the practical context: participatory theatre can serve as a legal entry point to closed institutions that are usually inaccessible to social activists. Then it is not only a space for reflection, but a strategic tool to reach the most excluded and invisible members of society. They are given a stage (literally and metaphorically) so that they can be seen and heard on their own terms. Additionally, the leaders noted that theatre offers a valuable medium: it allows telling personal stories using masks, metaphors and fictional characters, without the need to publicly attribute the story to oneself.

They questioned whether "designing social change" is the right framework at all, pointing out that they do not have tools to track what happens to participants in projects after they end. What they can observe and work with is the change that occurs during the workshop itself. Therefore, they focus on maximizing effects during the process by developing, among others, skills in:

- communication;
- cooperation;
- conflict resolution;
- building courage to express emotions and present vulnerability.

In this context, the leaders also drew attention to the increase in the sense of agency through the experience of creating a real theatrical performance (mostly without professional preparation in this regard). They also noted that their overriding goal is to leave the group in a better state after each project than before its start. Therefore - they focus on building ties within the group, and not between the group and themselves.

Organizers' perspective at the end of the project - focus group research.

In the focus group research, which we conducted on May 10, 2026, representatives of three partner organizations took part:

- Društvo ZIZ from Slovenia;
- Restart Theatre Athens from Greece;
- Stowarzyszenie Kobietostan from Poland.

The research was conducted in English, using a research scenario, which consisted of a total of 10 questions or sentences, divided into four main thematic threads:

- communication;
- social exclusion;
- participation;
- social change.

The statements of the people who took part in the research were transcribed, and then subjected to qualitative analysis and abbreviated description, which we presented below.

Part I Communication

What forms did communication take and what goals did it achieve in this project?

Team 1 - Restart Theater Athens

The representatives of this theatre distinguished two axes of communication in the project, which in their opinion are the most important:

- process moderators and the group of participants (as well as the performance audience);
- partner organizations.

They described communication within the group as open, transparent, and equal. In their opinion, they managed to create a safe space for discussion, which allowed expressing needs and sharing difficult experiences (indication of the therapeutic function). Each participant could share experiences important to her at a time of her choosing and to the extent she was ready for. They noted that their task as process moderators was often limited to active listening and support in finding the answer to the question of what and how a given actress would want to say from the stage.

As the goal of communication between partner organizations, they indicated support (mutual consultations) and exchange of experiences. They considered that communication within the

consortium was based on respect, honesty and responsibility. They were accompanied by a conviction of community and solidarity.

Team 2 - Društvo ZIZ

During live meetings with the participants, the directors often used the figure of a circle (equality of voices). As an important element that defined, among others, the rules of communication, the representatives of this organization indicated the contract developed with the team. Openness to sharing opinions (feedback) was also important to them. Because many tensions appeared in the process (including difficulties generated by one of the participants, who eventually left the group), they used theatrical tools (e.g. theatre of the oppressed) to manage conflicts and problematic situations.

They noted that communication with the participants outside the meetings was operational and formalized (e-mail), which resulted from the belief in the necessity to maintain distance (lack of building private relationships). The directors and process moderators were in constant contact with each other (live meetings, phone calls, as well as regular organizational meetings of the collective). This team also emphasized the value of meetings with other partner organizations (online supervisions, live workshop meetings serving not only the exchange of theatrical tools but also consultations related to, among others, group dynamics). Communication within the consortium gave a sense of security and of being heard.

Team 3 - Stowarzyszenie Kobietostan

In the area of communication, the representatives of this organization distinguished three important goals:

- developing the content and form of the performative event;
- building relationships;
- managing organizational issues.

Besides live meetings (workshop work, forum discussions), the organizers and participants had a shared WhatsApp group, which served not only for operational communication, but also for exchanging inspiration and sharing materials that were used in the creative process. Not all messages were sent to the shared group (some participants contacted individually, e.g., with one of the directors).

At the beginning of the process, a contract was developed, which also concerned issues related to communication; the participants and organizers returned to its provisions at subsequent stages. Communication with partners took place during live and online meetings (exchange of experiences and good practices, building relationships, organizational issues). Additional tools for operational communication: e-mail and Google Drive, as well as Messenger. The internal communication tool in Stowarzyszenie Kobietostan is Slack. The directors remained in constant contact with each other (conversations in a duo), and also used the help of a supervisor.

Part II Exclusion

After this project, do you have any new thoughts on social exclusion?

What are they?

Did the thread of exclusions experienced by the participants affect your work in any way? How?

What do you consider important in terms of running projects that are directed at groups at risk of exclusion?

Team 1 - Restart Theater Athens

The representatives of this theatre noted that the project confirmed their assumptions that the experience of social exclusion and its various odslony is still a common phenomenon among Greek women. They drew attention to, among others, manifestations of discrimination based on gender (established patriarchy, wage inequality), reproductive pressure, high level of violence against women - mainly on a sexual background. They emphasized the shortcomings in the education system, as well as the low level of social trust in classic forms of therapy. They noted that in the topic of preventing exclusions and creating inclusion mechanisms, there is still, in their opinion, a lot to be done. The WOMEN interACT project confirmed their belief that participatory theatre can be a form of supplementing these shortcomings and an element of shaping social change.

The respondents stated that both for them and for the participants, the joint exploration of the topic of social exclusion and discovering its subsequent levels was extremely valuable. The experiences of individual participants in this area were an important thread in the creative process, which also resonated from the stage. Each of them shared her story at a time and in a dimension of her choosing.

At the same time - according to the organizers, working with such difficult experiences was unpredictable and burdensome (the story of a given participant could trigger diverse, individual reactions, e.g. encouragement to tell one's own fate or quite the opposite - a blockade related to raising a thread for which a given person was not ready). They drew attention to the domino effect (both in the context of an increase in mobilization and the risk of a crisis). The nature of the project required from them the ability to moderate the process, but also greater flexibility and maintaining appropriate distance. They had to consciously manage their emotions (the overriding task was to tone down moods and maintain calm in crisis situations).

Both the participants and the organizers could count on the support of a therapist who accompanied them in the process. In their opinion, the decision to establish cooperation largely influenced maintaining the group and bringing the project to the end.

They considered conscious observation of group processes, strengthening the sense of belonging to the group (the opposite of previous life experiences), and at the same time setting boundaries (also in the context of the participation of people who disrupt the course of the process) to be particularly important in such projects. They also raised the thread of defining the scope of support and the therapeutic dimension (whether and in what form such is to occur). They noted that in an ideal scenario, one should also have a plan for what exactly to do to maintain the change, and even increase its reach.

Team 2 - Društvo ZIZ

The workshop group included people who experienced different levels of exclusion, as well as pressure related to the need to fit into expectations and standards. The director noted that the experience of participatory work, with such an engaged, emotional and expressive group, required from her a high level of flexibility, but also setting boundaries and redefining her role (negotiations with her own ego).

The organizers from ZIZ (just like the representatives of other organizations) experienced challenges related to the presence in the group of a person who had a destructive impact on the team dynamics. Her behavior lowered the sense of safety and the comfort level of individual people. Despite many attempts, the situation did not improve, which influenced the decision to end the cooperation earlier. It was a very difficult and demanding experience. In retrospect, the representatives of this organization stated that they made the decision to part ways with this person too late.

At the same time, they emphasized that the supervisions with the remaining partners were extremely useful in dealing with this situation and making the final decision. They highlighted how important the possibility of mutual consultations is in this type of projects.

Team 3 - Stowarzyszenie Kobietostan

The consortium leaders shared many observations on one of the basic assumptions of the project (focus on the double exclusion of women). They returned to the first focus group research, when doubts arose related to how to organize the recruitment for the project so that no one felt labeled, or even stigmatized. They admitted that at subsequent stages of the process they began to move away from the concept of double exclusion. In their opinion, the concept of exclusion itself is ambiguous, and even more so its numerical dimension. They admitted that they have to discuss this thread within the organization, because they still have not developed a coherent position. Among the alternatives they mentioned, e.g. multilevel disadvantage or the experience of crisis (the latter, in their opinion, was definitely closer also to the project participants).

At the same time, they noted that during the workshops they did not explore their experiences in the area of exclusion with the participants. On the other hand, from some of them they received signals that participation in the project was a source of reflection on this subject (e.g. belief in otherness and the tendency to resign - self-exclusion vs. giving oneself permission to belong for the first time).

The respondents admitted that working with this group was a source of many inspirations, thoughts and delights for them. Apart from the impressive fluency in generating creative solutions, as well as openness to improvisation, the participants demonstrated a very high level of awareness and sensitivity. Their natural need to secure comfort individually and mutually meant that especially at the beginning of the process they were very insightful, meticulous (e.g. when creating the contract). Since for most of the participants acting in a team was not a new experience, based on those previous ones, just in case (as a precaution) they took into account factors that could cause their or someone else's discomfort. This extended some stages of work and required considerable flexibility from the organizers, e.g. in terms of using specific tools or stage solutions.

The representatives of Kobietostan deemed that in the implementation of this type of projects it is extremely important to:

- ensure that the group contract is a real tool, and not just a formality;
- have the possibility to use supervision;
- have conscious leadership (creating space for discussion, ability to listen but also readiness to set boundaries and make decisions).

Part III Participation

Do you think that the process you were participants and moderators of had a participatory character? Why?

After this project, do you have any new thoughts on participatory theatre? What are they?

Did the level of engagement of the participants increase or decrease during the process? Did you moderate this engagement in any way, how?

Team 1 - Restart Theater Athens

The organizers responded through the prism of what in their opinion is necessary for the process to be truly participatory - pointing to specific conditions and tools that together create a participatory whole:

- contract - as the foundation of common rules and mutual obligations;
- peer supervision - mutually accompanying each other in the role of moderators;
- active listening - mindfulness to the voices of participants as the basis for action;
- being a strong leader - responsibly leading the group without dominating;
- maintaining group boundaries - in order to preserve a safe space;
- finding a support system (e.g. supervision) - something that helps deal with trauma;
- availability of a psychologist;
- staying calm;

- thinking about what should/could happen later - reflecting on what will come after the project ends.

The organizers emphasized that the process had a participatory character from start to finish (it engaged every person at a chosen level of participation - both in the context of participants and organizers). Participation also applied to the content: the participants decided what to say on stage. The organizers only made minor corrections, giving agency in terms of word and stage presence to the participants.

According to this team, nothing fundamentally new happened in the context of participatory theatre. After the process, they feel more confident and are increasingly convinced that theatre as a whole is a good tool for deepening democracy and participation.

Team 2 - Društvo ZIZ

A new look at participatory theatre after this project resulted from the discovery that the participants were their own material: with their mind and body. They not only performed scenes, but also co-created them themselves. For the organizers, this is the key understanding of participation: the creative matter of the performance emerges from the participants themselves, and is not imposed on them from the outside. An important new thought was also noticing the value of feedback that flowed in both directions, which gave the process the character of an equal dialogue.

The organizers noticed that they used the same tools as before, but this time it worked out better. A key new reflection concerned themselves as moderators and directors: they learned new ways of participating in participatory theatre - not only in relation to the participants, but also with their fellow collaborators and partners from other organizations. Participatory theatre thus turned out to be a space for learning participation on many levels: among others inside the group, between organizers and towards participants.

Team 3 - Stowarzyszenie Kobietostan

The representatives emphasized that in this project they left the participants a lot of space for improvisation, which also showed them a new face of creative explorations. Their role as directors was often limited to the selection of ideas. They noted that despite the unpredictable form and severely limited influence, they felt satisfied as artists. Despite the specific formula, they had the conviction that they did not give up their own vision. In other words: participatory theatre did not mean for them total subordination to the participants at the expense of their own artistic integrity.

Thanks to this experience, they gained new thoughts also on the topic of leadership. For the first time, they decided to co-direct. Additionally, they found out that in such a version, participatory theatre requires from the directing person the readiness to give up control and openness to what she does not yet know. In their statement, a new grasp of participation fell: it is also saying "no" - participation does not mean only agreement and inclusion, but also includes the right to refuse and set boundaries.

Part IV Social change

What changes did you observe in the participants (individually and in the group) during the process?

In your opinion, what should happen for this change to be permanent?

Do you think that this project can be an element of shaping a broader social change? Why?

Team 1 - Restart Theater Athens

The organizers noticed many changes in the participants. Sharing experiences in the forum helped subsequent people to open up. Breakthrough moments appeared in the process: some participants, who had previously shared only minor stories, began to speak louder about their stories. At the group level, the change was clear: through greater openness, the group became more solidary. During the process, more patience, support and love appeared.

The representatives noted in the context of social change that they are aware that after the end of the project, participants may return to old habits (whether they will use this experience depends on them). At the same time, they emphasized that in this context it would be extremely important to create further opportunities for cooperation, although some participants are satisfied enough with what they have achieved that they do not need continuation.

The respondents noted that to trigger social change, many small actions happening simultaneously in different places around the world are needed. Time is also needed to see and evaluate the results. They emphasized that there must be a combination: people working to improve social conditions, representing theatre, ourselves and others; only joint action of various entities can support and consolidate true social change.

Team 2 - Društvo ZIZ

The organizers noticed that at the beginning there were many withdrawn, closed or difficult attitudes. However, they created a space that began to develop and mature: the participants regained their power, charisma and presence. The key change was the transition from closure and resistance at the beginning; to blooming and reclaiming oneself as the process continued, which the organizers attribute primarily to creating an appropriate, safe space for each participant.

They added that the participants want to continue working together with Društvo ZIZ. They noted that they see the need to close the process that happened as part of this project. They pointed to a specific area of impact: participatory theatre could support young people with mental health problems, which are becoming more and more serious. This, in their opinion, is a real path to a broader social impact.

Team 3 - Stowarzyszenie Kobietostan

The organizers observed an increase in the level of courage in the group: the participants began to speak their own truth loudly. Some of them learned to adapt to the group, and at the same time expanded their comfort zone. They became more and more open, also on stage. An important change was breaking barriers without being forced to do so: the participants did it of their own free will, at their own pace.

The participants experienced a new sense of belonging to the group, which changed their view of themselves. As a result, they felt more valuable, a voice appeared: "I am enough". The team noted that the change is not dependent on them (they do not want to be responsible for it), but on the participants themselves. The leaders emphasized that there is a need for many similar projects and people who will implement this type of practice. They noted that every small change in this direction is necessary and valuable.

Participants' perspective at the beginning of the project - focus group research

The focus group research was conducted using a research scenario, which consisted of a total of 13 questions or sentences, divided into four main thematic threads:

- communication;
- social exclusion;
- participation;
- social change.

We conducted them in the following forms and dates:

- January 10, 2026 (online formula, English and Slovenian complementarily); participants of participatory theatre in Društvo ZIZ;
- February 2, 2026 (online formula, English and Greek complementarily); participants of participatory theatre in Restart Theater Athens;
- March 5, 2026 (live meeting, Polish language), participants of participatory theatre in Stowarzyszenie Kobietostan.

The statements of the people who took part in the research were transcribed, and then subjected to qualitative analysis and abbreviated description, which we presented below.

Part I. Communication

What do you think communication is? What is it used for?

What is communication in ZIZ/Restart/Kobietostan? What does it give you, what does it enable?

Team 1 - Restart Theater Athens

The participants agreed that communication is a process in which a sender and a receiver are present. At the same time they noted that it is a concept that can be understood in various ways: e.g. as verbal communication, but also non-verbal (appearance or body language). Each of the participants gave a catchword answer to the question of what communication is for her. The list included, among others: need, understanding, emotions, creation, respect, active listening.

Communication in Restart was identified by the participants with respect, cooperation based on clear rules, being listened to and learning to listen, interaction, solidarity, relaxation, support, safety, lack of criticism and positive motivation. They considered that communication in Restart gives them a sense of unity and community (solidarity), peace, strengthening and empowerment (empowerment), a sense of acceptance, the possibility of expressing themselves and exploring the inner world, opportunities to play, but also to face challenges. The participants also shared the reflection that in moments of crisis (sense of failure) they happen to forget about all the previously mentioned benefits.

Team 2 - Društvo ZIZ

The participants defined communication as a process that occurs between two or several people, whose goal is to reach an understanding (understood as a state in which everyone's needs are heard). Intuitively they also began to value communication. They characterized the good one as one that is based on equal relationships, without elements of imposing opinions or beliefs. They indicated that it is a process in which one can speak openly (even about negatives), without using manipulative tricks, and also without taking the interlocutor's words too personally. The respondents considered the ability to actively listen as a key element of communication. At the same time, according to some, "being good at communication" (understood as a high level of communication skills and competencies) is essential, not only to achieve success, but to "survive" in today's world.

Attention was also drawn to the specificity of the Slovenian language, in which the way of addressing each other (use of specific honorific forms) can indicate hierarchy and the advantage of one person over another. In this context, the participants referred to the English language, which they considered more direct and conducive to solving problems.

Characterizing communication in ZIZ, the participants noted that it is voluntary, filled with respect and support (everyone has time to speak and the right to be heard, but there is no compulsion for active participation). They also noted that its foundation is trust and respecting privacy (e.g. in the context of not taking the discussed stories outside the group). They also referred to the contract they jointly drew up. They emphasized its usefulness, e.g. in conflict situations, which they considered an inseparable element of the process.

Additionally, they emphasized that the sense of security and communicative comfort that accompanies them, on the one hand allows for joint play and fooling around, and on the other hand for deep, workshop work with emotions.

Team 3 - Stowarzyszenie Kobietostan

The participants drew attention to different types of communication, e.g. municipal, image, telecommunication. The interpersonal one they initially reduced to a form of transmission that has a specific sender and receiver. They drew attention to different forms (verbal and non-verbal) as well as channels and tools. As two overriding goals of communication they indicated agreement and passing information.

They noted that in the project communication takes place on many levels and in various channels. They drew attention to the WhatsApp group, which serves not only to discuss organizational issues, but also to exchange inspiration. They described it as a shared digital space. They noticed that during live meetings they communicate verbally, but also through the body. They noted that communication is a way of opening up to each other and enables the realization of the idea of co-creation. It serves cognition (individual and mutual), communicating, regulating emotions. The participants also made a distinction between producing a message, and a dialogue. They referred to the "menu", i.e. the contract they formulated at the beginning of the process.

Part II Social exclusion

What do you think social exclusion is?

Do you sometimes feel excluded in your everyday life? When? Why?

Team 1 - Restart Theater Athens

The participants explained social exclusion as a state in which someone does not fit into the generally accepted idea of society. Such a person experiences marginalization, lack of equality. Their otherness is not accepted, they have no possibility of expressing their emotions or beliefs. Among the elements that can constitute a basis for exclusion, the participants mentioned, among others:

- financial issues;
- religion;
- sexual orientation;
- education level;
- race;
- marital status.

They unanimously stated that each of them had experienced some form of exclusion (e.g. at work, in family relationships or other social circumstances). They spoke about exclusion due to gender, experience of sexual violence, age, appearance, family/marital status. They noted that as women they very often experience a limited sense of security (e.g. in the context of moving alone).

Team 2 - Društvo ZIZ

Initially the participants defined social exclusion through the prism of people who experience it. In their opinion it is a state in which a given person for some reason feels that they cannot fully function in society. They feel that they do not belong, that there is no place for them.

They also drew attention to the fact that exclusion is a process. They described it through the prism of two categories. On the one hand - as one that can be initiated by a group (within which exclusion occurs); on the other - as initiated by the person/people (who ultimately get excluded). Among the factors that can be a reason for exclusion the participants mentioned for example:

- personality traits;
- skill set;
- race;
- gender;
- sexual orientation.

They also drew attention to the aspect of analytical paralysis that an excluded person may experience. Then they are unable to critically analyze the functioning of the group, and focus only on searching for flaws and shortcomings in themselves (as a justification for exclusion). The participants unanimously stated that each of them experienced exclusion e.g.:

- at work (in a team or at the stage of looking for work e.g. positions intended exclusively for men or discrimination of single mothers);
- in social relations (especially at the initial stage of making an acquaintance);
- in offices (e.g. in the context of criteria for granting financial support);
- in doctors' offices.

Team 3 - Stowarzyszenie Kobietostan

The participants began the conversation by searching for synonyms and Stowarzyszenies to the term social exclusion. They recalled catchwords such as: ostracism, stigmatization, unequal access, social pressure, dehumanization, limitation of agency. In addition to listing concepts, they undertook to create their own definition. In their opinion, social exclusion is a situation in which a given person is deprived of or limited in access to rights or resources. Among the reasons for exclusion were mentioned: gender, overweight, addictions, single parenthood, poverty, as well as mental condition or age. The participants noted that one of the non-obvious manifestations of exclusion can be e.g. excessive care.

They also raised the thread of "being stuck in exclusion". They drew attention to the insufficiency of tools that can prevent exclusion or support inclusion (both on a social and individual - personal level).

Part III Participation

Do you feel in your everyday life that you have an influence on something? If so, on what?

Do you feel that you belong to this group? What do you have an influence on here?

Are there any rules binding you here? Who set them? How do they affect your functioning?

How is your cooperation with the representatives of ZIZ/Restart/Kobietostan going? How would you describe their role?

What are they responsible for?

In your opinion, what is the most important thing during rehearsals? How do you feel here? What conditions must be met for you to feel an important part of this group?

If you compare this experience with your previous ones, is there anything special about it? What makes it stand out?

Team 1 - Restart Theater Athens

The participants indicated many areas in which they feel they have an influence in their everyday lives. Already on the basis of the first weeks together they emphasized the essence of the experience of working in a group composed exclusively of women, where for the first time they felt that their voice was listened to more carefully than before. Several respondents noted that belonging to this group was not obvious from the very beginning: the start was difficult, but the group evolved over time. The respondents emphasized that psychological support plays a very important role, flowing both from each other and from the therapist present in the group.

Already at the stage of the first research, the participants felt influence on three levels simultaneously:

- on the group dynamics;
- on themselves;
- on the shape of the performance.

They declared that the theatrical process helps them recognize their own problems and cross limitations. They felt they could express what they want and have a real part in shaping the performance. They worked out a common stage language and group energy,

something like a code that belongs exclusively to them. They emphasized the essence of the contract, that is, a set of rules they worked out together. The contract covered both organizational and relational issues. The group declared that it cares about every woman being seen and heard to an equal degree.

The participants agreed that how well cooperation works favors participation. They defined the role of the leaders as a connector (they are the ones who encourage women to overcome their own fears and express what they feel and want). The participants emphasized that the leaders are extremely helpful in realizing the performance: inspiring, listening and giving courage. They emphasized the importance of a safe environment, without discrimination. Some of them had previously participated in other theatrical groups that did not have these elements and they noticed the difference. They agreed that although the project will last a while longer, what they have already found in it is something new and valuable to them. The sense of importance also built mutual trust and developing relationships between the participants - the awareness that they are on the same side with each other, that they understand each other, that through common work they become closer to each other.

Team 2 - Društvo ZIZ

The participants agreed that they have an influence on certain aspects of their lives, although they noted that it is an individual issue. They considered their reactions and behaviors in interpersonal relations primarily as areas over which they have a real influence. The sense of influence in their opinion has a primarily internal dimension and concerns their own choices, and not external circumstances. The respondents declared belonging to the group and the responsibility associated with it. An important thread for them was the feeling of acceptance - in this group you do not have to pretend or forcefully adapt to expectations; you can be yourself without fear of rejection.

The participants indicated that within the group they feel some form of inner strength and the ability to cross their own limits. The process they participate in, they perceived as something that pushes the participants out of their comfort zone, but in a positive way. They confirmed that there are rules in the group (a written contract). They were established by the people leading the theatre workshops, and the participants accepted them at the moment of joining the group. To the question about the impact of rules on the functioning of the group, the participants drew attention to a paradox: discipline is a form of freedom. Thanks to the rules, no one feels lost during the meetings, on the contrary, comfort and the sense of security increase - even if to some extent it consists in adapting to the imposed framework.

The participants described cooperation with the organizers as very supportive. They also emphasized an important context: as women they were taught their whole lives to do what they are told. Meanwhile, in this process they are encouraged to be themselves. They stated that this experience is an opportunity for them to learn self-love, respect for themselves and for others. They indicated several threads that distinguish this project from other experiences:

- uniqueness of the group composition, only women, of very different ages; atmosphere of courage and honesty;

- professional, pedagogical approach of the organizers to leading the group;
- clear philosophical dimension of the project: the participants explored the concepts of victim and oppression and wondered how to provoke themselves and society to reflection;
- working on the ego not in the context of its excessive expansion, but learning about one's own weaknesses and areas that require development.

Team 3 - Stowarzyszenie Kobietostan

At the stage of conducting the research, the participants uniformly confirmed the sense of belonging to the group. They emphasized that relationships between them are still shaping. Concepts repeating in this context are: "time and not being excluded" and "trust". They emphasized a strong influence on what they create together and that they inspire each other mutually. They noted that in the name of comfort, freedom and agreement, they created a contract (common rules). It gave them a sense of:

- being rooted in the group;
- agency;
- being part of something important.

The participants described the representatives of Kobietostan as observers, but also companions who are part of the same process - they control it, but at the same time actively participate in it. They emphasized that their cooperation is based on the principle of equality.

The respondents indicated several key elements that are most important to them during rehearsals and which make them feel an important part of the group:

- sense of security;
- openness to who they are;
- possibility of being authentic, lack of criticism.

Among the terms that fit this process, they mentioned: sisterhood, maturity and expanding the field for exploration, searching and new experiences. They noted that there is no hierarchy in it, and what describes it accurately is the feeling of "validation" - as opposed to invalidation.

Part IV Social change

Do you think that participation in this project will affect your future?

What could change?

Has participation in the project already affected you? How? Do you already notice any benefits now?

What would have to happen, what conditions would have to be met, to maintain positive changes after the end of the project?

Team 1 - Restart Theater Athens

The participants noted that they see a real potential for change, emphasizing that it is not about radical changes in life, but rather subtle, internal shifts that can gradually improve its quality. One of the most important changes was realizing that their own experiences, those that until now seemed exceptionally difficult or shameful to them, are in reality much more common than they thought. This discovery brought relief and gave birth to empathy, both towards themselves and towards other women. This was accompanied by a gradual release from the feeling of guilt, and consequently - a kind of internal liberation.

They declared that the project gradually crumbles fixed beliefs about themselves. They are learning to speak more boldly and listen more carefully and they discover that art can be a tool for working through their own difficulties. They declared that already at this stage they have gained more vocal strength to say in the family, at work, in everyday life: "I have my rights and I intend to talk about them". The respondents were unanimous that to consolidate and deepen the changes, the group should maintain contact and communication also after the end of the project.

Team 2 - Društvo ZIZ

The participants agreed that the project has already changed their lives and will certainly have an impact on their future. They felt more grounded and learned to set boundaries, discovering that they are not alone in this. They found comfort in the awareness that other women also experience oppression. This sense of community turned out to be very important. In the future they would like to transfer what they have learned: both the relationships they established, as well as the pedagogical approach of the organizers, to their everyday lives.

They talked about the desire to become mentors for others. On a personal level the participants noted that they learn self-regulation in situations when they make mistakes, they are able to set boundaries, and at the same time they preserve their authenticity. An idea appeared to go to the theatre more often and maintain the atmosphere of community that they built in the group. It seemed crucial to them to recreate the exercises or at least the ideas that stand behind them, in everyday life, in the family, in free time. The participants also felt a greater social responsibility. They talked about how to translate ideas from the workshops into family dynamics and how to put into practice the ideology of sisterhood and women's community. Finally, the participants emphasized that they want to honor this part of their personality, which they developed through the experience of participatory theatre.

Team 3 - Stowarzyszenie Kobietostan

The participants expressed the conviction that the project will affect their future. They felt empowered in the fact that their voice is taken into account. They gained access to processing certain threads through the body, space to take care of themselves, there was an awakening of creativity, imagination. Participation in the project helped to regulate the daily schedule, everyday life. It is important that their well-being among women was strengthened. The greatest benefits they talked about were the courage to live, speak, dream, express concepts.

The most basic condition for change from their perspective is the continuation of contact between the participants after the end of the project. Ideally, the project would last longer or be repeated in some form. It is also important not to put away what they discovered, but to actively cultivate a new understanding of themselves and implement it in life. The participants indicated that these changes have already happened, they are real.

Participants' perspective at the end of the project - focus group research

The research was conducted using a research scenario, which consisted of a total of 10 questions or sentences, divided into four main thematic threads:

- communication,
- social exclusion,
- participation,
- social change.

We conducted them with the participants on the following dates and locations:

- March 26, 2026 (Maribor, English and Slovenian complementarily); participants of participatory theatre in Društvo ZIZ;
- April 25, 2026 (Athens, English and Greek complementarily); participants of participatory theatre in Restart Theater Athens;
- May 10, 2026 (Wrocław, Polish language), participants of participatory theatre in Stowarzyszenie Kobietostan.

The statements of the people who took part in the research were transcribed, and then subjected to qualitative analysis and abbreviated description, which we presented below.

Part I Communication

What does communication through theatre mean to you?

Do you think you can use the rules of "communication through theatre" in everyday life? In what way?

Team 1 - Restart Theater Athens

According to the respondents, communication through theatre provides more possibilities to express oneself. It is an opportunity to see oneself in the played character and thanks to this learn more about oneself (under the cloak of a heroine or hero one can also convey some truth about oneself). Additionally - from the stage one can raise socially important topics,

which can become a pretext to start in-depth discussions. The participants also noted that communication through theatre can have different forms.

Firstly: the preparation stage, which in their case, a very important element of were conversations about individual experiences, and not only organizational arrangements. Second form: the presentation of the performance and its consequences. The participants agreed that the experience of communication through theatre can have a positive impact on their functioning in the future (setting boundaries, learning cooperation and discipline, better understanding of other perspectives, the ability to interpret attitudes and identify with another person, public speaking). They pointed out that in everyday life they also play different roles.

Team 2 - Društvo ZIZ

According to the participants, communication through theatre can have a positive impact on building awareness and a sense of confidence. Playing a character allows hiding behind a proverbial mask, which for many people can be liberating (also in the context of raising difficult topics). The respondents stated that communication through theatre made it easier for them to establish relationships. In "normal life" it would be much more difficult. They agreed that the experience of communication in theatre and through theatre can be useful for them in everyday functioning.

They learned to actively listen, broadened their horizons, got to know different perspectives and above all - thanks to the feeling of acceptance they gained greater self-confidence. They noted that some of them initially had concerns about how they would be received, whether they would fit in. They also pointed out that at the beginning of the process there was a person in the group who affected it destructively. Her departure and how it affected the group dynamics they also treated as a valuable lesson.

Team 3 - Stowarzyszenie Kobietostan

According to the participants, communication through theatre took place in this project on several levels, in different forms and fulfilled different functions:

- inside the group (organizational issues, but primarily creative work using theatrical tools: eliminating uncertainty, flow of emotions, broadening perspectives, getting to know oneself and others through forms other than conversation, increase in openness);
- with the audience (during the presentation - close interaction combined with a metaphorical message, after the presentation - direct and more literal).

The participants noted that communication through theatre in their opinion definitely goes beyond the framework of spoken language and is a more capacious form. Its experience was a source of new reflections and skills for them, which they will be able to use in the future. They mentioned, among others, greater ease in naming and expressing emotions, as well as operating with metaphors and analogies - in order to explain their perspective or difficult issues (e.g. in communication with children).

They drew attention to how important it is in projects (not only theatrical ones) to jointly define a goal. At the same time they noted that achieving it should not at all mean the end of work ("something has sprouted, now it needs to be nurtured"). Some of them emphasized that thanks to using various theatrical tools and tasks related to improvisation, they could see for themselves what form of expression or regulation is most appropriate for them (e.g. dance). They noted that the experience of collaborative creative work not only sensitized them, but also abounded in many memories that took a very concrete form (e.g. a song that was sung during the show). This made some of them feel equipped with more "anchor points" to consolidate memories and valuable reflections.

Part II Social exclusion

After this experience, do you have any new thoughts on social exclusion?

What are they?

From the beginning of the process until now - did you feel a sense of belonging to the group? Did this feeling change at some point?

Team 1 - Restart Theater Athens

The participants noted that the work process was an opportunity for them to deeply explore the topic of exclusion and experiences related to it. By sharing their own stories, they got to know its various manifestations and forms. Without a doubt they considered that in the project they felt belonging to the team. They had the feeling that they experienced all possible stages of group formation, shaping the sense of security and building relationships.

Team 2 - Društvo ZIZ

Sharing new thoughts on exclusion, the participants first of all noted that it happens that a given person makes a decision about being excluded themselves (before the group excludes them). They meant primarily independent withdrawal, setting limitations for themselves (one of them noted that she hopes that thanks to this experience she will never exclude herself again). They unanimously stated that before joining the project, each of them experienced exclusion and being judged. In the performance they raised threads that in their opinion were connected with this topic: prostitution, dementia, spirituality, botox, pressure of influencers and body shaming.

They returned again to the thread of the person who initially joined the project, but did not respect the jointly established rules (e.g. regarding the fact that topics discussed during the meetings should not be taken outside). Some of the women felt personally attacked by her. Despite many conversations, the situation did not improve and a decision was made to end the cooperation. The participants drew attention to the fact that although the WOMEN interACT project was in a way supposed to counteract exclusion, paradoxically this symbolic exclusion had a positive impact on the group. It could be felt that this experience was extremely important to them and although a lot of time has passed, it is still alive. The

participants presented a different attitude towards this situation (one of them treated it as a kind of failure they suffered as a group).

Team 3 - Stowarzyszenie Kobietostan

The participants' answers were varied, some of them emphasized that the project showed them how common the phenomenon of sexualization of women is. They noted that actually everyone at some point in their life can experience exclusion (in any dimension). They pointed out that participation in the project showed them forms of exclusion they had not thought of before (e.g. linguistic exclusion of foreigners in the context of theatrical events). The thread of self-exclusion appeared in the discussion (limiting one's own participation due to the belief in otherness). They noted that participatory theatre can foster seeing oneself in one's experience of exclusion and lead to redefining one's own otherness (otherness as an asset).

The participants agreed that a sense of belonging to a group can definitely affect an increase in the level of acceptance towards oneself. They declared that at various moments they felt belonging to this specific group. For some people it was the day of the dress rehearsal, for most the turning point was the workshop run by a guest representative of Društvo ZIZ. The participants noted that this could also be influenced by the fact that they set aside two days for joint activities. This form deviated from the character of weekly, evening meetings after work. They admitted that during the process they had various crises and doubts, some had thoughts of resigning (some people made such a decision and left the group). At the same time, those who stayed noted that they were accompanied by the conviction that they do not want to let the others down. Some people emphasized that it was the attitude of others that constituted support and inspiration for them (drive for action).

Part III Participation

What do you think was the most important thing in the preparations for the premiere?

Did you feel that you had an influence on this process? In what way?

Do you think that this sense of influence will change the way you act in everyday life?

Have you noticed that people in the group started taking on specific roles (for example: leaders)?

Would you like to participate in such a project again? Why?

Team 1 - Restart Theater Athens

The participants described that they faced something new and difficult for many hours of rehearsals, and the final result brought them great satisfaction. They were convinced that they had an influence, and they expressed it through action and were not afraid to change things that did not suit them; these were their personal choices. The team leaders made the participants feel very safe and have the freedom to express what they feel.

This work already translates into their everyday functioning, changing their attitude towards themselves and the surrounding world. The roles that emerged in this project are: secretary, translator, controller, director, leader, supporter, caretaker/cook, and timekeeper. Some participants admitted that sometimes the project was overwhelming, especially in the context of facing their own feelings.

Team 2 - Društvo ZIZ

For the participants, being on stage turned out to be particularly important. In the preparation process they had a great influence on many elements, they enjoyed great creative freedom. They also felt very supported, and the mentors gave them a lot of space to discover. Very clear personal changes appeared in them. One of the participants noted that she stopped being afraid of making mistakes. Her guiding motto became "no more fear". The participants also emphasized that they mutually support and cheer each other on; this ability to cheer for others also translates into greater kindness towards themselves.

They unanimously confirmed that certain roles emerged in the group, partly related to the played characters. They listed the following types: leader, "madame", mediator, "don't give a fuck" (the one who doesn't care what others say), grace, femme fatale and supporting person/caretaker. All participants answered unanimously that they would like to participate in such a project again. For some of them it was a step forward, because they felt included, supported and could talk about topics important to them on a deeper level. They emphasized that it was an intimate space, free from evaluation, which gave them a chance to experience something they had not known before.

Team 3 - Stowarzyszenie Kobietostan

The participants mentioned several key elements of the creative process. In the stage perspective, the issue of relationship with the audience was most emphasized - they devoted a lot of attention to how to preserve their own message despite planned, hard to predict interactions. In the context of cooperation, the atmosphere of voluntariness and adaptation to each person was important to them. They emphasized the feeling of being on a par with the directors - the experience of being fully listened to. Open conversation and dialogue about all scenes turned out to be very important. The participants emphasized the importance of caring for comfort, well-being and not crossing one's own boundaries.

The thread of the heart as an experience of love, feeling empathy appeared repeatedly; moments that touch very deeply and reach places where everyday life does not reach.

In the group the participants felt united and perceived themselves as part of something bigger, deeply rooted. Trust in oneself and in the process was also important. They emphasized that they felt they did not have to do anything and could be in harmony with themselves. The respondents were unanimous that the feeling of influence in everyday life depends on the area of life. The experience in theatre gave them a sense of agency: "I can". Today they can feel the same outside the theatre, in other areas of life. They listed many individual benefits from participating in the project. One of the participants said outright: "I am gentler with myself".

Roles emerged in the group: caretaker, leader, teaching person, organizer, mentor, "hugger", visionary, team spirit and professional. The respondents noted that some roles were filled by different people (depending on circumstances). All participants answered unanimously that they would definitely like to participate in such a project again. They talked about feeling unsatisfied because there is great potential in this group. They emphasized that it is not only a creative process, but also a difficult transformative process.

Part IV Social change

Do you feel that this project changed you? If so, in what way?

Do you think that this change will stay with you for longer? What could help maintain it?

Team 1 - Restart Theater Athens

The participants declared that the project contributed to an increase in their self-confidence. They also became more organized, and their feelings more orderly. The fact that they could tell their story gave them a sense of strength. Because they went through various experiences (often traumatic), they frequently lost contact with their own body - thanks to this project, they partially regained it. They felt lighter: it is easier for them to share things that happened. Thanks to this project they also experienced the power of teamwork.

They answered unanimously that they believe the change will stay with them for longer. They want to work hard to consolidate it. As a way to maintain the change they indicated, among others, remembering the story of each of the participants. This can help overcome obstacles - they met other strong women who managed to overcome difficulties; they are role models for each other.

Team 2 - Društvo ZIZ

Most participants admitted that real changes occurred in them. They felt more coherent and stable; they learned to accept themselves to a greater extent. A greater trust in the process also appeared in them. Courage became a common motif. One of them described that she stepped outside her well-worn patterns of thinking about herself, noting that she was like that before, but society made her forget about it - the project helped her return to herself.

It was also emphasized that just seeing that such projects are possible in society is a huge hope and proof that change can happen.

One of the participants noted that she stopped being silent at home, she started to express herself not only in the space of the group, but also in everyday life, she found her voice in various relations and contexts, and the positive reactions of the environment gave her strength for further action. The participants expressed the hope that these changes will stay with them permanently. At the same time they emphasized that what will happen next is crucial; whether continuation of contacts and participation in further similar projects will be possible.

Team 3 - Stowarzyszenie Kobietostan

The participants noted that the cyclical nature of meetings, as a certain form of discipline, ordered their reality for the last weeks. This showed them the usefulness of fixed elements (routine) in everyday functioning. Some of them emphasized that they redefined their individual perception of belonging to the group (otherness as an asset, not an excluding factor). Several participants talked about changing the way they look at themselves; about greater acceptance, but also about the fact that they decided to focus more on themselves and their strength.

The process was an opportunity for them to observe themselves in various (sometimes abstract) circumstances. Thanks to this they could observe the mechanisms that guide them. They learned more about their needs, e.g. regarding the pace of work, time needed to process information; reflection. In the context of consolidating the change - they indicated both internal factors (acquired capital of new experiences, thoughts, knowledge, etc.), as well as specific external conditions. A strong desire (and even a need) to continue activities was expressed several times. It was defined differently (searching for opportunities to cooperate in this group, opening up to other communities, perhaps using the known tools in original activities and own initiatives).

In the context of the end of the project, a statement was made, which we will also use to end this subchapter:

It will end when all of us women and men decide that it has ended.

3.3 Observations

We based overt observations on the analysis of two areas:

- communication (e.g. form, course);
- participation (e.g. atmosphere, level of engagement, relations, team roles).

The observational research concerned exclusively the participants (also in the context of relations with the organizers). During the analysis of the observation results we used a narrative analysis, the summary of which we included in the tables below.

We conducted the observations of Društvo ZIZ on March 27, 2026 during the dress rehearsal (Maribor, premiere venue):

Communication	Participation
Verbal and non-verbal communication, in various configurations (personal changes in interactions). Verbal communication: frequent, positive, joking, empathetic, quiet, conflict-free, non-hierarchical (between participants), hierarchical between the director and the participants (comments on the group forum and individual conversations; additional questions and explanations; explaining mistakes). Non-verbal communication: noticeable high level of freedom e.g. bodily - changing clothes; gestures proving closeness (touch), support (patting, massaging, hugging, high-fiving); concentration, stress before performing (mobilization of the body by patting); need to de-stress (dance as a form of relaxation). Space: ordered, treated responsibly as shared, with respect for all participating people.	Overriding attitude: caretaking (noticeable in the behaviors of most participants, care in relation to other people, but also in relation to space, props and other elements that made up the process and result). Observed roles: coordinator (silencing, sensitivity to technical aspects), soul of the team (relieving tension through gestures, jokes) Atmosphere: concentration, mindfulness (towards other people and what is happening on stage), closeness, freedom, support, sense of shared responsibility, teamwork (combined with respect for the need for momentary isolation). Summary: overall impression of full engagement, mobilization, coherence and teamwork. Strongly marked "femininity" as an element of group identity: makeup, dresses, hairstyles, way of being.

Table 5. Summary of overt (non-participant) observations of participants from Društvo ZIZ.
Elaboration by the authors of Part I.

We conducted the observations of Restart Theater Athens on April 25, 2026 during the dress rehearsal (Athens, premiere venue).

Communication	Participation
Verbal and non-verbal communication, in various configurations (personal changes in interactions). Verbal communication: not very intensive, subdued, operational, task-oriented, quiet, conflict-free, non-hierarchical (between participants), hierarchical between the director and the participants (palpable authority, comments on the group forum dominate, high level of concentration), noticeable bond with the other organizers (e.g. conversations with the therapist present in the room). Non-verbal communication: spontaneous (gestures, glances), subtle physical contact, movement as a way to relieve tension and mobilize the body for action (e.g. jumping). Space: shared backstage full of additional artifacts, lack of "individual stations".	Overriding attitude: individual concentration on the quality of the performance (participants focused on their own role: repeating texts, mobilizing the body). At the same time: manifestations of mutual support (applause, supportive shouts). Impression of an integrated, intergenerational team; friendly, professional relations (common striving for the highest possible quality), lack of manifestations of deep closeness and group intimacy. Observed roles: soul of the team (relieving tension through jokes or caring for the well-being of others e.g. massaging, offering food), specialist and coordinator (support for the organizers in managing the process). Atmosphere: concentration, stress, mobilization, professionalism, task-orientation, mindfulness and responsibility (towards other people and what is happening on stage). Summary: impression of a high level of mobilization and care for the quality of the final presentation; professionalism; individualism combined with teamwork.

Table 6. Summary of overt (non-participant) observations of participants from Restart Theater Athens.
Elaboration by the authors of Part I.

Due to the performative character of the Stowarzyszenie Kobietostan event (lack of rigid division into stage and audience, all participants in the "playing" space all the time), we conducted the observations during preparations for the dress rehearsal and the premiere presentation (May 8 and 9, 2026 at the premiere venue in Wrocław).

Communication	Participation
Verbal and non-verbal communication, dominance of communication on the forum; brief, operational interactions in smaller groups (e.g. giving a specific tip). Verbal communication: various forms, communication mostly subdued, uniform, mindful. The effect of "grapevine" - passing an instruction person to person; sometimes shouting as an operational way to be heard by the group e.g. to call everyone to a given point. During discussion on the forum non-hierarchical communication, developed culture of feedback, everyone freely gives suggestions, shares thoughts (with a noticeable consideration of the director's role as the one who makes the selection and makes decisions); dominant narrative in the plural (we). Non-verbal communication: rare, operational (e.g. quiet pointing where something is), gestures as manifestations of approval for what a given person has done (non-verbal comment). During discussion on the forum intuitive and habitual forming of a circle. Besides, participants in constant movement, predominance of open postures. Negligible physical contact. Space: lack of clearly separated backstage, which resulted directly from the performative form (the whole space "played").	Overriding attitude: communicating vessels (individual tasks as an element of a larger whole), shared responsibility, high level of mutual mindfulness, additional exposure of other people's ideas that were considered valuable. Observed roles: transitional, variable, many people showed fluency in generating ideas and freedom to comment on solutions (creator/evaluator); additionally: leadership role and the role of translator in the context of cooperation with representatives of Restart Theater Athens. Atmosphere: variable and very diverse; chaos, fatigue, uncertainty, curiosity related to what will happen; joint experimentation and continuous creative searching, high level of stress, but also concentration. Summary: state of creative chaos, different level of engagement with a simultaneous impression of a strong sense of belonging and shared responsibility (teamwork). Lack of physical contact as a manifestation of support or closeness of relations.

Table 7. Summary of overt (non-participant) observations of participants from Stowarzyszenie Kobietostan. Elaboration by the authors of Part I.

4. Participatory Theater as a Tool for Social Change – Research Conclusions

We return to Claire Bishop and her definition of broadly understood participatory art, in which she emphasizes that it is a practice where:

people constitute the central artistic medium and material, in the manner of theater and performance

(Bishop, 2012, p. 2)

and at the same time it is

the ultimate political art.

(Bishop, 2012, p. 2)

From our perspective, this implies that participatory theater has the potential to generate real social change, and the research we conducted within the project largely confirmed this. Below, we present the key conclusions, which we hope will serve as a starting point for further discussion on how to harness the immense potential this form offers.

KEY RESEARCH CONCLUSIONS DIVIDED INTO FOUR AREAS OF ANALYSIS

COMMUNICATION

According to the concept of M. Fleischer presented by us, communication is the negotiation of meanings, which generates and maintains the social system. We speak, among other things, to feel a sense of belonging and to satisfy our personal needs (Fleischer, 2007). The research we conducted confirmed this: for the participants, theater was a space where, through speaking and co-creating, they satisfied the basic need for belonging. Developing their own group „code” and stage language was a tool for them to build a community. The participants and organizers repeatedly emphasized the key role of the so-called contract. Effective communication (in participatory processes, but also more broadly) therefore requires the establishment and respect of clearly defined rules. Mutual and external supervisions proved to be equally important from the organizers' perspective. Participation in the creative process helped equip the participants with new communication tools and competencies, which they naturally began to transfer outside the rehearsal room – they regained or strengthened the „voice” that socially excluded groups are often systematically deprived of.

SOCIAL EXCLUSION

The research we conducted confirmed the heterogeneity of the phenomenon of social exclusion (Silver, 1994). The organizers and participants repeatedly drew attention to its intersectional nature, combining, among others, gender, sexualization, violence, sexual orientation, mental condition, and material situation. This led them to perceive social exclusion in terms of „multi-level disadvantage” – which fits into the participatory and distributional approach (Grotowska-Leder, 2005). The respondents noted that excluded individuals often internalize systemic barriers – reflecting a moralizing approach that blames the victims (Levitas, 1998). As a result, analytical paralysis and the phenomenon of „self-exclusion” occur: individuals blame themselves and deprive themselves of the right to participate before the group even has a chance to do so. The very use of the term „socially excluded” proved to be an equally important issue. In projects aimed at groups at risk of exclusion or socially excluded, it is worth first establishing a specific definitional approach (how do we understand social exclusion and to whom, therefore, are we directing the project?), and then developing an appropriate communication strategy so that the terms used do not have the hallmarks of excessive labeling or stigmatization.

PARTICIPATION

The research participants unanimously indicated that theater without participation is an empty form („There is no theater without participation, without it, it is just an empty building”), and exclusion is understood as a direct result of being deprived of the opportunity to participate. This directly corresponds to Rappaport's (1981, 1987) thesis about empowerment as a process of restoring agency: the absence of participation is the absence of control over one's own life. The research results show that all teams distinguish formal participation from real participation and treat this difference as crucial. This directly corresponds to the diagnostic application of Arnstein's ladder of participation (1969): the question is not „are we inviting?”, but „on which rung of the ladder are we actually located?”. A real change in the position of the excluded occurs only with partnership, delegation of power, and full civic control. Security emerges as a foundation without which no level of participation is possible. This correlates with Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory (1985, 2000): people are most motivated when three basic psychological needs are met: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The fear of evaluation, exposure, or failing to meet expectations primarily blocks the sense of autonomy and relatedness, which the respondents described as the „main enemy of participation.”

The respondents emphasized the significant dimension of encountering different perspectives: the exchange of energy and learning from different cultures; building a deeper connection with the topic through authentic human involvement; building community and resolving conflicts. This corresponds to Putnam's (2000) distinction between bonding and bridging capital: participatory theater works when excluded groups have an excess of bonding capital (strong internal cohesion) and a deficit of bridging capital (lack of ties with other groups and institutions). Theater becomes a space for producing exactly this missing bridging capital. This is complemented by Bourdieu's perspective (1986): including the perspectives of the excluded in the language and form of the performance is an acknowledgment of their cultural and symbolic capital. According to the Service-Dominant Logic (SDL) concept, the participants brought their unique resources (experiences) to the

stage and gained a platform to shape their own narratives. Instead of being the subject of debate, they became its co-producers.

SOCIAL CHANGE

In Archer's morphogenetic approach (1996, 2019), the starting point of every cycle of change is existing structures and institutions (T1 – structural conditioning). The research results show that the participants' exclusion was structurally rooted, and theater was consciously used as a „legal entry point” to spaces normally inaccessible. At the same time, the same structures proved to be a limitation for the organizers themselves: dependence on grant funding forced a „start-stop” rhythm: the project ends before new patterns have a chance to take root. Social change could therefore not exist as a systemic effect. The interaction phase (T2–T3) is the moment in Archer's model when actors, equipped with reflexivity, can take actions negotiating or questioning the existing order. At this stage, the research results are unequivocally positive: specific changes were noted during the process. Participants who were initially closed and withdrawn over time „regained their power, charisma, and presence”, and experienced a new sense of belonging. Thus, the phase of social interaction actually took place, and theater efficiently served as a space where actors could negotiate their identities and relationships. The key stage in Archer's model is T4 – change. The question is whether the effect of the interaction is real structural change (morphogenesis) or merely the reproduction of existing systems (morphostasis). The research results suggest an asymmetry: at the individual and group level, the change is credible and documented. Participants emerge from the process with an expanded sense of agency, a new network of relationships and lasting friendships, with communication tools and the experience of completing a performance, often with a rebuilt sense of self-worth. At the structural level: institutions, policies, conditions that generated exclusion – there is no change or it is unverifiable. There is also a lack of tools to track long-term effects. Without T4 at the structural level, the morphogenetic cycle remains unclosed, which does not mean failure, but indicates that the condition for systemic change would have to be another, accumulated cycle covering institutions and policies.

Lewin's force-field analysis model (1943, 1946, 1947) describes social situations as a field of tension between driving forces pushing toward change and restraining forces maintaining the status quo. In the researched projects, the driving forces were: the safe space and trust built by the organizers, the artistic theatrical form lowering the entry threshold, the shared experience of the creative process, and the involvement of the participants. The restraining forces turned out to be: structural dependence on grants (the „start-stop” rhythm), the lack of a person to maintain new norms after the facilitators' departure, and the limited impact range of the projects relative to the scale of exclusion. Lewin's three-stage model: unfreezing, changing, and refreezing, allows for the most accurate description of the trajectory of change in the researched project. The unfreezing phase proceeded effectively: the organizers consistently built a safe space, which destabilized the participants' previous, closed attitudes. The changing phase was dynamic and visible – participants moved from resistance and withdrawal to openness, courage, and a sense of self-worth. The problem lies in the refreezing phase: consolidating the new state requires long-term structures, not one-off projects. If the structure cannot be consolidated, one can at least strengthen individuals enough so that change occurs within themselves, regardless of external conditions. Thus,

change occurred, but in the individual and group dimension. However, freezing the change at the structural level remains an open task, requiring the accumulation of many such actions, many entities, and long-term institutional frameworks.



PRACTICAL PERSPECTIVE

Stages and examples of tools
used in participatory theatre

Stages and sample tools for working in participatory theater

1. Before we begin

This guide grew out of practice. From post-rehearsal conversations, from moments of uncertainty, from situations that worked surprisingly well – and from those that forced us to stop and rethink our own working methods. It was created thanks to the experiences of three partners of the WOMEN interACT project: Društvo ZIZ from Slovenia, Restart Theater Athens from Greece, and Stowarzyszenie Kobietostan from Poland. We all have been working with participatory theater for years, often in environments marked by marginalization, tension, and social fragility.

It is exactly from these experiences – from what proved supportive, but also from what required particular mindfulness – that this publication was built.

We are not trying to propose one universal method. Rather, we care about sharing practices that have worked in specific conditions and in work with specific groups – often with women whose stories and experiences remain invisible in the public space. Therefore, alongside tools and exercises, you will also find reflections on what helps participatory processes develop, and what can weaken, complicate, or put them to the test.

When we began mapping our experiences, it quickly turned out that despite differences in working languages and artistic aesthetics, we all recognize three recurring stages of the creative process:

- building the group;
- gathering the material;
- creating the performance.

However, we do not treat them as rigid, separate phases. The theatrical process rarely proceeds linearly – it is more like a spiral movement than a straight path from point A to point B. We return to earlier stages, go backward, and change direction. What initially serves to build relationships can later become stage material. What seemed closed can open up again.

In this guide, we devote the most space to the first stage – building the group. From our perspective, this is where the foundation of the entire subsequent process is created. Especially in participatory work, which relies on relationships, trust, and readiness to co-create.

Each stage is accompanied by a description of one selected tool – a practice developed by one of the partner organizations. The exception is the first chapter, which additionally features the Contract – a common tool of all three project partners. It is what creates the basic framework of working with the group and helps us build shared responsibility for the process.

This part of the guide emerged from the experiences, trials, errors, tensions, and discoveries of the artists co-creating the WOMEN interACT project. The editing of the whole was prepared by Iwona Konecka from Stowarzyszenie Kobietostan, however, it is not a single story told in one voice. It is rather a meeting of many perspectives – sometimes similar, sometimes very different – which mutually complement and expand each other.

We did not try to smooth over these differences. On the contrary – we wanted to preserve both what connects us (and there turned out to be surprisingly much of it) and what results from different intuitions, working methods, or local contexts. That is why the direct voices of the artists are so important to us. Quotes do not serve the function of an addition or illustration here – they are an equal part of this publication. They often carry the narrative forward, give it direction, and allow us to see the process from different perspectives. The descriptions of the tools remain in the hands of their authors.

This publication is not a textbook nor a closed system of methods. It is rather a record of practice – and an invitation to further develop, transform, and challenge these experiences in your own work.

The entirety is presented as a process: from starting work with the group to the premiere of the performance. In the following sections, we describe the stages of this process and their characteristics, along with sample working tools.

2. First and foremost, the group

2.1 Stage description

In participatory projects, everything starts with the group. It is at the beginning of the process that a space of relationship, trust, and shared responsibility is slowly built – conditions without which it is difficult to talk about genuine co-creation.

This stage is crucial in the experience of all WOMEN interACT partners. Artists from Društvo ZIZ emphasize that the foundation of the process is building relationships based on trust – both among the participants themselves and between the group and the moderators. It is about creating a shared space of understanding while simultaneously recognizing the individual ways of expression of each person.

Restart Theater Athens points out that without a solid community-building process, it is difficult to talk about co-creation that truly empowers participants. As they note:

If this stage had not been successful, it would have been extremely difficult to move to a co-creation process that would be empowering for the participants – which was the main goal of the project.
(Angeliki Kasola, Restart Theater Athens)

Building the group is therefore not merely a preparation for artistic work. It is the very foundation of the process.

We create a space where you can work

One of the most important tasks at the beginning of the process is to create a space where one can feel safe – psychologically, relationally, and ethically.

This sense of security allows the group to first consolidate, build and feel a sense of community, and at a later stage of work – to differentiate, explore their own creativity, and discover diversity within the team.

(Agnieszka Bresler, Stowarzyszenie Kobietostan)

As Restart Theater Athens emphasizes:

In participatory and socially engaged artistic processes – especially those dealing with experiences of exclusion, discrimination, and violence – safety is not a secondary condition, but a methodological foundation.

(Angeliki Kasola, Restart Theater Athens)



Photo 1, photo: Žiga Auer

One of the most important practices common to our processes is creating a Contract – jointly established rules of work, boundaries, and ways of reacting to difficult situations. It is important to us that these rules are not imposed from above, but worked out together with the group. Often, the very process of creating the Contract takes more than one meeting. Building a sense of security often also requires additional forms of support. We met at

mutual supervision sessions of group leaders, consulted with psychologists, and in some cases also invited therapists to the process, who supported the participants in more difficult moments.

However, the individual teams differed in their approach to working with the participants' personal stories. In Restart Theater Athens' projects, psychological support was directly integrated into the framework of the artistic process because the participants had a strong need to share their own experiences.

Including therapeutic support in the artistic framework thus allowed us to maintain a balance between creative exploration and psychological responsibility.

At the same time, we tried to clarify that the project was not a therapeutic intervention, but a process of artistic co-creation. Maintaining this distinction was important from an ethical point of view.

(Iriní Mela, Restart Theater Athens)

Restart also emphasizes that including trauma awareness in the methodology of work helped ensure that the process was empowering rather than exhausting. ZIZ and Kobietostan share this perspective, although they more often work through the body, image, metaphor, and performative actions, avoiding direct autobiographical storytelling.

In all our actions, however, one thing was important: clear definition of the process framework. Although we treat theater as a space of encounter, development, and contact with our own sensitivity, from the beginning we try to communicate clearly that we are here primarily to create art together. We are not therapists. We are artists working collectively – and our tools and methods stem precisely from this perspective.

We enter play, voice, and body work

We gradually familiarize the participants with their own creativity. It's not about "creating a performance" right away, but about first opening a space where one can start to freely experiment, react, play, and be together.

Through games, improvisations, storytelling, practices based on body work, and singing together, the group began to experience creativity as a shared process, not an individual achievement. These activities supported spontaneity, sensitivity, and joy, helping to gradually dissolve initial inhibitions and hierarchies in the group.

Participants learned to admire each other, support and react to each other, strengthening relationships in parallel with developing artistic skills.

(Angeliki Kasola, Restart Theater Athens)

We work through group and movement games, improvisation, singing together, exercises with imagination and Stowarzyszenia. We look for tools that allow entering the creative process without the need for prematurely exposing oneself. We also care about offering diverse forms of expression – so that each person can find a form of participation close to themselves.

...letting participants understand that in the process we propose, there will be a place for various potentials, abilities, and interests. We also avoid potentially conflict-generating tasks that reinforce competition, and we use those that build teamwork, cooperation, and restore childlike spontaneity. We focus on joy and play as a space where mutual alliance and support are built, tensions release, inner guard is lowered, and the sense of mistrust decreases

(Agnieszka Bresler, Stowarzyszenie Kobietostan)

Artists from Društvo ZIZ also emphasize how important it is to take special care of more withdrawn individuals – so that they can safely enter the process and gradually experience their own agency.

We used various exercises, conversations, and reflections on power relations, mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion, oppression, and group dynamics to create a more egalitarian and inclusive environment for all participants.

(Barbara Polajnar, Društvo ZIZ)

Restart Theater Athens, on the other hand, focused strongly on the agency associated with telling one's own stories. Participants discovered that the same story can be expressed in many different ways. This experience strengthened the sense of influence and allowed a transition from merely sharing an experience to being the authors and performers of their own narratives.

Kobietostan at this stage works particularly strongly with the voice – which seems important to us especially in the context of the difficulties many women experience in accessing their own, full, and strong voice.

Working with the voice – constituting the foundation of further work, allowing participants to discover and strengthen their voice, express themselves, and metaphorically stand behind themselves. Giving voice. Having heard ourselves and each other, we break the first resistance, the first internal barrier, we overcome the first fear, we experience the first delight and we can move forward – towards creativity.

(Agnieszka Bresler, Stowarzyszenie Kobietostan)



Photo 2, photo: Justyna Żądło

It is also the moment when we gradually start introducing the basic elements of performative work – stage presence, occupying space, relationships between bodies, or the dynamics of power and visibility on stage.

We establish the framework for working together

At this stage, we also start building shared structures of work. In Kobietostan's practice, the figure of the circle plays an important role – both as a physical way of organizing space and as a symbol of equality and cooperation.

We care about building a team in which – like in a circle – each of the participants is equally visible and audible, but in which we – as facilitators – do not enter into a hierarchical, superior relationship. Yes, throughout the duration of our work we watch over it and guide the participants, but it is not an omnipotent, masterful guidance, rather as partner-like and transparent as possible. Such a strategy not only unleashes greater participation of the participants, but at the same time does not burden us with excessive responsibility for the group.

(Agnieszka Bresler, Stowarzyszenie Kobietostan)

In the work of all WOMEN interACT partners, we regularly return to emphasizing that each participant is co-responsible both for their own well-being and for what they bring to the group.

A participatory process relies on freedom of expression, but this freedom also includes awareness of one's own boundaries.

(Barbara Polajnar, Društvo ZIZ)

We want to ensure that responsibility is not diluted in the group, but also does not rest solely on the facilitators. Our experience shows that it is precisely such jointly developed frameworks that become a stable point of reference for further creative work. They provide a sense of continuity, transparency, and responsibility – and thus allow participants to gradually take artistic risks and enter deeper into the co-creation process.

What we pay attention to: Not missing what is happening in the group

The community-building phase requires not only time but also very attentive observation of the group dynamics. In participatory processes, people with different experiences, temperaments, and levels of self-confidence meet. Tensions, inequalities in occupying space, or communication difficulties naturally arise. One of the important tasks of the facilitators is to notice these mechanisms and react in such a way as to protect both individuals and the creative process itself.

Maintaining balance regarding whose voices are heard is a frequent challenge. Some people easily occupy space and quickly get into action, while others need more time to feel safe. That is why it is so important to constantly return to the shared rules of communication and support participants in developing awareness of how the group operates.

Building a community is also sometimes associated with difficult decisions. Sometimes it happens that someone is unable to function within the agreed frameworks or destabilizes the process with their behavior. Accompanying such situations requires empathy and readiness to take responsibility for decisions regarding a given person's further participation in the group's work.

It's also worth remembering that this first stage is rarely spectacular.

This first stage is particularly time-consuming, can be tedious and stormy (and we want to rush towards creativity, towards the performance!), but it shouldn't be rushed.

(Agnieszka Bresler, Stowarzyszenie Kobietostan)

It is precisely this time that allows a safe and healthy workspace to be created gradually – without it, the creative process has nothing to rest on.

Various forms of support for facilitators also prove very helpful in dealing with challenges. One of them is supervision. We all worked both in co-facilitating pairs, using peer supervision, as well as consultations between partner organizations and professional psychological supervision. This helped us better understand the group dynamics, name emerging conflicts, and look for adequate ways of reacting.

Caring for group dynamics, patience, and readiness to react to tensions are therefore an integral part of this stage of work. Even if many of these actions remain invisible from the outside, it is they that largely determine whether the creative process will be able to develop in a safe and truly cooperative way.

Building a community is not just the beginning of the process. It is something that lasts throughout the work – only in different forms. Trust, responsibility, and attentiveness do not appear once and for all. They need constant care and continuous renewal.

In the next section, we look at two specific tools that supported us in creating such a workspace.

- The first is the Group Contract – a practice present in all WOMEN interACT partners, helping to jointly establish rules of cooperation, boundaries, and ways of reacting to difficult situations.
- The second is the proposal of Društvo ZIZ – "Observing the playing body in space" – a practice developing awareness of presence, relationships, and bodily expression, supporting participants in transitioning from everyday ways of functioning to a more conscious performative presence.

2.2 Tools

The Contract

Angeliki Kasola, Restart Theater Athens & Iwona Konecka, Stowarzyszenie Kobietostan

The foundation of the group-building phase for us is a tool we call the Contract. We do not treat it as a formal document or a set of rigid rules. The Contract is rather a living practice – something that is created jointly with the participants and gradually shapes the way we work, communicate, and care for each other throughout the process. Over time, it becomes the backbone of shared work – a structure that supports its ethical, relational, creative, and practical dimension. All these elements are needed if co-creation is to be truly responsible and meaningful.

Tool description

Below we present a more elaborate way of creating a Contract. For those who already have experience with similar practices, it allows them to go beyond ready-made, schematic formulas and regain a more authentic contact with this process. For those encountering it for the first time, it can become a gentle entry into group work and help them understand the meaning of jointly establishing rules.

We divide the work on the Contract into several stages. In shorter processes, the first and second steps can be omitted.

1. Self-reflection

We invite participants to close their eyes or focus their gaze on one point and dedicate a moment to personal reflection:

- How did I function in groups before?
- How did I feel inside them?
- What was difficult or uncomfortable for me?
- What did I need?
- And what do I notice in myself now – being in this specific group?

2. Needs mapping

We distribute markers and sticky notes. Each person writes down their needs related to functioning in the group – one need per note.

Then, one person reads their first note and places it in the center of the circle or sticks it to a large sheet of paper. They can say a few words about it.

People who find a similar need in themselves place their notes next to it – in this way, the first "island" begins to form on the group map.

Another person shares their need, and the process repeats. Subsequent islands are formed.

We continue until all people who want to contribute have the space to do so. There is no obligation to reveal everything – some things can remain private.

3. Creating common agreements

Together we look at the map of needs and ask questions:

- What rules can support these needs in our group?
- Are there needs that we cannot take care of here?

We talk, negotiate, and look for formulations that all people can agree to. Step by step, a set of common rules emerges.

At the end, we emphasize that the Contract is a living document – it can change, evolve, and be supplemented, always with the group's consent.

4. Title and signatures

Each group gives its Contract its own title. It's a minor element, but it often helps build a sense of common group culture and triggers creativity.

At the end, all the people co-creating the Contract sign it.

What this tool brings at this stage of the process

At the center of the Contract is creating a space based on security and trust. Before deeper creative or personal work is possible, we need the feeling that we can share experiences and explore creatively without the fear of judgment or being hurt.

Together we establish rules regarding confidentiality, attentive listening, voluntariness of sharing personal stories, and the right to withdraw from the process at any time. These rules are not imposed from above – they arise in dialogue and are co-created by the group, thanks to which participants have a real influence on the working conditions.

The Contract also helps build practical structures supporting the process. Together we establish a realistic schedule taking into account the lives and capabilities of the participants, we talk about ways of making decisions, communication, and reacting to conflicts.

In the WOMEN interACT project, the process of creating the Contract also included discussions about available forms of support – both artistic mentoring and psychological support – so that each person knew they could use these resources if they needed them. All these elements introduced greater stability and transparency, allowing participants to focus with greater peace of mind on creative work and taking artistic risks.

Over time, the Contract becomes a space where trust, creativity, and shared responsibility can develop. It allows participants to fully engage in the process, explore their own stories, and give them a performative form as their authors.

Context and working conditions

We create the Contract at the beginning of the process – although this does not always mean the first meeting. In Kobietostan, especially with longer processes, we often give the group time (2-3 meetings) so that people can get to know each other and start sensing the group dynamics before we start working on the Contract.

The Contract can be created – in various forms – with groups of any age and with different experiences. Our experience shows, however, that it is particularly important in working with people who have experienced marginalization.

It does not always have to be in written form, although we most often choose it. The conversations around the individual rules build a common understanding of the process, while a written Contract allows returning to it at different stages of work – especially in more difficult moments.

It is important not only to create the Contract, but also to practice it. Regularly returning to the common agreements, checking how they work, using them when solving difficulties, or making them available to people joining the process keeps it alive.

One of the clearest signals that the Contract really works is the moment when participants themselves start referring to its rules from memory.

When is it worth changing the form of work?

In shorter projects, facilitators can propose a basic version of the Contract, and then invite the group to a conversation about what is important to them and what they would like to add.

In such situations, agreements usually appear regarding:

- voluntary participation in exercises and conversations with simultaneous expectation of involvement,
- speaking from the perspective of "I" – referring to one's own experience instead of interpreting others,
- structure of working time – rhythm of meetings, breaks, and organization of the process.

What is worth keeping in mind

The power of the Contract lies in the fact that from the very beginning it brings transparency, safety, and a sense of shared responsibility to the process. It does not act as a set of imposed rules, but as a jointly built framework that allows the group to co-decide on the way of working.

Thanks to this, it strengthens the agency of participants, builds trust, and helps translate abstract values – such as care, accessibility, or co-creation – into everyday practices and concrete behaviors.

The Contract also organizes the practical dimension of the process: communication, reacting to difficulties, making decisions, and organizing work. It creates a stable base from which one can safely take creative risks.

At the same time, this is a tool requiring time, patience, and attentive facilitation. Just writing down the rules is not enough. It is equally important to return to them, name moments when they are violated, and react to emerging tensions.

We see the greatest potential of the Contract in the possibility of building a mature group culture based on dialogue, transparency, and awareness of boundaries. What is particularly worth watching out for is the moment when the Contract becomes solely a declaration – something that sounds good but is not practiced. Then the common rules quickly lose meaning, and tensions begin to operate below the surface.

What does it support?	What does it require?
• A sense of security and transparency. • Participants' agency. • Trust and shared responsibility. • Communication and work	• Time and patience. • Attentive facilitation of the process. • Regularly returning to the agreements. • Readiness to respond to conflicts

organization. Stable framework for creative risk.	and tensions. Translating values into concrete actions.
What can it bring?	What can go wrong?
- Development of mature group culture. - Greater awareness of boundaries and needs. - Experience of shared influence and negotiation. - More honest and courageous creative process. - Ability to adapt rules to changing conditions.	- Treating the Contract as an empty declaration. - Creating rules that are too general or unrealistic. - Lack of reaction to broken agreements. - Leaving tensions unspoken. - Using language that is too formal or abstract.

Table 9. Analysis of the tool: contract. Own elaboration by the authors of Part II.

Observing the body in motion

Anja Bezlova Završnik, Društvo ZIZ

As one of the key tools in the group-building phase, I choose the process titled "Observing the body in motion". This tool is based on thinking about the body as the primary site of knowledge, sensitivity, and artistic expression. It is the body that constitutes the foundation of theatrical language – and by exploring movement in space, participants can gradually begin to understand how creativity is born.

The goal of this practice is not just to develop performative skills. It is equally important to guide participants towards greater self-awareness and deeper contact with their own resources – emotions, life experiences, imaginations, wounds, and desires. By observing and exploring the playing body, participants build a relationship with space, with other bodies, and with their own presence.

This process allows each person to discover how different roles or figures trigger specific dynamics – both within themselves and in the broader social context – and how they carry specific forces and creative potentials



Photo 3, photo: Vasilis Dragoumanos

Tool description

The tool is designed for a group of about ten people and takes roughly two hours.

1. Theoretical introduction (approx. 30 minutes)

The process begins with a joint introduction in a circle. The facilitator explains the purpose of the exercise and clearly defines what we will pay attention to during observation.

The starting point is everyday movement – without stylization. Participants are not to create a character or pretend to be someone else. They are simply invited to move as they do every day.

Observation focuses on specific elements of posture and movement, such as:

- head positioning,
- position of arms and shoulders,
- openness or closedness of the chest,
- hip alignment,
- way of placing the feet and posture,
- movement and position of hands,
- way of walking,
- initiating movement, rhythm, stopping, and changing direction.

The goal is to develop an accurate perception of body dynamics – without judging or interpreting.

2. Observation and role reversal (approx. 45 minutes)

Participants are divided into two groups of five people. One group moves in the space, the other observes. The people moving do not know who is observing them. After some time, the groups switch roles.

In the next step, the observing people try to recreate the way the person they were observing moved as accurately as possible. The previously observed people try to recognize who is mirroring their movement. This stage deepens awareness of individual movement qualities.

3. Reflection and sharing experience (approx. 30 minutes or more)

The facilitator invites each pair to share their observations and experiences with the group: what they noticed, what movement qualities were particularly pronounced, what surprised them. Together we also reflect on what stage potential or what kind of character might emerge from a given way of moving.

Then there is a shared reflection on what was most interesting, what was most demanding, and what the participants discovered about themselves.

4. Towards character creation

In the next step, the selected movement quality or bodily element is isolated and amplified. Through further development, the participant gradually moves away from everyday movement and begins to build a new stage presence.

In this way, the real body begins to transition into what we call the "poetic body" – a body carrying artistic meaning.

What this tool brings at this stage of the process

This tool was central to the initial phase of the process because it allowed participants to develop a deeper understanding of themselves – especially the body as a medium of expression.

Many people experience their own body primarily as a functional tool, less often as a space of meanings and communication. The exercise helps notice one's own movement habits, recognize characteristic body qualities, and discover their expressive potential.

At the same time, this practice plays an important role in taming stage fright. Because it relies on natural, everyday movement, it does not put participants under the pressure of "performing", but gently introduces them to the creative process. Thanks to this, it reduces the sense of exposure and supports building security.

The tool also helps create a sense of community. Participants get to know each other in a non-verbal way – through action and shared experience.

Because everyone goes through the same process of observation and embodiment, a sense of equality and connection emerges.

The exercise often takes place in an atmosphere of lightness and humor, which helps build a good group atmosphere and the trust needed for further creative work. Without this tool, the process would most likely not reach the level of openness, security, and embodied awareness that is needed to develop the "poetic body" and create stage characters.

Context and working conditions

This tool works best at the beginning of the creative process – when we focus on building group dynamics and deepening body awareness. It is particularly effective in groups that already have at least a minimal experience of working together or basic contact with theatrical practice, as it requires a certain level of openness and capacity for reflection. The gender of the participants is irrelevant here – the working conditions are key. The process needs a safe, closed space that supports confidentiality and concentration.

At least two uninterrupted hours are necessary, because both the practical part and the reflection are equally important for the effectiveness of this tool.

The group must also be ready for shared reflection and dialogue – it is these that allow the transition from the everyday body to the "poetic body".

When is it worth changing the method or giving it up?

We would not use this tool in work with children and younger teenagers, because it requires a certain level of body awareness, emotional stability, and the ability to reflect on one's own presence.

It will also not work in very time-constrained situations or when the facilitator does not have experience in leading processes based on body work. The structure of this exercise requires precise facilitation and great sensitivity to group dynamics.

The method is also not well suited for very large groups (over 20 people), because it reduces the precision of observation and the quality of the individual experience.

We would also avoid using it in mixed groups, consisting of both people with and without physical disabilities – unless the methodology was very carefully adapted beforehand. The exercise relies on the direct mirroring of movement dynamics. The key condition remains a safe and protected working environment. Without it, the method cannot fulfill its purpose.

What is worth keeping in mind

The strength of this tool lies in its ability to rapidly build trust and a sense of community. Because all people go through the same process of observing and being observed, an experience of equality and shared commitment emerges. The method does not require previous stage experience, thus remaining accessible.

Its intensity allows moving beyond superficial contact – careful observation of movement reveals individual qualities and performative potentials. At the same time, the tool requires high awareness and experience from the facilitator. The process is time-consuming, relies on pair work, and needs a safe atmosphere, because the very experience of being observed can initially be difficult or uncomfortable for some participants.

What the tool can open up is a transition from everyday presence to a more conscious performative presence – as well as the development of empathy, attentiveness, and self-confidence in the group.

The greatest risk arises when the process is interrupted or closed too quickly. Without time for reflection and sharing experience, the exercise can lose its coherence and depth.

What does it support?	What does it require?
• Rapid building of trust and bonds in the group. • Accessibility for people without stage experience. • Deepening the awareness of body and movement. • Attentiveness towards oneself and others. • Recognizing individual performative potentials.	• Experienced and attentive facilitation. • A safe workspace. • Sufficient time for the full process. • Gradual introduction to the exercise. • Readiness to observe and be observed.
What can it bring?	What can go wrong?
• Development of conscious stage presence. • Greater self-confidence and sense of individuality. • Greater empathy and attentiveness in the group. • Material for further improvisations and character work. • Deeper understanding of the body and relational dynamics.	• Interrupting the process before the reflection stage. • Discomfort associated with being observed. • Moving between stages too quickly. • Loss of a sense of security with poor facilitation. • Organizational difficulties in pair work or larger groups.

Table 10. Analysis of the tool: observing the body in motion. Own elaboration by the authors of Part II.

3. Creative exploration

3.1. Stage description

The moment of transition to working with material is rarely clearly noticeable. There is no single day when we "start making a performance". Something just begins to shift. The same exercises that previously served to build relationships and trust gradually begin to produce stage material. Improvisations turn into scenes, Stowarzyszenies into structures, and conversations become the seeds of texts.

We still work with the body, voice, and imagination – but with a different kind of attention. We begin to pause at what happens: at a gesture, a sentence, the quality of movement, the tension between people. We slowly learn to recognize and name what carries stage potential – without yet needing to define or close it in a specific form.

At this stage, the most important thing is not yet creating, but allowing something to emerge.

We do not select or organize yet. We gather. Material must first exist before it can be evaluated. Texts, images, actions, scene fragments, single sentences, rhythms, movement qualities appear. Sometimes these are mere sketches, sometimes almost ready fragments.

You can think of this stage as building a common archive – a collection that is not yet a performance, but already contains its potential.

We awaken creativity

For many participants, this is the first moment they truly encounter their own creativity. Therefore, we start with activities that do not require competence or "talent", but only openness and engagement: games, improvisations, simple movement and writing tasks – everything that allows entering the process without the pressure of an effect. Over time, these activities begin to expand. Play transitions into structure, structure into a scene.

Creativity can be capricious, it can be repressed, hidden, unconscious. The essence of the material creation stage is therefore its activation, triggering, spinning up. This happens through play, transforming games into more open structures, and finally through group and individual tasks that trigger spontaneity and ingenuity.

(Agnieszka Bresler, Stowarzyszenie Kobietostan)

In this process, it is also important to notice what already exists in the participants. Sometimes these are skills long abandoned, sometimes small intuitions that have never been named before.

Extracting these "dormant possibilities" is sometimes one of the most moving moments of this stage.

We create time and structure

Barbara Polajnar from Društvo ZIZ particularly emphasizes the need to create conditions in which exploration can even happen. Material does not appear on demand. It needs time, repetitions, freedom, and the feeling that not everything has to be "good" right away.

That's why it is so important not to rush this phase. To give space for trying, getting lost, returning to the same ideas from different angles. To build a stable group dynamic where participants can take risks – even if this means moments of uncertainty or awkwardness.

Introducing external impulses – a workshop led by a new person, a different tool, a different way of working – also proves valuable. Such moments can open up the process and trigger completely unexpected material.

Within WOMEN interACT, we visited each other exactly to expand the range of tools, learn from each other, and bring new impulses and possibilities to the groups.

We work with experience

In the practice of Restart Theater Athens, this stage clearly shifts towards personal experience. As trust grows, participants begin to reach deeper – their stories become more multi-layered, but also more exposed.

It is a moment of great intensity. What emerges can resonate strongly – both for those speaking and those listening. Therefore, alongside creation itself, pausing becomes equally important: making room for conversation, collectively holding what has been touched upon.

It is not about protecting participants from their own expression, but about accompanying it – so that the process remains safe and meaningful.

In this sense, creating material becomes more than preparation for a performance:

Through these multi-layered experiences – deep self-disclosure, shared reflection, physical exploration, and satirical processing of experiences – the devising stage became a space not only for building the performance, but also for reclaiming narrative agency. The women were no longer merely telling what happened to them; they began to shape how their stories would be seen, felt, and understood on stage themselves.

(Iriní Mela, Restart Theater Athens)

What we aim for at this stage

We build together

One of the key goals of this stage is to build a real sense that the performance is being created together.

Each person needs space to bring something of their own – a topic, gesture, text, way of thinking – and see that it becomes part of a larger whole. This is particularly important because later stages will involve selection and difficult decisions. Therefore, the experience of co-authorship must appear now.

All people involved in the process must therefore have the space to add something from themselves to the common pool and feel that our ideas connect into a whole, create a common image, vision, message – and that even if at a later stage this image comes into focus, is shown in a specific light or through a chosen filter – we all participated in the process of its creation.

(Agnieszka Bresler, Stowarzyszenie Kobietostan)

This feeling of creating together later becomes the foundation for the transition to composition – without losing the sense of belonging.

We learn to see creative material everywhere

An important goal of this stage is also developing theatrical awareness – not as theoretical knowledge, but as an experience of what stage material is and how you can work with it.

Working with the same theme through different forms – text, movement, group action, image – allows participants to see that the stage does not serve to reproduce reality, but to transform it.

Material ceases to be something "given" and becomes something that can be consciously formed, changed, and composed.

We strengthen presence and agency

At the same time, we try to keep the field of expression as open as possible. We do not narrow down the language of the performance yet – on the contrary, we expand it. We experiment with different forms, perspectives, and theatrical languages. The same content can appear as a monologue, a group scene, a physical action, or a written text.

The intention was not yet to fix scenes or decide what would remain in the final composition, but to experiment with different forms, perspectives, and theatrical languages, so that later decisions could be made consciously and with agency by the women as co-creators.

(Angeliki Kasola, Restart Theater Athens)

This expanding of the field of possibilities helps participants find those forms of expression that are truest for them.



Photo 4, photo: Žiga Auer

Along with moving more freely between different forms, their self-confidence also grows – both stage and personal. The experience of trials, changes, returns, and looking from different perspectives builds trust in one's own decisions. Participants begin to feel they have a real influence on how their stories are told.

We get to know the participants

This stage is also the moment when facilitators begin to know the participants more deeply. We can take a step back and observe what emerges – not only in terms of topics, but also energy, working styles, or stage presence.

We gather knowledge about what is important to the participants, what motifs recur, which forms seem natural, and which require support. Thanks to this, an intuition concerning the possible structure of the performance begins to appear – not yet as a closed form, but as a direction.

It is thus a dual process: the group produces material, and the facilitators learn how to understand it and how to hold it.

What we care about at this stage

We protect the process from premature judgment

This is one of the most alive – but also the most vulnerable – stages of the entire process. Intensity grows simultaneously on the creative, relational, and emotional levels. The material

thickens, stories deepen, and participants enter expression more fully.

We want to go deeper – allow for authenticity, risk, exposure. At the same time, we constantly care about the emotional safety of the participants. This means being attentive to moments when we need to stop, slow down, or change the direction of work.

For me as a director, this stage also required patience – refraining from closing the structure too quickly and allowing the exploration process to truly unfold.

Ultimately, the greatest responsibility was protecting both the emotional well-being of the participants and the integrity of the creative process, so that the group could continue to grow despite emerging difficulties.

(Angeliki Kasola, Restart Theater Athens)

This is a moment when participants can easily withdraw – especially if it is their first stage experience. That is why the way we react is of immense importance. It is not about avoiding feedback, but about sensing the right moment.

The key was to maintain a safe working space while giving empowering, positive feedback – so that participants would not withdraw or abandon their own material.

(Anja Bezlova Završnik, Društvo ZIZ)

We must also remain attentive to the different rhythms of work and creation.

Creativity is triggered over time, it must first force several well-oiled locks, bypass the inner critic, let safe ideas pass first – so it requires patience. If we start the process of evaluation (or self-evaluation) too early, we will not let it speak.

(Agnieszka Bresler, Kobietostan Stowarzyszenie)

Rest is also part of the creative process. Breaks, conversations, time without a task or goal are just as important as the work itself. At the same time, structure is needed – a theme, a direction, a frame – not to limit, but to provide support.

3.2 Tools

Creating from the end

Iwona Konecka, Stowarzyszenie Kobietostan

As a tool supporting the material-gathering stage, I would like to share a method I call "creating from the end". Its essence lies in reversing the order that many people are used to when working on a scene.

In a more classic model, we first determine the goal of the scene, analyze its meaning, test ideas in action, and only at the end do we choose the materials or objects we will use.

In Kobietostan we sometimes work backwards – we start with an object, material, or substance, and only later move on to meanings and dramaturgical functions. This tool invites us to think about the scene not only through the topic, narrative, or words, but also through action, image, rhythm, and relationship with matter. Thanks to this, participants are engaged not only in creating content but also in building the visual and formal layer of the performance.

Tool description

The exercise can be adapted to different topics and ways of working. Most often, participants work in groups of three or four.

1. Material

The starting point is the choice of an object, material, or substance. Sometimes it stems directly from the topic of the work, sometimes it appears more intuitively. For example, in Slovenia, we worked with bandages and chewing gum, looking for materials that stick and connect – the theme was sisterhood. In Greece, we intuitively chose tights.

Objects that are easily multiplied and materials that are flexible and prone to transformation work best. We have already worked with, among other things, carpets, cups, paper, balloons, bandages, soil and water, chewing gum, or paperclips.

2. Exploration

Each group receives a set of objects and creates a map of possibilities. In the middle of a piece of paper, they write the name of the object, and around it, all the actions that can be performed with it. At the same time, participants are encouraged to touch, stretch, and physically test the material.

At this stage, we constantly remind: we are not looking for good ideas – we are looking for all possible ideas, including absurd, strange, or illogical ones.

This is sometimes a difficult moment because participants often quickly move to interpretation. We are interested, however, in naming pure performative actions, not ready-made meanings.

For example:

- "pull a pair of tights over the head" is an action,
- while "rob a bank in it" is already an interpretation and a stage intention.

We work this way because assigning meanings too quickly limits further creative possibilities.



Photo 5, photo: Justyna Żądło

The groups continue working until they generate at least twenty actions. Then they select one to four and present them to the rest of the group. At this stage, it is important not to project meanings yet, but simply arrange the actions in a presentable structure – who does what, after whom, in what order – guided by intuition and form, not by "what we want to say".

3. Assigning meanings

After each presentation, the group gives feedback on two levels:

- what we experienced as viewers,
- what meanings, Stowarzyszenia, or feelings appeared while watching.

Thanks to this, participants begin to see how actions affect the audience and what senses they can trigger.

4. Goal

Only at the end do we connect actions with intention: what do we want to say through them and what place can they take in the larger structure of the performance.

What this tool brings at this stage of the process

Before I started using this exercise, it was difficult for me to engage participating individuals – often without professional theatrical experience – not only in creating content, but also in building the visual and formal layer of the performance.

This tool opens exactly such a space.

Because all people start from a common element – material or object – the group works within a common framework. At the same time, the exercise allows for a huge diversity of ideas while maintaining a certain visual coherence.

The method generates a large number of new ideas, builds energy in the group, and supports thinking about theater through action, matter, and image – and not exclusively text or narrative.

For me as a facilitator, it also brings a very concrete compositional effect. During this exploration, ready-made micro-scenes or performative actions appear, which can later become elements of a larger performance structure.

Context and working conditions

This tool can be used in different groups, although the artistic effects will vary. It works particularly well when the group has already managed to build basic trust and a sense of safety, but is still in the exploration phase.

The exercise allows presenting ideas on a small scale – without the pressure of creating full scenes. Thanks to this, less active people can more safely enter the process.

When is it worth changing the method or giving it up?

I would not use this tool at the very beginning of the process – before even a minimal level of trust has appeared in the group. I would also avoid it in situations where the group has a tendency towards strong mutual criticism or is in active conflict. The exercise requires openness and readiness to share ideas.

If I see that the group works better through action than through verbal reflection, I modify the exercise and skip the writing stage. In such situations, participants work directly with objects, and one person acts as an observer and writes down the most interesting actions. This allows maintaining the fluidity of the creative process.

What is worth keeping in mind

The strength of this tool lies in triggering creativity through action, material, and physical experimentation – not exclusively through language or analysis. It opens the process for people who do not feel confident working with text or think more intuitively – through images and movement.

A common starting point gives the group a sense of support, and at the same time leaves room for very different ideas and helps build aesthetic coherence.

An important element of this method is separating the creation stage from the evaluation stage. Thanks to this, it is easier to silence the inner critic and allow oneself greater freedom of exploration.

At the same time, the tool requires attentive facilitation. Participants often move too quickly to interpreting and assigning meanings, which can close further processes of searching. For some people, the multi-stage structure of the exercise can also be demanding.

What the method enables is co-creating not only the content of the performance, but also its visual and performative language – while simultaneously preserving a common aesthetic.

The risk arises when the group stays too long at the idea generation stage or, conversely – closes meanings too quickly, before the material has time to truly develop.

What does it support?	What does it require?
• Creativity based on action, image, and matter. • Including people less confident in working with text. • Common aesthetics while maintaining a diversity of ideas. • Loosening the action of the inner critic. • Thinking about the scene through rhythm, action, and image.	• Attentive facilitation. • Restraining premature interpretation. • Participants' readiness to experiment. • Time for exploration and testing. • Clear explanation of the process logic.
What can it bring?	What can go wrong?
• Co-creation of the visual layer of the performance. • Development of micro-scenes and performative actions. • Increase in self-confidence and performative agency. • Discovering unobvious meanings and Stowarzyszenies. • Building a common aesthetic language.	• Getting stuck at the idea generation stage. • Closing meanings too quickly. • Frustration of people needing more precise instructions. • A sense of chaos with weak facilitation. • Falling into clichés and overly obvious solutions.

Table 11. Analysis of the tool: creating from the end. Own elaboration by the authors of Part II.

4. Finally – the performance

4.1. Stage description

The stage of creating the performance begins when the accumulated material begins to demand a form. This is the moment of transition from exploration to composition, from many possible directions to decisions that give the whole rhythm, structure, and meaning.

This does not mean, however, that the process suddenly becomes closed or entirely subordinated to directing. On the contrary – it is one of the most delicate moments in the context of co-creation. We have to organize the material, make decisions, build the performance – and at the same time not lose what has been the foundation of the process from the beginning: co-ownership, trust, and participants' agency.

After the openness and multiplicity of the material gathering stage, we had to start moving towards composition – making decisions, building rhythm, shaping transitions, and creating a dramaturgical arc capable of carrying the emotional weight of these stories.

(Angeliki Kasola, Restart Theater Athens)

Each process of assembling a performance looks different. It depends on time, the group, the type of material, the facilitation model, and the level of trust that has been built.

We try to take their voices and ideas into account, look for solutions together, and at the same time we reserve the right to the 'last word'.

(Agnieszka Bresler, Stowarzyszenie Kobietostan)

This tension – between joint searching and the necessity to make decisions – becomes one of the central dynamics of this stage.

And although this is already the last phase of the process, it does not mean there are no returns. Just as before, we move between stages, we return, we go back, we start anew. Very often, while building the structure, it turns out that something is still missing – and then we return to the stage of generating material.

What we aim for at this stage

We turn exploration into structure

At this stage, we begin to ask questions: what follows what? What journey does the audience go through? What journey do the performers go through? Where do we need intensity, and where do we need breathing room? When should words resonate alone, and when do they need the support of the body, music, image, or the group's presence?

The material gathered earlier – texts, gestures, images, improvisations, scenes, rhythms, songs, or choreographies – must be organized. It's not, however, about mechanically assembling fragments. It's about finding a dramaturgical logic that will allow the material

to breathe, build up, change tone, and guide the audience through an experience.

In the work of Restart Theater Athens, creating a structure capable of holding the participants' texts was particularly important. From the beginning, the women stated clearly that they wanted their stories to be told in their own words:

They didn't want their stories to be primarily translated into symbolism or abstraction, or filtered through other people's voices. They wanted language – direct, personal, unapologetic. This desire set the direction for the entire composition.

(Angeliki Kasola, Restart Theater Athens)

This need shaped the entire performance. The structure had to be strong enough to hold the text, but at the same time flexible enough not to close it off.

We protect co-authorship throughout the process

One of the most important goals of this stage is maintaining the feeling that the performance still belongs to the group. This is particularly difficult because composition always involves selection. Not everything that has been created will ultimately be shown to the public. Some fragments will be shortened, others moved, some will disappear entirely. The pressure of time and growing awareness of public exposure further amplify the tension of this moment.

That is why it is so important for participants to feel that their material is not being "used" by the director or dramaturge, but jointly transformed into an artistic form.

It was about creating a sense of shared ownership of the material – so that scenes were not 'used', but consciously shaped and transformed into art.

(Barbara Polajnar, Društvo ZIZ)

Similarly, in Kobietostan's practice, joint searching remains central:

Ultimately, we can find a dozen solutions to a given problem. The choice will belong to the directors, but joint searches allow us to sustain the team's participation.

(Agnieszka Bresler, Stowarzyszenie Kobietostan)

This is an important distinction. Participation does not mean that every decision is made jointly. It means rather that the people involved understand the process, have a real influence, are heard, and can recognize their contribution in the final work.

We strengthen performers and authors

Creating a performance is also the moment when participants begin to see themselves more clearly as performers. They not only generate material, but learn to carry it – in front of the group, on stage, and ultimately in front of an audience.

As described from the perspective of ZIZ, it was important:

...so that each participant as a performer felt confident and at ease – both with herself and with the group – standing on stage, holding her idea, and presenting it to the public.

(Barbara Polajnar, Društvo ZIZ)

At this stage, very concrete skills develop: stage presence, public speaking, singing, movement, precision, rhythm, or audience awareness. But the goal is something more than technical preparation.

It is also about developing performative autonomy:

so that participants were able to independently create and shape stage material.

(Barbara Polajnar, Društvo ZIZ)

The issue of visibility also remains central:

Strengthening the visibility and voice of women, who very often remain invisible on stage

(Barbara Polajnar, Društvo ZIZ)

This sentence well captures one of the main meanings of the entire process: the stage becomes a place where usually marginalized people appear not as a theme, but as authors and performers.

We aim for artistic quality

In participatory processes, it's easy to succumb to the temptation of thinking that the mere presence of marginalized voices on stage is enough. For the WOMEN interACT partners, however, it was important to reach further – to create works that are not only socially important, but also artistically strong.

to collectively create a truly good performance – one that all the people involved can stand behind and that they want to continue showing and repeating.

(Barbara Polajnar, Društvo ZIZ)

Our practice shows not only that "the voices of marginalized people can create high-quality, professional art" (Barbara Polajnar, Društvo ZIZ), but also that maintaining artistic ambition increases the chance that the performance will truly move the audience and stay with them longer.

We give it our all, we set the bar so as to reach it, but have a lot of satisfaction from that jump – we prove to ourselves that we can, that we manage, that we are worthy.

(Agnieszka Bresler, Stowarzyszenie Kobietostan)

What we care about at this stage

We make choices without dismissing contributions

The most sensitive moment of this phase is selection. The material gathered earlier with openness and care must now be shaped. Not everything will stay. In working with personal material, this requires special attention. Shortening or removing fragments can be perceived not as a dramaturgical decision, but as an invalidation of someone's experience. That is why Restart particularly emphasized transparency and consent:

It was important that no one felt diminished or less visible in the final structure. At every stage, we made sure that changes and cuts were introduced with the participants' consent

(Iriní Mela, Restart Theater Athens)

We lead while we listen

Facilitators must hold all voices, while simultaneously making decisions. They need to remain open, but also responsible for the structure, rhythm, and quality of the performance.

This tension does not disappear – one must learn to maintain it. Too much openness can dissolve the structure, too much control can undermine co-authorship. The work consists in constantly seeking balance.

We care for quality without losing care

This stage also carries the risk of crossing boundaries. Time pressure, artistic ambition, and responsibility for the whole can cause facilitators to start pushing too hard. Kobięstosć says this very explicitly:

This stage can become the most difficult and the most dangerous. We can get carried away by the excitement of creating a world, an endless flow of ideas – while the group may begin to lose its sense of belonging, experience disappointment that 'it ends as usual – with pressure, violence, coercion'.

(Agnieszka Bresler, Stowarzyszenie Kobięstosć)

This is an important warning. Artistic quality cannot be built at the expense of safety, trust, and agency. At the same time, care does not mean abandoning ambition. As ZIZ writes:

to maintain high artistic quality, while remaining open and inclusive.

(Barbara Polajnar, Društvo ZIZ)

We move through the pressure of the premiere

As the premiere approaches, tension rises. Doubts arise: is the performance coming together? Is the material still too scattered? Will there be enough time?

This applies to both participants and facilitators.

In such moments, calmness and transparency become key. Not pretending that everything is ready, but acknowledging that tension is part of the process. Sometimes a performance really comes together only at the last minute.

I accept that work will continue until the very end, and I try to talk about it openly with the group – assuring them that we will manage, that they are capable, that where we are now is part of the process

(Agnieszka Bresler, Stowarzyszenie Kobietostan)

Maintaining the group's morale thus becomes not only an emotional task, but also an artistic one.

We build an adaptable structure

Working with non-professional performers – especially people living in difficult or unstable conditions – requires openness to unpredictability. Someone might miss a rehearsal, fall ill, or withdraw from the process. Therefore, the structure of the performance must remain flexible. As Restart Theater Athens describes:

The narrative sections in each part were designed with flexibility in mind, so that texts could be added or subtracted without risking the collapse of the entire dramaturgical arc. No single monologue served an irreplaceable structural function.

(Angeliki Kasola, Restart Theater Athens)

Similarly, group choreographies can be built in such a way that they do not fall apart in the absence of one person.

We connect text, body, and form

In many processes, participants strongly need to speak in their own words. At the same time, movement and image should not become merely an illustration of the text.

The body should support the word, not compete with it.

(Angeliki Kasola, Restart Theater Athens)

This sentence well illustrates one of the most important compositional tasks: finding the relationship between voice and body, between testimony and form.



Photo 6, photo: Angeliki Kasola

A similar tension appeared in ZIZ's work with cabaret aesthetics:

So that the performance did not remain merely a collection of testimonies, but became a theatrical form – sharp, ironic, and shaped by the aesthetics of cabaret.

(Barbara Polajnar, Društvo ZIZ)

Personal material needs form not to hide it, but so that it can resonate more strongly.

4.2 Tools

"What I want to say" – a game

Angeliki Kasola, Restart Theater Athens

At the stage of creating the performance, I chose the tool "What I want to say" – a simple narrative, improvisational, and performative game that I created about fifteen years ago. It was created with groups with little or no stage experience in mind, especially people who are ashamed of being seen, feel anxiety towards open improvisation, or have not yet fully built a sense of being a group.

Tool description

This tool creates a small performance. It is based on a simple text structure composed of five sentence starters:

- My name is...
- I really like it when...
- I really don't like it when...
- It doesn't matter... It doesn't matter...
- What I really want to say is...

Participants are guided step by step. Each of them enters the stage in a way of their choosing, one by one, and then speaks the text, completing the sentences aloud with what they want to say. When she finishes, she strikes a pose, bows, and learns to accept applause – because that is what closes her short performance.

The person who has already spoken stays on stage, moves to the side, and indicates the entrance for the next person. The process continues until all members of the group have entered the stage and spoken their part. At the end, the whole group is already on stage and bows together.

This performative structure gives a sense of security, while at the same time leaving room for spontaneity and personal content.

The exercise works with two emotional poles – sympathy and antipathy – after which a space of transition appears: "it doesn't matter". At the end comes a declaration. Such a sequence creates a small dramaturgical arc in each short statement.

The tool can be used in two main ways. In the first version, the person speaks on their own behalf and says what they really want to say. In the second, they create a fictional character and speak and act from their perspective. Both approaches can generate rich stage material – both as independent moments and as elements of a larger structure. At the same time, participants gradually develop stage awareness. They practice standing in front of an audience, addressing the audience directly, experimenting with emotions, transitions, and various characters – from realistic to clownish and grotesque. They also learn to maintain full energy in moments when they are not speaking themselves, but remain on stage and support the people who are currently speaking.

These skills prove very useful while working on the performance.

In our case, the tool became both a material generator and the final scene closing the performance.

What this tool brings at this stage of the process

This tool was important because it introduced a sense of security – both artistic and emotional.

Even when the main part of the performance was still in the process of creation, "What I want to say" gave a clear and celebratory conclusion – first for the participants, and later also for the audience. Knowing where the performance is heading reduces tension in the group. Under time pressure, uncertainty can very quickly weaken shared morale. When the beginning and the end were already present, a stable frame was created within which the middle part of the performance could continue to develop.

This structure gave direction and support to the phase of creating material and composition, which without it could easily become chaotic.

The tool also allowed theatrical "masks" to drop in the final scene of the performance. After going through scenes of dramatic storytelling, intense embodiment, satire, and transformation, the participants could step forward simply as themselves. Without a character, without exaggeration, without a role – only with their voice in the present moment.

It became a final moment of empowerment: a space of free expression, in which participants could show themselves exactly as they chose. It closed the journey – personal and shared – inviting the audience to see and celebrate the presence: not only of the performers, but of the people who brought their stories to the stage, shared them bravely, and allowed themselves to go through a change in this long process.

Interestingly, the content spoken in the last scene also underwent subsequent transformations, reflecting changing needs related to the question: "what do I want to say?". This tool gave the performance a clear, emotionally liberating destination point and ending.

Context and working conditions

The tool works particularly well in working with non-professional performers who need structure and freedom at the same time. It is very effective in moments of transition in the process – depending on when it is used, it can serve different functions.

At the beginning, it can act as a light, playful introductory exercise – opening participants to the process, helping them get to know each other, and test different ways of presenting themselves on stage or creating various characters without pressure. Joyful, rhythmic background music works well in this version.

In later stages, the tool becomes a way of strengthening voice and agency. It allows participants to clearly and publicly articulate their stories in a safe, closed structure, giving them control over what is said and how.

The greatest potential is revealed in socially engaged theater, when personal narrative is central, and the group has already built enough trust to enter into authentic expression. For the audience, it is also a very important and moving experience – to meet the people behind the stories they previously watched.

When is it worth changing the method or giving it up?

From my experience, this tool is flexible and can usually be used in its basic form. However, it may require adaptation when verbal expression is not possible or not desired.

Possible variants include:

- speaking in gibberish, i.e., nonsense language, which introduces lightness and playfulness,
- replacing words with sound and physical gesture,
- singing the text instead of speaking it.

These adaptations preserve the structure and intention of the tool – building self-confidence and stage presence, exploring emotions, and enabling expression – while at the same time adapting it to the needs and dynamics of a specific group.

What is worth keeping in mind

The strength of this tool lies in its simplicity. A clear, repeatable structure gives participants support, reduces stage fright, builds performative skills, and allows a quick entry into personal expression.

Each person receives the same space, and the repeatability of shared sentence starters and closing declarations builds a shared rhythm, focus, and a sense of participating in one process.

The tool can become a moment of radical visibility – each participant speaks in their own voice, without the mediation of a character or metaphor.

At the same time, this simplicity requires careful dramaturgical work. Without deepening, the statements may become predictable or too similar to each other. The greatest potential of this tool lies in creating a celebratory closure of the process – an experience of a common chorus of individual voices.

The greatest risk is associated with emotional exposure. Because the exercise invites direct declaration, it requires prior trust, good preparation, and readiness of facilitators to provide support.

The format also relies on verbal expression, so at the beginning it can be difficult for people with strong stage fright, a language barrier, or discomfort associated with public speaking.

What does it support?	What does it require?
• Sparks creativity based on speech, action, body image, character work, and narrative material. • Allows the inclusion of people less confident in working with text – text that is easy to remember. • Builds a common aesthetic, leaving room for a great diversity of ideas.	• Attentive facilitation. • Stopping the group from moving to interpretation too quickly. • Participants' readiness to experiment. • Time for exploration and testing. • Guiding participants through the logic of the exercise step by step.

• Weakens the influence of the "inner critic" through play, improvisation, and positive reinforcement. • Encourages thinking about the scene through presence, action, rhythm, and image. • Allows authentic exploration of basic emotions and transitions between them. • Develops the dynamics of entering the stage and the ability to address the audience directly. • Helps overcome stage fright and discomfort associated with public speaking.	
What can it bring?	What can go wrong?
• Co-creation of the visual and narrative layer of the performance. • Development of micro-scenes and performative actions. • Strengthening performative courage and agency. • Discovery of unexpected meanings and Stowarzyszenies. • Building the group's common aesthetic and solidarity. • Confidence in standing in front of other people and saying what one really wants to say. • Awareness of changing expressive needs at different stages of the process. • A sense of empowerment, achievement, and liberation on the part of the participants.	• The group may get stuck at the idea generation stage. • Meanings may be closed too quickly. • Frustration may arise for people needing clearer instructions, more positive reinforcement, or more time to feel comfortable and safe – especially if the inner critic is still very strong. • Emotionally intense material may be revealed at an unexpected moment and create pressure on other people to reveal more than they are ready for. • A sense of chaos may emerge with weak facilitation. • Solutions may become banal, clichéd, or too obvious.

Table 12. Analysis of the tool: "What I want to say" – a game. Own elaboration by the authors of Part II.

SUMMARY

In the presented guide, we particularly wanted to support the development of participatory theater practices in a systematized way using scientific methods, and further – specific practices and working tools. All this to open new perspectives for institutional and non-institutional support towards improving the quality of social life.

We had the chance to observe how many new possibilities participatory theater opens for all involved parties. We care that the material collected in this publication serves as a real tool of support for various social groups. We believe that this type of action can deepen the understanding of participation:

Participation also means saying 'no' – participation does not mean only consent and inclusion, but also includes the right to refuse and set boundaries.

(Iwona Konecka, Stowarzyszenie Kobietostan)

At the same time, we do not treat participatory theater as a universal solution or an automatic tool for change. Our experiences have shown that its potential is revealed primarily when the process is built on mindfulness, relationships, transparency, and a readiness to share responsibility. A poorly facilitated process can reinforce existing inequalities just as effectively as a well-facilitated one can challenge them.

This, in our opinion, is one of the foundations of a democratic civil society, for which the common good, respect, a sense of community, and mutual empowerment constitute overriding values.

We hope that the publication will become not only a collection of tools and reflections but also an invitation to further experiment, ask questions, and develop one's own participatory practices — in institutions, organizations, local communities, and wherever art meets another human being.

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