Chapter 7
The Theatre as a Laboratory of Creativity and Chaos: Youth Participation and Informal Processes of Multidimensional Learning

Björn Andersson and Zulmir Bečević

> *Theater is a form of knowledge; it should and can also be a means of transforming society. Theater can help us build our future, rather than just waiting for it.*
> *Augusto Boal.*
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> *If you are doing theatre then you are . . . I think you need to be really curious about many things, and like cherish that. Curious about society, curious about people, curious about fantasy, curious about ideas. You want to explore things. And not be afraid to expose yourself.*
> *Jonna, member of Theater Kolektiv.*

Abstract Theater Kolektiv is a group of young people for whom theatre has long been an overwhelming interest. To the members, theatre represents a way of expressing oneself and presenting ideas concerning important social and political issues in the world. Acting is also a path for self-development and offers an opportunity to influence others. The group studied aesthetic programs in secondary school and received a lot of support from the municipal cultural school. In the research, we followed the group during a period when they worked purposively to make their theatre group independent of that kind of support, and a method to accomplish this was to stage a play of their own. However, this turned out to be a quite complicated process. The group had to take care of tasks and solve problems that they previously had not handled on their own. Also, this situation uncovered differences between the various members, which had not been obvious before. The result was that the members pulled the group in different directions, and they did not succeed in carrying out the play project. At the same time, extensive learning took place both in relation to the external world, the shared life of the group and each member's inner world. The members experienced their project as an example of

B. Andersson (✉) · Z. Bečević
Department of Social Work, University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg, Sweden
e-mail: Bjorn.andersson@socwork.gu.se; Zulmir.becevic@socwork.gu.se

meaningful participation in society, and the group process illustrates how a lived citizenship can emerge from young people's cultural commitment.

Introduction

Since the post-war period, dramaturgical analyses of social interaction have become an essential feature of sociological theory. Originating in anthropology, the concept of "role" is most strongly associated with and renowned through the works of Erving Goffman (1959, 1961, 1967, 1971) and his sociology of everyday life. From a Goffmanesque dramaturgical perspective, the everyday life of interaction and human meaning-making can be analytically perceived through theatrical imagery and metaphor. The world is a theatre, a great stage on which individuals perform and play roles and by engaging in interactions with others create identities. As actors, individuals are constantly involved in performances in front of or together with others. Their performances are characterized by conscious or unconscious "impression management" (Goffman, 1959/2009: 182–206), that is, activities through which they try to manage and control others' perceptions of them. According to Goffman, people's identities do not emanate from a secluded inner core; they are an effect of the whole "scene" which frames the interaction. They are produced in situ, always as part of the larger interactional context which enables certain ways of presenting oneself while hindering others. At times, Goffman has been criticized for ignoring dimensions of power in the making of social relations and identities (Giddens & Sutton, 2014: 211f). Emphasizing the interaction process from the perspective of the individual, the actor can easily be perceived as superficial, manipulative and without authenticity. However, part of this criticism is misdirected. Goffman (1959/2009: 219f) writes that his theatre analogy is not to be understood literally; the dramaturgical perspective is of course a metaphor which serves to open up the analysis of social life and human conduct.

What is interesting and equally peculiar, however, is that the sociology of everyday life has paid little attention to the inner workings and interactions of *theatrical life* (Atkinson, 2006: 41, 51). Inspired by Goffman, social scientists have been diligent in the use of the drama metaphor to study reality while simultaneously neglecting to study theatrical contexts and cultural meaning-making *as everyday life*, through the lens of social interaction. One of few exceptions is Paul Atkinson's (2006) detailed, ethnographic account of the social organization and collective work of the Welsh National Opera Company. Setting out to fill this lacuna in the interactionist tradition, Atkinson (2006: 51f) simply reverses the Goffmanesque analysis: instead of using the theatre to understand everyday life, he uses the sociology of everyday life to understand the work of theatre.

Partly inspired by this reversed approach, in this chapter we depart from a similar premise: we analyse the workings and multidimensional learning processes of a

young, amateur theatre group as everyday social interaction. Placing the analysis of the ethnographic case study within an interactionist tradition essentially means conceptualizing individuals as profoundly social beings shaped by society and culture. Through their active nature, ongoing interpretive practice and interactions with others, they in turn are continuously shaping and (re)constructing the social worlds they inhabit (Mead, 1934/1967; Blumer, 1969/1998). Here, the term *interaction* refers to mutual action accomplished together by several individuals participating in a setting characterized by intersubjectivity and collective construction of meaning (Joas & Knöbl, 2009: 123 ff). Human beings are engaged in constant reflection and dialogue with themselves and their social context, which implies a concept of *informal learning* as a reflexive and socially conditioned interpretation of internal factors (instincts, drives, needs), as well as interpretation of external factors to which the individual has to relate in any given situation. Participating in a youth group which devotes itself to culture means engaging in a "constant process of conscious and strategic as well as non-reflective learning" (Sernhede, 2011: 172). Self-chosen and meaningful participation is thus inevitably interwoven with multi-layered processes of learning. As Etienne Wenger (1998: 3) writes, learning is "a fundamentally social phenomenon" emerging from "the context of our lived experience of participation in the world".

Following this brief discussion on the intersection of participation in culture and learning, our interactionist approach to the workings of the theatre group will be looking at *how* learning is accomplished through interaction framed by a theatrical setting, as well as the individuals' subjective experiences of learning in relation to this particular context. Both learning and participation are conceptualized as collective endeavours (Wenger, 1998; Walther et al., 2020). The object of analysis is the group, because as previous research has shown, participation in culture and cultural production would not be possible without collective (social) organization (Becker, 1974, 1982). As Atkinson (2006: 53) writes, there is "a dialectical relationship between social life and theatricality. The sociological imagination therefore needs to pay attention to the everyday life of the theatre just as much as to the theatricality of everyday life". Since life is drama and drama is life, the aim of our analysis is to understand learning as it emerges and evolves in the intersection between the *reality* and the *theatricality* of social action.

In the following section we present the theatre group and the empirical material underpinning the analysis. We also present a typology of learning and learning types derived from the interdisciplinary field of youth studies. Thereafter we move on with the presentation of main empirical themes relating to the topic of the chapter.

The Case Study: Theater Kolektiv

Theater Kolektiv is a free theatre group based in Gothenburg, Sweden. The group joined the PARTISPACE project as one of six ethnographic case studies and later as one of the action research projects (see Bečević et al., 2017; McMahon et al., 2018).

The empirical material used in this chapter was collected in two overlapping research stages. The ethnographic fieldwork with the group was conducted between September 2016 and January 2017. During this period the group functioned within the organizational structure of the publicly financed Culture School.[1] Within the typology of PARTISPACE cases, their participatory activities were categorized as being both "formal" and "informal" by nature. During the ethnography, Theater Kolektiv was provided with a rehearsal facility, a fully equipped theatre "black box" containing theatre necessities such as an open floor serving as a semi-circular stage, a seating section for an audience of up to 100 people, lights, a sound system and a backstage area. Here, they met and practised once to twice a week together with a professional drama teacher whose primary task was to help the group transition from the formal organization of the Culture School to independence and self-management.

The black box was the main setting of the ethnography. The group also met regularly in their free time in order to socialize and discuss the overall mission of the group as well as the form and content of their tangible work related to the practice sessions. The ethnographic material consists of participant observations during their training sessions, materials and discussions regularly posted on the closed Facebook page of the group, informal discussions and short interviews with group members, a group discussion and three longer biographical interviews. In January 2017, the group formally left the Culture School, found a new rehearsing studio and commenced an action research project, the purpose of which was to explore conditions, possibilities and obstacles related to the struggle of establishing themselves as an independent group. During this second stage (January–June 2017), the research team kept regular contact with the group and their work in progress. Two long focus group interviews were conducted with the group, with particular focus on *learning* (one at the beginning of the action research phase and one at the end), and are also included in the empirical base of the chapter.

During their involvement in PARTISPACE, the constellation of the group varied. From the beginning of the ethnography, the group consisted of up to ten members aged 18–21.[2] Most of the members had a background in the theatre programmes and drama classes organized by the Culture School. Others were newcomers to the group. All members shared what could be described as curiosity and a passion for performing arts in general, and the theatre in particular. However, given that this was not a professional but an amateur group which came together in their free time to do theatre and try to find their ways into the professional world of theatre, the amount of work and the level of engagement each member was ready to put in varied according to periodic commitments to other arenas of life such as the family, school, work, leisure activities, friends and so on. In general, the group was held together by a

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[1]The municipal Culture School offers voluntary, and free, after-school training in a range of aesthetic subjects to children and young people aged between 6 and 19.

[2]One of the members was male and the rest were female.

dedicated core of four to five people, while other members engaged on a less regular basis.

A Typology of Multidimensional Learning

In order to uncover and analyse learning processes that took shape through the practices of the theatre group, we adapt a typology from youth culture research and a pioneering ethnographic study of three Swedish rock bands (Fornäs et al., 1995).[3] A brief outline follows of the learning model, specifically adapted to the analysis of the empirical material relating to the creative work of Theater Kolektiv.

As suggested by Fornäs et al. (1995: 229–249), informal learning processes through participation in cultural group activities (e.g. playing music in a band, doing theatre) can be conceptualized along three main dimensions pertaining to both the collective and the individual experience of acting in the world: learning that happens in relation to an objective, existing reality (what the authors call *learning in the external world*); learning that is intersubjective by nature and socially shared (*learning in the shared world*); and learning related to each person's more or less unique world of subjective experience (*learning in the inner world*). Each of these main dimensions then contains several subtypes of learning.

The first type, or dimension, of learning – learning in the external world – can be divided into three subtypes and competences which are achieved through active participation in a theatre group: *practical competence* (has to do with learning to handle "general material logistics" like creating and equipping the rehearsal studio, learning technical skills like camera and sound management), *administrative abilities* (such as forming a theatre association and handling all the paperwork that goes into that, applying for funding, managing the finances, in short, a learning process emanating from relations with surrounding institutions) and finally *knowledge of nature and society* (this broad learning category has to do with developing a "conceptual understanding of the world" [Ibid. p. 234] through, for example, political, social and ethical themes the group so often chose to address in rehearsal and discussions).

The second learning type – learning in the shared world – is premised not by a relation to the external world but on intersubjective and shared activities that are part of the social universe of theatre. Acquiring *cultural skills*, such as understanding and participating in the symbolic and stylistic genres of theatrical discourse, is a multi-faceted endeavour which, for example, encompasses different bricolage strategies when rehearsing and playing around with certain themes and materials in order to create new meaning and communicate specific experience. Practising theatre is often a sort of "creative chaos" without a clear starting or end point, where members

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[3] See also Sernhede (2011) for an application of the model on learning processes of a young Swedish hip-hop collective.

improvise, search, succeed, fail, appropriate, invert and play around with symbols deriving from drama, everyday life, music, texts, newspapers and so on. Each participant is a "bricoleur" (cf. Hebdige, 1979) in this explorative quest, never knowing where she is headed in the improvised interactions with her peers. What is important is the creation of a symbolic system of congruence, that is, that the doings related to theatre make sense and are meaningful to oneself as well as to one's peers and that they are intersubjectively transferable, which they need to be in order to make sense. Furthermore, *normative capabilities* have to do with creating a common set of intersubjectively shared "rules for social interaction", including "learning to deal with conflicts and to cooperate" (Fornäs et al., 1995: 236). Normative learning processes of different kinds characterized the working process of the group, from managing and finding solutions to conflicts to discussing and agreeing on what the group really wants to achieve. Normative learning is characterized by a process of openness and experimental freedom through which the group jointly constructs and establishes a "structure of norms" that they decide to follow. This structure is of course never fixed but always open for further negotiation and re-definition.

The third learning type – learning in the inner world – is related to a subjective, embodied world of the individual and can also be broken down into three interrelated subtypes. *Self-knowledge* has to do with learning who you are through engagement in theatre. This self-knowledge is always reflexive and encompasses reflections about one's own social background (family background, class, gender, age, race/ethnicity) and "conceptual knowledge of the world" (Ibid. p. 239) through which the individual tries to come to terms with her identity, limitations and capabilities. Related to this is the *ability to form ideals* pertaining to the life course, future life plans and matters of desires and goals: who do I want to become? As will be shown, for some members of the collective, theatrical experience is inseparable from questions of personal identity and development and thus profoundly meaningful in relation to the past, present and future. The last learning subtype has to do with *expressive ability*: through theatre young people are provided with tools to articulate, express and act out feelings, needs and impulses.

Of course, the learning types discussed here can in reality not be separated from each other. This systematization of a multilayered learning process in a theatre group is an analytical construct which helps us differentiate between subtle learning types and processes observed in the participatory activities of the group – to which we now turn.

Keeping on Through Transformation

During the period when we followed Theater Kolektiv, the members strived to manage a process that involved both continuity and change. The core of the group really wanted their theatre project to live on. This was very much a question of

meaning and identity; for them, acting and thinking theatre represented existential qualities that had helped them to find their place in life:

Many that do theatre, I think they have felt they have not fitted in so much. /. . ./ They feel a bit weird you know . . . I think. /. . ./ I don't know, but I think it was a pretty constant thing with the people I have talked to and done theatre with; they have always felt that they have not fitted in, in different contexts. But when they do theatre, they feel like they fit in. (Anna, Biographical Interview)

Anna thinks of herself and her friends as belonging to a collective of "theatre people" to whom playing a part and acting have always been important tools for self-expression and belonging, though this has not always been appreciated by peers, and finding like-minded persons has sometimes been a demanding search. Nonetheless, choosing another life path was never an option since theatre embraces so many vital areas of life. The engagement helps to understand both oneself and others; it forms a basis for self-reflection as well as for grasping the outer world. As Johanna puts it:

The theatre has shaped me a lot . . . I have gained a lot of friends through the theatre. Also, I have not talked about creativity and imagination, but I realised a while ago, it is not something one is born with, you have to expand your imagination, and everything I have gained through theatre means a lot. /. . ./ And it is invaluable, it is awesome to be with people who think the same and who like exploring the same things. (Johanna, Biographical Interview)

From a biographical perspective, finding these friends who "think the same" proved to be easier with age. When choosing further education after compulsory school, several of the group members ended up in a school that offered programmes for studies in theatre and music. Anna describes the difference:

It was a huge change; it was really fun to get there. It was a completely different atmosphere at the whole school; it was a completely different thing because people had also chosen it, as I had. And largely for the same reason . . . all of a sudden, I experienced that I could discuss things with people, things I thought were interesting, and they understood. I remember, I became friends with someone who had listened to the same music as I had, and I had never met someone who listened to the music that I did. So, then it was really like "What!?", it was awesome. (Anna, Biographical Interview)

It was at this school that several members of the group first met and formed their mutual theatre project. As mentioned, this was organized within the Cultural School, through which the group was provided with professional drama teaching as well as training facilities. This support was important in order to realize and embody the position as "theatre people", and, when leaving the Cultural School, the group struggled with all issues and practical matters they now had to take care of on their own.

The difficulties of maintaining the group were connected not just to the new independent position in relation to the Cultural School but also to a transitional phase that many young people encounter in their twenties. The Kolektiv members had to decide on important questions concerning what life course to follow, such as: Should I go to university? Find a job? Move or stay? Take the chance to travel and live abroad? When we worked with the group during the second stage of the empirical studies, the participants were really at a crossroads. This made them reflect much on

life issues, both in retrospect and concerning the future. In this context, taking part in the research project was helpful:

> *It has been analytical, in a good way; we have been thinking about our work more than we would have done if we would have been outside this* [the research project]*; then I think we would have taken every week as it came. But now we got the opportunity to tie together what we are doing and perhaps become more aware of what it is that we want with ourselves.* (Johanna, Group Interview 2)

Many of the reflections in the group had to do with learning aspects of being engaged in theatre and acting. Using the theatre metaphor of "the scene", in the following we will present these considerations in a three-level structure based on the typology of multidimensional learning presented earlier.

Scene One: Learning in the External World

> The group is sitting on the floor, reading and cutting out articles from newspapers that Gunilla (the teacher) has brought with her. Members start discussing common themes that have caught their attention, which all deal with problems of various kinds: war, racist politics, citizenship, gender issues.
> Theater Kolektiv field notes, The Box, 10/10/2016.

The members of Theater Kolektiv saw themselves as politically aware persons, and they were deeply involved in socio-political issues concerning, for example, sexism, racism, citizenship and identity. To them, it was important that their acting should be part of, and reflect, this engagement. A play should have something to say and, while still at the Culture School, they methodologically investigated media to find contemporary material that could be transformed into dramatic performance. As they saw it, the theatre was exceptionally well suited for dealing with the complexity of current issues:

> *It's like this: I think the theatre is a forum where you can process big, difficult questions. Everything from mental illness to world war. Because it's such a beneficial forum to bring up this stuff in, from all ages.* (Group discussion)

As another group member puts it:

> *So, the theatre is really . . . it can target an individual level and it can target a societal level. There are very few limits in theatre. You can influence someone on an individual level and bring up something that is difficult for people. And you can address societal problems, and I think it's a very good way to also feel involved in society. That you get involved in depicting society through an art form that you like. And as one can develop in private as well as, as a person.* (Group discussion)

In the view of the group, theatre work carries the possibilities of expressing concerns and ideas about important issues on all levels. Through this, engagement in society and personal maturation may happen at the same time. This fusion between the individual and the collective is crucial because it represents an existential dimension of youth participation: a lived citizenship (Kallio et al., 2020).

However, these expressive qualities of the theatre were just one side of what the group members wanted to achieve; they also emphasized the possibilities of impression, that is, to make people reflect, be affected and, perhaps, change their minds:

I think you can influence people's knowledge, people's opinions, people's way of thinking . . . you can influence people to give them a little seed for a new thought or idea by telling them a story or showing something to them. (Johanna, Biographical Interview)

From a learning perspective, the ambition of Theater Kolektiv was to learn a great deal about contemporary societal problems and how these could be presented as important issues that touch and influence the audience. This requires a deep understanding of social interaction and involves a great diversity of situations, relationships and communication. However, as an actor, it also has a very practical side: to learn how to portray people, events and moods in a multifaceted but at the same time clear way. One way the group used to practise this was by always starting their meetings with various improvisation exercises. These sessions were often based on pressing issues such as tolerance for functional variation, exclusion of homosexuals and the living conditions of beggars. During rehearsals, the group discussed and analysed how different characters could be portrayed:

How can we address a stereotype such as a fourteen-year-old girl? Does she just wear pink, does she just talk like this [uses a squeaky voice]*? So, all that, how can we bring that up and make clear that it is a stereotype? We do not mean that it should be, or is, like this, but we kind of push the issue to somehow show the absurdity of it. So, this is really very central: to be clear about whether to show a stereotype or not and where to draw the line.* (Group discussion)

There was constant effort within the group to develop as actors and refine their ability to bring the external world into the theatre, represent it on stage and communicate something significant back to the audience. The support they received from the Culture School was essential in this respect, both for the professional leadership and because it provided them with a recognized basis in relation to external contacts. When the group tried to advertise their project independently after leaving the school, they found out that being young was often equated with being inexperienced:

I guess we have noticed how hard it is for young people to be participants, if we do not fight a lot for it. Most people know that, it's not just about stepping outside the door and "Yeah, now we have a show and a scene and oh so good, and a big audience." Instead, we have to struggle extra for it /. . ./ If we call up the people with power within theatre then it's like "Yeah, yeah, so you are a theatre group and you are about 20 years old, yeah, yeah, do you have any experiences of it from before?" Straight away, there is such a disinterested tone (Anna, Group Interview 2)

Another part of the group's learning about the external world was that the realm of theatre proved to have barriers to entry, which they had not met before. In fact, as already mentioned, being young was linked to a number of difficulties when trying to keep the theatre project going:

I think it's a bad age period, the age period most of us are in, to pull something together, because people do different things all the time. Perhaps starting education, or getting a new job and so, then everything becomes chaotic. (Johanna, Group Interview 2)

The life course is affected by structuring processes in society which link age to certain developmental stages. On the one hand, youth is a very open period when much is possible. On the other, it is a phase when important decisions have to be made and time must not be wasted on unnecessary things but rather invested in plans for a functioning and productive future. During the time when we followed Theater Kolektiv, some members left, temporarily or permanently. Obviously, it was a difficult time to keep the group together. This had to do with external reasons but was also related to the internal processes of the group, to which we now turn.

Scene Two: Learning in the Shared World

> The group is discussing internal dynamics. Anna says that everyone needs to step forward more; everyone needs to feel free to speak; members of the group cannot continue being as shy and cautious as they have been (in the concrete planning phase of the work) so far. The group agrees that everyone needs to step up and participate even more; the forum is open for that.
> Theater Kolektiv field notes, The Box, 5/10/2016.

An important goal for the theatre group was to put on a play of their own: to carry out a whole performance. They were very happy with their improvisation exercises and very skilled in conducting them, but they wanted to do something that was more outwardly directed and would answer to their socio-political ambitions. This process started while the group was still at the Culture School and continued afterwards and became a symbol of their ability to cope with the new, independent position:

> *Because this is the first performance that we will put on, whether it will be now or in three years. And then you want to do everything, you want to show that "we are good" and "we can do it". That sort of thinking accomplishes things. We want to show that we can do this without a teacher. And I think we have also learned that . . . it will really require that we take it as it comes*. (Group discussion)

Taking on a play affected relations within the group. Processes of different kinds were triggered and developed in various directions. During the interviews, when the group recall what has happened, they paint a rather complex picture of setbacks and progress. One thing was that they had problems keeping the group together, and it became clear that there were differences concerning aspirations and motivations between group members:

> **Zulmir** *What have been the biggest obstacles along the way?*
> **Petra** *Group dynamics, I think.*
> **Anna** *Yeah, it has looked different every time actually.*
> **Zulmir** *Lack of continuity. . .?*
> **Petra** *Hmm, we have had a core group that has been there often and so. And then people have come and gone.*
> **Gunilla** *Different levels of ambition, it sounds like.*
> **Johanna** *Yes.*
> **Petra** *I think we had different ideas, with regards to what we wanted with the group.* (Group Interview 2)

One thing the group discovered was that there were so many things to deal with in order to set up a play. It concerned all aspects of a performance: script, distribution of roles, direction, staging and reaching an audience. It became very clear that their position inside the Culture School had been quite sheltered:

I think we jumped to fast perhaps, in this safe world of the Culture School where it was like "Here are your lines; that's the only thing you have to focus on" to "Now you create a full show." I think so; it was too big of a jump perhaps. (Johanna, Group Interview 2)

A priority was to have a script to start out from. First, the group tried to write something on their own, but this proved problematic:

I think every idea we have tried, we have given it a couple of weeks, and then we have analysed it and felt that . . . for example writing our own script. We discovered the difficulties with that. No one actually has any experience of writing scripts, and we wanted to fill it with a lot of substance, and at the same time we needed to make choices. Then we felt we should move on to an already written script instead, because that is also work, deciding how to interpret a script. (Johanna, Group Interview 2)

When the difficulties of writing a script became overwhelming, they found an already written play that was available. The story in this script was about a young girl who was going to write a kind of farewell text to her family. However, the content of this text was not fixed in the script, so this allowed the group to fill it with their own material. Here was an opportunity to highlight all the contemporary issues and problems that the group wanted to put across on stage. However, again the divisive ideas within the group came to the surface:

The big change in the group happened, I think, when we decided to work with an already written script. /. . ./ Because this thing, each of us having a responsibility for a certain part, already there we had ten different understandings about what it meant. Someone perhaps thought "Then I have 100% ownership of this part, and I decide exactly what everyone will do and I can direct it." And someone perhaps thought "I can improvise, and I can also improvise in your parts," so there were very, very different perspectives. And then it was this script thing, doing an existing script . . . There was also a small conflict, if one can call it that. Because some people didn't want to do it, others could imagine doing it, and a third party didn't even take it into consideration. So, I think that was pretty much what changed the group. (Johanna, Group Interview 1)

The task of putting on a play forced the group to introduce a division of labour, which had not structured their mutual theatre project before. This process highlighted individual characteristics and challenged the idea of keeping the group together and making decisions on a collective basis. The new situation also forced the group to reflect on important distinctions between work and leisure, on the one hand, and being friends and workmates, on the other:

It is so delicate, how to deal with that, you can view this as work and think that we are almost like colleagues, and now it is not the 'private' Petra sitting here, but . . . what we do here has only to do with the work, and what happened this weekend we leave aside. That is how we perhaps think, but then someone else will think that this is totally irrelevant, why should we do that, this is just a leisure time thing, it ought to be more personal. And no matter how hard we work towards becoming work colleagues, it is impossible to ignore that we are friends. So, it has been tricky in many ways. (Petra, Group Interview 2)

During the time that we followed Theater Kolektiv, they did not manage to put on any performance. The task was too big and the members of the group were too divided between all kinds of obligations and possibilities. However, the hope that the group would survive lingered on:

> We are on our way in different directions. I think everyone is doing different things: no one knows where they are going to be during the summer, no one knows where they will be during the autumn. I think that is where we are at the moment, standing still while at the same time we know that we . . . now I am talking for myself, but it feels like we know that we would like to make it work as a group. (Petra, Group Interview 2)

In spite of all the obstacles and difficulties that the group encountered during their work on a play, their evaluation of this period was not that it had resulted in failure. Instead, they emphasized how much they had learnt and that this had helped them to develop:

> Yes, but we also felt that we tried a lot of things; we dared to try writing our own material, we dared to improvise, we dared to try to create a play of our own and to take over a manuscript. All the time we tried different things, and through this we moved forward. (Petra, Group Interview 2)

> Every discussion has been good for our group, in order to move us forward and make us realise that it does not have to be in a certain way . . . we have dared to try things out. (Anna, Group Interview 2)

The overall feeling was that they had been brave in not hesitating to take on new tasks and try out unfamiliar roles. To them, this showed the meaning of participation on a group level:

> And then that everyone in the group is involved in their own way; that everyone is needed for something to be done. This is also a form of participation, that you come to the meetings and show that you care and fight for the group. (Petra, Group Interview 2)

Scene Three: Learning in the Inner World

> The group continues with an improvisation exercise called 'The Class Party' which involves the participants playing opposites to themselves and their personality.
> Theater Kolektiv field notes, The Box, 17/10/2016.

To the members of Theater Kolektiv, acting was not just a way to explore the socio-political issues of their times; it was also a way to explore themselves as persons: to get to know more about an inner world of feelings and identifications but also to find out the limits and possibilities of bodily expression:

> It is everything about the theatre. Learning so much about myself, what I can do with my body, what I feel, what I can easily play and relate to, what I cannot relate to or what I am afraid of. (Johanna, BI)

The goal was for self-awareness to grow. The theatre helped them to mentally process things they had gone through and to relate to the emotional landscapes of other people:

When I come to the theatre, I can process everything that I experience and feel. And then I can put myself into feelings or situations, or how I have seen that other people feel, how I feel. So, it's therapy as well. (Group discussion)

The therapeutic capability of the theatre had much to do with a twofold, circular process of acting out and taking in. On stage it was possible to assume all kinds of roles and positions and to use strong expressions both verbally and bodily. The improvisation exercises, in particular, allowed for this. However, since the expressive position changed between the actors involved, all the participants continuously had to take in what the others acted out. This reciprocal process could become quite obtrusive, and the group often discussed what they had experienced after the session had ended. Such discussions helped each member to gain from the exercise, and it was possible to clear out lingering doubts.

Several of the group members saw acting as a very natural and long-standing trait in their personality. They had always loved to "mess around":

I mean as long as I can remember I have liked theatre, to mess around and have fun and do weird voices, and I really like being a clown in different contexts. (Anna, BI)

As a consequence, imagining a future career as a professional actor was close at hand. However, experiences from outside the theatre could change this:

Sometimes I think that perhaps it is not the theatre as such that I like. For a while I was determined that I would work as an actor, but now I am not at all that sure. Now I work with children with disabilities, and I use my theatre a lot in that work. Not that anyone can see that I am acting because I am not, but I am using things I have taken from the theatre in my work. (Johanna, BI)

The insight that Johanna describes is that working as an actor does not have to depend on a theatre, a stage and a play. When acting is truly integrated with one's personality, it can be disconnected from theatre props, and the everyday world becomes the stage. And nobody will realize that this is happening; it will just be a part of social life (cf. Goffman, 1959/2009).

Discussion

We were more or less thrown out of a secure place, from having a confident leader, and then just bang, now we are independent, a bit like leaving home. /. . ./ So, learning in terms of . . . yeah, but in terms of that it does not always have to lead to something tangible; I mean what you say in January does not need to hold in May; things change all the time. And that does not mean it's a failure. /. . ./ It can be part of the learning.
Group Interview 2.

Youth as a social category in the contemporary West is sometimes characterized as being under cross pressure between structuring forces of subordination on the one side and autonomy on the other (cf. Jones, 2009). We can see this struggle among the young members of Theater Kolektiv. There are several liberating factors in their lives. They have recently left school and have time and space to indulge in individual

development and personal interests. It is a golden opportunity to put acting and the theatre at the centre of their social activities and to realize their dream of putting on a play of their own.

However, they gradually grasp that this commitment not just opens up possibilities; it is also connected to new forms of limitations. An independent theatre project contains an abundance of tasks and obligations that have to be solved; things they have previously received support to deal with. The new-found freedom is therefore exercised within a restricting and time-consuming framework of activities and decisions. They also meet key figures in the world of theatre who are not at all impressed by young people's efforts and enthusiasm. Furthermore, aside from acting there are many exciting things to try, such as travel and short studies abroad. The time for theatre activities thus has competition. Time is also not as free as it seems: the future attracts their attention. The youth phase is temporary and should not be spent too carelessly. There are duties and demands for usefulness to take into consideration. It becomes important to really use the time in the way one wants, and the members of Theater Kolektiv make different choices, which complicates group cohesion.

In this way, a new interplay arises between aspects of demands and opportunities, which *reverses the spheres of freedom and dependence*. Previously, it was the formal institution of the school that represented dependence and the theatre project that signified free and self-selected activities. Now, formal obligations are low, and instead the voluntary theatre project has become quite a demanding dimension of the young people's lives. To some, this means that the pleasure has gone, so they leave the group.

Obviously, this is a time that changes and strains the relationships within the group. To some extent this has to do with the fact that it is theatre in which they engage. As Atkinson et al. (2013: 495) point out, performative art is often characteristically *authority based*. There is learning and a ranking order between people with more or less experience and a division of labour that marks different positions. Not least, the director is central. This is what the theatre group discovers when they start working on their performance. They have to distribute the tasks between the members of the group, and this complicates the relationships. Through this process, existing differences concerning ideals and the seriousness of the investment become clear. The question of power comes to the surface: How should the decision-making be organized and how should conflicts that arise be dealt with? This becomes extra difficult in a group in which the relationships are fundamentally based on friendship and a shared interest.

Although the performance does not take place, the core of the theatre group insist that they have had a period of *profound and meaningful learning*. As we have shown, we have been able to point to all levels based on the model we have used: learning in the external world, in a shared world and in an inner one. However, these levels should not obscure the striking fact that learning is so often simultaneous and multidimensional. The formation of a social reality on stage means that so much happens at once: the presentation of a social issue, the assuming of roles, the expression of meaning, the emotional outburst, the reception of the opponent's

acting, etc. Macro, meso and micro layers are constantly interwoven and relate to one another. Goffman's use of the theatre metaphor is about precisely this, and that is why it is so compelling. What is "real" and when is someone "genuine" in a world of constant acting? The discovery that Johanna relates to about being able to use theatrical expressions in her work with young people with disabilities illustrates this.

At the same time, the group members constantly highlight how much their project is about and how it provides space for *participation*. This is partly internal, within the group. The fact that everyone contributes, does his or her part, is a form of participation on a very basic level. However, there is also much more externally directed participation, which we have previously linked to the concept of *a lived citizenship*. This has been defined by Lister (2007: 55) as "how people understand and negotiate rights and responsibilities, belonging and participation", and she adds a quotation from Hall and Williamson (1999, p. 2) that it is also about "the meaning that citizenship actually has in people's lives and the ways in which people's social and cultural backgrounds and material circumstances affect their lives as citizens".

At the core of Theater Kolektiv, lies the engagement in theatre and the project that the group tried to carry through was really an effort to negotiate a space to problematize and embody issues concerning rights, responsibilities and belonging, on behalf of both themselves and others. In their discussion on lived citizenship, Kallio et al. (2020: 717–718) suggest four dimensions as a framework for the concept: spatiality, intersubjectivity, performed aspects and affective qualities. Obviously, the practices of Theater Kolektiv that we have explored in this chapter fit perfectly within this framework.

In light of this, it is easy to understand the optimistic assessment of their effort that the group members articulated at the end of the research period. They did not manage to put a play about everyday life issues on the theatre stage, but they managed to stage the theatricality of lived citizenship characteristic of the dynamic life phase they are in.

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Björn Andersson   is Associate Professor and Senior Lecturer in Social Work at the Department of Social Work, University of Gothenburg, Sweden.

Zulmir Bečević   is PhD in Childhood Studies and Senior Lecturer in Social Work at the Department of Social Work, University of Gothenburg, Sweden.