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Mechanisms of co-presence in repetitive drama studio performances

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When working with older children (ages 9-12) in a drama studio environment (extracurricular theatre and drama education with performative outcomes), keeping everyone present is both an exciting and challenging task. The process towards a performance can encompass several techniques and methods during the creative process, as well as on stage, in three core areas: 1. Impro and Process Drama; 2. Mentoring; 3. Language and Literature. Presence and co-presence occur as a result of focus, accepting, and building which are characteristic of improvisational theatre and process drama techniques that are used to keep students engaged and on task. Students address issues from an autobiographical and collaborative perspective, allowing them to play a part through improvised personal responses. The mentoring is present both outside and inside the play as mentors guide their students, assume some of the roles, and provide a meaningful framework and direction of the play. Fairy tales and well-known literary texts can be used as starting points; they are adapted and transformed on the spot. This results in a creative, spontaneous, and natural use of language that keeps the players present and alert throughout. This paper presents the examples from the Zagreb Youth Theatre (ZKM) Drama Studio's final production 'A Bunch of Forest Fairies' (June 2023) which contains elements of Impro, process drama (uncharacteristically performed on stage), inside and outside mentoring (super mentoring), and fairy tale elements that are transformed in a new socio-cultural context. Such an approach enables the players to perform the same play repetitively with the same intensity and presence as the first time, allowing them to re-explore relationships, expressions, and texts in a new and meaningful way.

1 Introduction

In theatre spaces, drama studios are environments in which children with interest in performing arts meet to work with drama educators and mentors. And while such spaces are characterised by a high level of enthusiasm, they are also often in demand of focus and exercising presence both during the creative process and the staging of performative acts. Older children between the ages of 9 and 12 attend drama studios, such as the one at the Zagreb Youth Theatre in Croatia, as extracurricular theatre and drama education which often includes final and midterm productions. Frequently, keeping everyone present and on task is a challenge that requires high-intensity work and carefully structured activities and exercises. There are many factors at play during drama studio sessions that demand individual and interpersonal considerations of presence. According to Giannachi, Kaye, and Shanks (2012, p. 1), "occurring in relation to situated acts, 'presence' not only invites consideration of

individual experience, perception and consciousness, but also directs attention outside the self into the social and the spatial, toward the enactment of 'co-presence' as well as perceptions and habitations of place". This is invariably true in drama studios as places that nurture individual and social aspects of presence.

This contribution outlines some of the key terms in theatre practice and how we rethink them in the context of drama studio performances. The proposed approach is essentially interdisciplinary. As Erika Fischer-Lichte (2014, p. ix) points out, "for researchers, the pervasiveness of performance opens up interdisciplinary collaborations across fields and disciplines". Therefore, the processes depicted in this contribution encompass several techniques and methods during the creative process as well as on stage that appear in three core areas: 1. Impro and Process Drama; 2. Mentoring; 3. Language, Literature, and Adaptation. By considering the creative processes leading up to the final performance for the audience on stage, we outline the key approaches and elements that contribute to the presence and co-presence within the ensemble. Special attention is given to how these aspects of presence are retained in repetitive performances – how amateur child players stay present even after multiple performances and how authentic responses, collaboration, and play continue beyond the drama studio experience.

2 Presence and co-presence in the drama studio

Research on presence encompasses areas and disciplines in theatre and other fields of study. Scholarly studies on applied theatre and presence have focused on presence as "the essential but elusive aspect of teaching" (Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006; see also Almond, 2019) and developing classroom presence through specific approaches and methods, such as applied improvisation techniques (Esposito, 2024), but rarely both. Many aspects of presence interact in the drama studio setting where the informal classroom structure and mentoring require additional attention regarding the complexity of interactions and the re-adjusting of traditional classroom roles.

Discussing presence in the drama studio and drama studio performances invites the considerations of the classic theories of improvisational theatre, drama education, and process drama. Impro works with the term "Focus" or "Point of Concentration" as its key element discussed by Viola Spolin in her seminal book *Improvisation for the Theater* (1963/1999). Spolin says:

> Focus releases group power and individual genius. Through focus, theater, the most complicated of art forms, can be taught to the young, the old, the plumbers, schoolteachers, physicists and housewives. Focus frees all to

> enter into an exciting, creative adventure, making theater meaningful in the community, neighborhood and home. (p. 22)

Spolin (1999, p. 22) lists various aspects and implementation of focus in workshops that are highly applicable in the context of drama studio work in:

1) helping to distinguish between the interplay of different theater techniques which are needed for a performance, isolate them, and intensely explore them;
2) giving control, artistic discipline, and stability during improvising in place of unchanneled activity as a destructive force;
3) providing students with a focus on "a changing, moving single point within the acting problem" (p. 22) to develop a point of concentration and involvement in the problem and its solution through relationships with fellow players;
4) enabling spontaneous action and "an organic rather than cerebral experience".

The term focus defined in such a way can likewise be used in the context of drama studio productions in which the players' energy is channelled through choice making and problem-solving during the performance. This approach also relates to Dorothy Heathcote's Mantle of Expert framework in which students inside the fiction assume the roles and responsibilities of experts, work collaboratively on assignments, and share power and Lajić Horvat ity with their mentor (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995). Decisions in this process are made by discussing issues and making choices as a team, and in this case while they are on stage. This means that the processes that usually take place in the drama studio classroom are transposed into theatre spaces in such a way that the students incorporate them into the characters, plots, and themes of the play. Presence then carries a distinctly socio-cultural function, one that surpasses individual performance, the memorising of lines, and the expectations of the audience.

Mentoring in this case is complex and requires a high level of expertise. Crucial to Spolin's methodology is the concept of "side coaching" which is a way for the mentor to "hold the player to the focus whenever he or she may have wondered away" (1999, p. 28). It is a way for the teacher to enter and share the same space as the players and with the same focus. However, in this case, the mentor is a fellow player and plays a part in the performance. The mentoring occurs less at the level of giving instructions and more through the posing of questions, problems, and challenges while in character.

This naturally happens by means of process drama techniques. Process drama is characteristically not meant to be performed on stage but is comprised of entering and exiting the fictional drama world through switching, entering, or leaving roles, organizational changes (working in smaller and bigger groups), change of fictional setting, a time jump into the past or the future or a change of format (dialogue vs. letters) (Gruić, 2002, p. 22; see also O'Neill,

1995). In our example of a drama studio performance these elements also take place on stage and the underlying structure and activities are visible to the spectators. Guided by the mentor, the players are presented with problems within a distinct narrative framework, and their spontaneous ideas, suggestions, and solutions propel the play towards its resolution. Some of the key terms in theatre practice are thus transposed into the context of the drama studio in the following way (see Table 1):

Key Terms	General	Drama Studio
Focus	Workshop	Workshop/Performance
Side Coaching	Mentoring	Mentoring/Super mentoring
Process Drama	Not performed on stage	Performed on stage
Language, Literature, and Adaptation	Text analysis	Embodied

Table 1: Key terms in theatre practice in general and in drama studio contexts[1]

Presence and co-presence occur as the result of focus, accepting, and building which are characteristic communication features of improvisational theatre and process drama techniques that are used to keep students engaged and on task. Students address issues from an autobiographical and collaborative perspective, allowing them to play a part through improvised personal responses. The mentoring is present both outside and inside the play as mentors guide their students, assume some of the roles, and provide a meaningful framework and direction of the play. Well-known stories and texts lend themselves well to these approaches because they provide a definitive structure within which one can spin the tale anew.

3 Fairy tales and dramatic adaptations

In a drama studio, fairy tales and well-known literary texts can be used as starting points for stage adaptations; they are adapted and transformed on the spot by drawing on players' memories, experiences, and cues from the environment. This results in a creative, spontaneous, and natural use of language that keeps the players present and alert. In this way,

[1] The elements in the table are based on the specific case study outlined in this paper and the findings should not lead to over-generalizations. For more accurate findings, additional studies with multiple groups and mentors need to be conducted.

students are introduced to the conventions and use of theatrical discourses, yet at the same time they are allowed to do it on their own terms through exploration.

Research into fairy tales has revealed that essentially all fairy tales are adaptations because the "hypotext" (Genette, 1997, p. 5) is impossible to find (Bacchilega, 2013). Beginning as wonder tales, fairy tales were eventually written down, influenced the genre of modern fantasy, and resulted in literary and media adaptations often dealing with the issues of gender, society, environment, or technology (Zipes et al., 2005, p. 182). Adaptation and literature scholars view adaptations as "palimpsests" (Hutcheon 2013, p. 6; McCallum, 2018), which is a conceptualization that invites collaborations of different art forms, formats and media. Accordingly, Robert Stam considers adaptation "a hybrid construction mingling different media and discourses and collaborations" (2007, p. 9). Therefore, Cristina Bacchilega's construct of the "fairy-tale web" where all texts are interconnected intertextually agrees with Stam's theorizing of adaptations in general. This is even more true in the context of fairy tales and theatrical adaptations, where theatre is naturally included in the network of literary tradition, language, and art.

According to Iva Gruić and Maša Rimac Jurinović, in Croatian theatre the two most common approaches to adapting prose texts are dramatization and stage adaptation. In a dramatized material, the prose is rewritten into a drama that is staged like any other dramatic text, and stage adaptation implies that the original text is treated as work material with which the process of putting on a play begins, and then the narrators' and characters' parts are given to the players (Gruić & Rimac Jurinović, 2018, pp. 462-462; see also Botić, 2013). In the case of dramatizations, the emphasis is on the solid structure of the dramatic story which is written down, while the stage adaptation turns to various theatrical means of expression. In both cases, the goal is to find the key to transformation as well as the strategy of bringing the story to life on stage and communicating it to the audience. Nowadays, stage adaptations of fairy tales may be more common (Gruić & Rimac Jurinović, 2018, p. 463).

Scholars of cognitive science and cognitive poetics suggest that one way to approach fairy tale adaptations is to reduce them to their core scripts and schemas as "knowledge structures" and "dynamic sequences" (Stephens, 2011, pp. 13-14) or "a knowledge representation in terms of which an expected sequence of events is stored in the memory" (Herman, 2002, p. 10). For example, John Stephens and Sylvie Geerts have concluded that looking at fairy tales as scripts and schemas enables "a modern adaptation to take a drastically new form while remaining constant to the script" (2014, p. 194). Conceptualizing stories in this way provides us with a definite structure and allows us to observe which schemas are altered depending on the context and times. According to Sung-Ae Lee, the "Cinderella" script may be composed of the following schemas: "a female orphan; physical poverty, persecution by an older woman,

one or more female peers as rivals; a helper; a shoe that, linked only with her, is lost and found; a future husband of high birth" (2014, p. 276). Often the process of adaptation in theatre organically follows the schematic structure, and the changes that are done in the process result from the interplay of different factors such as individual experience, previous knowledge, group dynamics and communication, socio-cultural context, and ideologies that are brought into play. All this may result in a unique theatrical fairy tale adaptation that draws on different methods, approaches, techniques, and resources.

4 Case Study: *A Bunch of Forest Fairies / The Elfin Hill* (ZKM, 2023)

The case study presented for this analysis is the Zagreb Youth Theatre (ZKM) Drama Studio's (Drama Group A6) final production *A Bunch of Forest Fairies [Brdo šumskih vila]*[2] (June 2023) which contains elements of improv, process drama (uncharacteristically performed on stage), super mentoring, and fairy tale elements that begin with the players drawing mental images from their memories and recreating them on stage.

Zagreb Youth Theatre (ZKM) was founded in 1949 as a place to engage children and youth in theatre and dance arts. After many decades of theatrical work and artistic development, ZKM today is a professional repertory City Theatre with an ensemble of 30 professional actors and the Educational Department for children and youth with operating Drama, Dance, and Puppet Studios. Every year, the Educational Department is attended by approximately 1500 children from the City of Zagreb (ZKM Učilište). More than 800 of them every year attend drama classes, divided into 47 age-based groups. There are no auditions, the classes are taught 2 hours per week, and at the end of the year every group has a final production/performance in front of the audience in one of the theatre halls. Some of the performances co-created with children and youth become a part of the repertoire and are performed more than 10 times for a regular audience. Moreover, sometimes the children from the Educational Department play important roles in professional ZKM plays (e.g., Arpad Schilling's *The Ice Angel*, Borut Šeparović's *Generation 91- 95*, Milan Trenc's *Emil and the Detectives*, etc.).

The particularity of ZKM's Educational Department is that the program is not structured as a short-term course during a school year, but children attend classes as long as they want. Some of them take classes for more than 10 years, which makes the program as well as children's and youth's artistic development an ongoing process. Some of them continue their education at academies of dramatic arts (acting, dramaturgy, directing) and continue collaborating with

[2] The Croatian title "Brdo šumskih vila" was loosely translated by the authors as "A Bunch of Forest Fairies" – "brdo" in Croatian can be translated into English as "hill" or "a bunch, a pile, a heap". The new title is likewise a reflection on the modernizing of the adaptation to suit the children's age and circumstances.

the drama studio as young professionals – in other words, some of the students become their mentors' colleagues.

The work at the drama studio of the Educational Department relies on the legacy of drama educator and theoretician Zvjezdana Ladika but is also highly influenced by theories and practice of well-known drama educators and theatre makers like Dorothy Heathcote, Peter Slade, Gavin Bolton, Michael Chekov, Viola Spolin, Keith Johnstone, and the representatives of contemporary theatre aesthetics.

The main goals of ZKM's Drama Studio work with children are to foster creative, problem-solving, joyful, and collaborative work required for engaging with drama as a public performance, production, and theatre; to develop the art of presenting and storytelling derived from one's own personality and experience; and to create socially relevant pieces and therefore actively take part in culture, create it, and live it. Drama activities as such help children and youth express their emotions, affinities, abilities, and opinions; speaking and expressive skills and abilities; imagination as well as creative and aesthetic experience; motor skills and body language. The students acquire and develop social awareness in all its components – (self)criticism, a sense of responsibility and tolerance; they contemplate humane moral convictions; build their confidence and self-esteem; understand interpersonal relationships and human behaviour; learn to collaborate, appreciate themselves and others and in this way gain recognition from others (Krušić, 2007). The specific theatre skills developed in drama studio sessions are acting (to process, experience, and express what is felt and perceived), spontaneity and the emotional spectrum, finding performative solutions, thinking about actions, reactions, text and subtext, active listening, embodiment, and persuasive speaking.

The work of the Drama Group A6 started in the fall of 2022 and continues to the present. There was no audition for the program and the kids had no previous theatre and drama experience. The group is diverse in terms of talent and personality – some of the kids are very gifted at performing, singing, drawing, some of them are very talented at writing, some of them have difficulties with focus and verbal expression, and some of them are shy and insecure. The mentor began working with the group by establishing positive group dynamic through games and improvisation, storytelling, writing stories, and experimenting with music tasks; the main goal was to support the children through collaborative acts but maintain their authentic expression and joy to play. The group has a very powerful energy and creative potential which led to the realisation that any kind of highly structured and directed performance would stunt their energy and creativity.

During the sessions, in addition to other content, the group was introduced to "The Elfin Hill", a fairy tale by Hans Christian Andersen, in the Croatian language. From the very beginning, the work on the story was structured as process drama. The mentor was a teacher in role and the players became so focused and engaged that the process drama quickly turned into a performance concept, with the mentor sharing the stage with the ensemble and playing several characters. Therefore, the source or pretext for the play, Andersen's "The Elfin Hill", was not introduced to the students through reading and retelling, but rather as a process which lasted over the course of several sessions. By using the elements of improv and process drama, the mentor (Grozdana Lajić Horvat) staged the play which was initially not intended as a public performance, but evolved in such a way through the presence and focus of young actors, and the co-presence of the ensemble (or as she said in the introduction to the final production, "This is a very special group").

The original fairy tale is the story about a great event at the court of the elf king who offers his two daughters' hands in marriage to two sons of the goblin king. All the daughters need to display their talents to see which would be eligible to be married. However, the daughter whose talent is storytelling impresses the goblin king so much that he decides to marry her himself. His sons, on the other hand, decide that they don't want to marry after all because they only want to have a good time. The tale is humorously told and the prevailing fantastic elements such as talking animals and the supernatural folk contribute to the development of distinct mental imagery while reading. Andersen's style is playful and inventive, as is visible in the following description:

> The elfin girls were already dancing on the elfin hill, and they danced with long shawls woven of mist and moonshine, and that looks very pretty for those who like that sort of thing. In the middle of the elfin hill was the great hall, splendidly decorated. The floor had been washed with moonshine, and the walls rubbed with witches' fat, so that they shone in the light like tulips. In the kitchen plenty of frogs were roasting on the spit, snail-skins with little children's fingers, and salads of mushroom spawn, wet mice's snouts, and hemlock; beer brewed by the marsh witch, sparkling saltpetre wine from grave cellars – all very substantial eating. Rusty nails and church window glass were among the sweets. (Andersen, 1932, p. 114)

The playfulness, humour, and absurdity of Hans Christian Andersen's style is echoed in the adaptation. However, in order to perform the story as a process drama, some artistic decisions had to be made concerning the space, dramaturgy, costumes, and the distribution of roles. The directing concept and decisions included:

1) Stage setting: There was no scenography and props but a blank surface for the children to draw the kingdom on stage (the background is designed by children, improvised in the moment; see Figure 1)
2) Distribution of roles: The players mostly have a collective role, but the children have the opportunity to step up individually in certain situations as much as they are comfortable with it (e.g., during the individual activities)
3) Presence on stage: The involvement of the children performing on their own behalf, as elves in the kingdom, or as king's children (spontaneity, use of the body, stage images and sounds, creating songs, no background music until the very end, acting style nurturing natural expression). As elves and fairies, the children create names, professions, their personal commentary, while at the same time as acting as the children of the king
4) Costumes: The children wear comfortable everyday clothes in variations of the colour green
5) Teacher in role: The mentor takes on the character of the king, storyteller, or princess.

Figure 1: Drawing the Fairy Kingdom – improvised scenography on stage

The elements of structure (dramaturgy and performance) consisted of:

1) Framed situations: a structured narrative line, clear storyline and scene sequencing (teacher leading the story, the children know the storyline and sequencing, children are familiar with the main idea behind every scene)
2) Improvisation within a particular situation: the text of the performance was never written down and the children never got the script on paper but took the solutions from improvisations they had created during the process (monologues, Hot Seat questions, bedtime visualizations and imagery). All these activities were mentored by means of side-coaching and, during the production, inside coaching – the mentor was on stage, in character, asking questions. Some segments were rehearsed, prepared improvisations (e.g., the welcome presentations/a display of talents).

The loose adaptation that was created as a result of collaborative drama studio work can be analysed by means of cognitive and narrative models. If we look at the pretext as a script, its schemas are: *a prosperous fantastic kingdom – a banquet / ball - the proclamation of marriage and search for the bride – the test / a display of talents (daughters) – unexpected marriage proposal – a celebration*. The ZKM Drama Studio's Group A6 and their mentor addressed the schemas from the story script, tampered with some of them, and turned the story into an adaptation that not only captured the main ideas of the script, but addressed the socio-cultural context of the young players. Instead of the two families, they only featured one – the elf king and his 18 children. The schemas involving marriage and the search for the bride were only connected to the king who decides to get married, and not his children because they are still very little. The display of talents occurs among the king's many mischievous children as well as a celebration in the end after the children have helped their father choose a bride. The test is the interaction of the new bride with the children themselves – who will they choose as their potential stepmother? Essentially, the mentor and the drama studio group adapted the story to suit the age of the performers and engage them in active decision making and displays of expertise which often tackled sensitive topics such as divorce, stepparents, and blended families. Additionally, the ensemble used different theatrical conventions and approaches to deliver the story more effectively and engage the audience.

The issue of presence not only addresses the performance, but also the creative process and rehearsal time. The mechanisms of presence in Group A6 manifested themselves in the freedom to speak and create. The fixed dramatic text is not delivered to the children to learn it by heart, but they are part of the creative process, remembering the structured narrative line along with stage action and movement; they are allowed to change it but within the

agreed-upon frame, which results in natural language production and authenticity of expression, while still retaining focus. By using the techniques of improvisational theatre and process drama, the students develop concentration, accepting, focus, engagement with the plot, spontaneity, and support for each other (i.e., ensemble spirit). The coaching/mentoring happens both on the outside (side coaching) and on the inside (inside coaching/super mentoring). The teacher in role has a very demanding task before and during the performance. Because there is an improvisational aspect to the presentation and an element of surprise, there needs to be a sense of mutual trust, which is developed in the early stages of group training. The focus then extends to the group performing together on stage. In all these segments, the mentor needs to have ample confidence, provide guidance for the group and each individual within it, show commitment, simultaneously coach and play with the ensemble, have an awareness of the audience, develop and maintain group energy, surprise the group without breaking consistency and the flow of the narrative, control the sequences in narrative, manage difficulties when they occur, and provide a frame within which the players can be inventive, spontaneous, and resourceful.

The most prominent improvisational and process drama structures visible in the play were:

- the drawing of the set on the spot to create the improvised scenography of the Kingdom,
- the revue of professions (butcher, cook, broccoli taster) and children's mischief (e.g., tampering with the food),
- providing background effects (Northern wind howling, announcing the marriage proclamation of the king)
- the Hot Seat technique – questions for the king about his upcoming marriage and potential bride (see Figure 2),
- the Yes/No/Maybe Line – making a decision on whether the king should be married based on opposing and neutral arguments,
- descriptions of space and place – "Katarina, what are you sleeping on?", "What is the pillow like?", "What is your favourite bedtime toy?"
- dialogues with the princesses as potential brides-to-be,
- descriptions of the princess – "What was she wearing?", "What was she holding?"
- and story time with the princess (Yes-And style).

With the emotional and conceptual idea of the scene already established, the children had a clear sense of what they were supposed to do. For example, they knew they were supposed to ask the king why he wanted to marry, but their questions changed and were different in every rehearsal and performance. In this way, keeping them on task demanded a sense of

presence and co-presence during the entire process, and these are felt each time the play is performed (see fig. 3).

Figure 2: Hot Seat – ensemble decision-making

Figure 3: Presence and co-presence in 'A Bunch of Forest Fairies'

This approach has sparked some interest in the Croatian Drama (in) Education community. The fact that process drama is played on stage and that the performance encompasses different techniques and formats inspired research into the possibilities of performative process drama by the student of Postgraduate Specialist Study in Drama Education Lucija Stanojević and her mentor Vladimir Krušić, a notable Croatian drama pedagogue and director. The research included concrete interview questions to the drama studio students who played *A Bunch of Forest Fairies* and was conducted in April 2024. The importance of presence and co-presence of the mentor was clearly expressed in the interview. When asked what the

experience would have been like if during the performance it had not been the mentor on stage with them the entire time and one of them had had to lead, some of the young respondents reported, “It would have been chaos”/“It would have been awful”/“We wouldn’t know what to do”. Generally, the children reported positively on improvising versus learning lines, having the mentor on stage, and providing different responses during each show to build the story. Stanojević goes on to compare *A Bunch of Forest Fairies* to other drama studio performances and finds that there is much more improvisation and teacher-in-role elements in the group’s performance, and the drama studio work of Group A6 (which was carefully observed by the author during her research) is transposed on stage with its various elements and techniques. The result is a sense of collaboration, high level of motivation, group cohesion, and the absence of tension and unease (e.g., stage fright). The show has been performed three times so far with visible changes to the narrative and different outcomes, both to the delight of the players and the audiences.

5 Conclusion

The enthusiasm that is built into the foundation of drama studio practices can be harnessed to become the driving force of drama studio performances. Even when the shows are repetitive, they can alert and surprise both the participants and the spectators. The key ingredient to amateur child players staying present and authentic in repetitive shows is to offer a material that adheres to the principles of improv-based theatre techniques and methods, super mentoring, and retelling of good stories. When children are allowed to keep the performance on course or change its course, make active choices and decisions during play, speak freely and offer ideas, and adapt the story on their terms, they will stay present, alert, and authentic. However, the role of the mentor is crucial in reinforcing presence and a return to focus, which is why informed co-presence is crucial for delivering, adapting, and (re)creating dynamic and aesthetically rewarding drama studio material. Even more importantly, it is essential for mentors to stay on task and always adapt to new groups, circumstances, materials, and methods by engaging in exploration and play, being bold, and actively participating in the processes of creative artistic production.

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