The Transformative Drama: The Case of Violence

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Abstract

The purpose is to discuss the project titles Work and dignity life for women victims of violence and especially drama written during the project. The main aim of the text is to present and define the new kind of drama - transformative drama and the way of use it in working with women-prisoners - the victim of violence. The text promotes the new, unknown method of therapy and the result of it - raising the women’s consciousness and their self-reliance. It is also worth to underline the transformative drama is a new category of literature – it is an applied literature. The drama and the method of use it can be successfully and effective used in working with marginalized people.

Keywords: transformative drama, therapy, domestic violence, prisoners, women

1. Work and dignity life for women victims of violence

The project titled “Work and dignity life for women victims of violence” was realized from 2005 to 2008 in cooperation with Foundation Centre of Women Rights and Community Initiative EQUAL. Beneficiaries of the project were women experiencing domestic violence: unemployed, in danger of unemployment, sentenced for crime of homicide on their abusive partners. The project involved 140 women who represented different age groups and different levels of education and work experience. The project was based on the assumption that women experiencing domestic violence suffer double discrimination: because of gender and family situation. Women who served prison term were stigmatized by this fact and as a result they face additional difficulties. In order to reach those objectives authors of the project created integrated system of assistance to women victims of violence, which comprised activities related to employment as well as psychological, legal and social counseling necessary to leave violent relationship. This comprehensive approach needed cooperation of employers, employment and training agencies with those providing legal, psychological and social assistance to women victims of violence.

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Innovative in the project was: 1. selection of the target group; 2. showing interdependence of domestic violence and women's functioning in the labor market; 3. identification of specific barriers and needs of women victims of domestic violence in the labor market and necessity to take it into consideration in all activities related to employment; 4. coordination of work of institutions providing assistance related to employment and of those helping women victims of domestic violence; 5. creation of integrated system addressing gender based discrimination in the labor market and violence against women; 6. use of creative and innovative methods (theater and other artistic activities as well as e-learning) in working with women victims of domestic violence aimed at improving their situation in the labor market. I am interested in the last innovative. Women who took part in the project described their experience on the theatre stage. They got the possibility to talk, in the form of art, about their stories. The method of therapy trough theatre is—as its authors claim—treatment by working with autobiography, which includes past, future, and contemporary times of a person. It relies on ordering pieces of information about herself and expressing emotions linked with her own life. The inspiration for this innovative method was the work done with women-prisoners from the Penal Institute in Lubliniec - the BUS method used in work with marginalized persons, relying on exchanging memories and telling the audience the story of a colleague. The first stage of working with prisoners (the work with a group of women) lasts for three months and the aim of this stage there is building interpersonal relations, arousing sensibility, trust and positive emotions, as well as stimulating the way of thinking that leads to overcoming stereotypes. The second stage of work (three months) is therapeutic work with an autobiography. The prisoner gives her assent to make the history of her life public. A director and a psychologist are included in work at this stage. The work relies on writing biographies and analyzing internal and social experiences of members of the group. During this stage, prisoners write dramas and are provoked to discussion. The person who tells her story is the most important, special and unusual one. The third stage (three months) relies on drama writing and performances. Women are able to share their experiences and work on the drama’s character and role. The study covers the group of 24 women convicted of murder. One group consisted of 12 women participating in the therapeutic theater. The second group of 12 women was the control group. Research showed that an improvement of mental and emotional condition of the women in the therapeutic group, and an increase in their willingness and ability to make positive changes in their life situation. Theatre helps to create a positive experience in social interaction and opportunities for getting rid of helplessness and improving one’s self-esteem, while building a sense of dignity and self-confidence. Participation in the drama-theatre therapy develops positive emotions and weakens negative emotions, allows participants to gain interpersonal experience, to be mindful of the needs of others, and allows them to construct an adequate self-esteem. The performance in front of an audience breaks stereotypes and emotional barriers, makes participants appreciate each other, overcomes feelings of alienation, teaches self-reliance and gives a deeper insight into their “selves”. Prisoners, playing out their past, are able to free themselves from the constraints. Performing on the stage and creating drama allows for a reevaluation of past experience and gives the participants confidence in new challenges and possibilities of changing their lives. One of the participants says: “In the theater group it is very important that this process is fast and intensive, and actually changes its appearance. It is not about sitting and meditating on “what I experienced,” but these are actions that actually change the way of thinking and methods of acting. This is actually a very effective form of therapy.” Another one writes: “Thanks to this therapy, the project, I recognize that everything lies in the fact that I have to want to do something with myself. In fact I have to decide, no one else.” And the last statement from a participant: “The drama, the spectacle, is a clear message. This is the best. It is a simple matter: you can read ten thick volumes and you will really know nothing. After such a drama or performance you just understand and feel, and everything is clear. The reader or viewer has no doubt what this is, how it should look”. Within the frame of the project, sex dramas were written. The first one, Zapach dzikiej róży (The smell of a wild rose, 2005) was written by a professional playwright, Adam Szymura. The drama tells two parallel stories, the first one about the nascent love of a woman towards a man. This love cannot be explained, it is an invisible, terrible power, which the woman gives up to. The second story begins with the end of the first one. It tells the events after a tragedy, and tries to find an way out of the nightmare of the past. Szymura writes dramas based on the stories of prisoners, using the common elements of their stories—alcohol, loneliness, physical problems, lack of understanding of the environment, family, the indifference of neighbors. In the background scrolls regret for lost love. As the author notices, dramatization is a great tool for teaching and

* https://www.google.pl/#q=zasady+bezwarunkowe+poparcia+dla+ofiar (Access: 16.04.2013) — the project’s materials.
rehabilitation work. The drama was performed 22 times. The second drama is titled Węzły życia (The knots of the life, 2007) and it is written by a prisoner. As the author, Barbara Rożniatowska, says: the drama was created among themselves: the prisoners, victims of domestic violence. The third one entitled Pasja. Obrzęd zdjęcia maski ofiarnych (The Passion. The ritual of taking the masks off) had its premiere on 25th of June 2007 in Warsaw’s Wytwórnia Theatre. It was written by Dagna Szepowrońska who listened to the stories of women’s life and wrote a screenplay of this play. Dagna Szepowrońska and Maria Depta directed the performance. It was a play which refer to a ritual theatre. It did not only tell some story but was also an act of transformation. During the first part of performance women told the stories of their life. Several women were the victims of violence for all their childhood. All of them experienced violence for all their adult life. They were maltreated for a string of the years and they had to fight to survive. On the stage each of this struggles was presented in the form of the mask. All women hid their real I, real needs, dreams and desires under the masks. The second part of performance was a symbolic act of taking the masks off. The women finished with their past and they freed themselves from bonds of violence. The women who took the mask off said a spell “This is my true face”, the face of free woman, the face of woman who is aware of her own abilities and realises her own desires. The fourth drama is titled Strachy (Fears, 2008), and the fifth—Czy mogę coś powiedzieć (Can I say something, 2007) written by Barbara Rożniatowska.

2. Transformative drama

Rożniatowska during her time in prison, wrote the drama The knot of the life. It was a story based on her autobiography and the biographies of her co-prisoners. It told two stories—the story of a wife who was beaten by her husband and that of a daughter humiliated by her mother. In the final scene, the daughter and the wife killed their persecutors. As Barbara explained, the process of writing the drama was an attempt to survive by imposing perspective on her life and to find answers to the questions: ‘Who am I?’ and ‘How can I live?’ The drama was not intended to justify the matricide, but was a way of understanding what had happened in her life. Barbara believed that her life could be changed by talking about the trauma—it was a kind of therapy. Reliving the experience of the actual event through the emotion expressed in the drama allowed the author to define her identity by becoming aware of the circumstances, decisions and choices in her life. Thanked to drama she was transformed, changing her negative identity to one that is positive. It did not mean that she became a better woman—she was still a murderer—but she gained an awareness of who she was. Meanwhile Aneta attended the The Women’s Rights Center in Warszawa, and discussed her problems with other women who were in a similar situation. One of the methods used in this group was the performance of a drama by Dagna Szepowrońska, whose work is based on the stories of her clients. Through her writing she reached back to the past lives of these women—even into their childhoods. For instance, in the drama Passion. The ritual of taking off the selfless masks, three main characters (all known as “I”), spoke similar words to those of the character in Barbara’s drama The knot of the life. The wife in Barbara’s drama said: “I do not know what is true and what is false. Am I wrong? If I can, I will change something, but it seems to be impossible. I still love my husband”. And in the final scene she exclaimed: “O my God help me, please, to have a choice. Tell me, please, where was I wrong? I try to be obedient and faithful”. Meanwhile the characters in Szepowrońska’s drama said: “I smother the life in myself as hard as I can”. But in the final scene they took one step more than the mother and daughter in Barbara’s drama and claimed: “I would like to get back my face. I choose life—my life”. And in taking off their selfless masks, they gained their own identities and are set free. The process of reading the drama, of telling their own stories, and then of using the drama as the screenplay in preparing the performance is called by Szepowrońska the ritual of passage, a ritual of transforming. The character changed herself and introduced to others the possibility of transformation as well. Reading and devising drama was a therapy that did not only treat those who created it, but also resulted in an artistic product which could be used in future by others with problems. This kind of drama gives an individual transformation and perspective a social perspective; it simultaneously retained and transcended its individual, intimate character.

This new category of transformative or therapeutic drama—which might perhaps also be known as tragedy—deals with personal development and identity. It presents real, concrete problems. Its aim is to establish a dialog with readers and to encourage them in their process of interpreting the text. To do this it presents observations and experiences, and provokes readers to express their opinions and emotions stimulated by the drama as well as to discuss the attitudes and choices of dramatis personae. Readers of transformative drama can be those people needing pedagogical and psychological support in the field of social attitude, self-realization, or the achievement of
emotional maturity and self-knowledge. The way a drama is received by its readers is important. Active reading, and internal commitment in the process of reading and then of using the text, should lead to the start of the transformative process. The new category of drama can be called applied as well as transformative drama.

3. Applied transformative drama

Stefania Skwarczyńska in her *Theory of Letters* (Skwarczyńska, 2006, 1937) and *The Introduction to the study of literature* (1954-1965) reviewed literary genres in order to find intermediate genres of artistic expression combining literature with life. She divided literature into pure literature and applied literature. The second one brought a reality, true life together with literature, because it contained a fragment of life. A category standing over the aesthetic criterion, i.e. the practical aim differentiated between these two forms of literature. This aim in the applied literature has got a practical purpose. The practical aim is "everything what has got a real estimate and what is planned and consciously achieved." (Skwarczyńska, 2006) The aim of applied literature is not awaken by aesthetic feelings, but the aim has to have a practical dimension. Therefore, Skwarczyńska writes about practical and aesthetic functions of applied literature. The aesthetic-practical feature becomes—as a French philosopher and poet Jean-Marie Guyau, whose theories were referred to by Skwarczyńska, writes in *Problèmes de l'esthétique contemporaine* (1844)—a symbiotic relationship and "the first symptom of an aesthetic feeling is appeasement of needs, the balance of life, the inner harmony and everything what is an elemental essence of beauty." (Guyau, 1901) The practical aim can be a transfer of specific information in the case of a letter, a transfer of certain truths and facts in teaching poetry and therapy in the case of transformative drama, along with fulfilling the aesthetic needs of readers. Applied literature is also literature, depending on the artist, because it is important that the author’s “self” is processed, evaluated and interpreted and presented a reality. And the authors “self” sometimes is more important than the content of the work. The theory by Skwarczyńska has been forgotten for years. It returns in order to justify the desirability of research on transformative drama. That genre of drama does not fit into the description of the existing species of drama. The transformative drama belongs to literature, through the applied literature. The most important features of this kind of drama include: its therapeutic and preventive aim, the author (a person who works with individuals with psychological disorders, or a person with a psychological disorder), and the content of the drama, which is primarily intended to serve a practical purpose. Skwarczyńska writes that the practical, non-literary aim is a willingness a desire to shed the author’s feelings and thoughts, the need to chat or make a contact. And this aim only is identical with the aim of the transformative drama. Drama should be the beginning of a performative dialogue with the reader, but also with the creator, the author. The drama is a kind of applied literature, referring to the everyday reality of readers and authors. The practical, and simultaneously, the esthetical aim of the drama is to bring about balance, consensus, inner harmony and subjectivity of the author/reader. In the context of transformative drama, an author is simultaneously a reader. The transformative drama meets all the criteria imposed on the applied literature imposed by Skwarczyńska: the criterion of purpose—to determine the specific conditions and circumstances of the drama; the criterion of form and content subordination to a practical purpose, and the criterion of artistic exploitation of the material, which means the language, style, and the composition of the content. Simplicity and directness which accompanied the achievement of a clear, explicit purpose can shock some non-intentional readers. The transformative drama is a kind of a statement which takes place in contact with life, and therefore it has to be the simplest and the most faithful picture of reality filtered by the "self" of the author, or the reader. The drama necessarily is clear, resolute, and surrendered to a practical purpose. Therefore, the close relationship between the content and the actual experience of the author is of importance. In this sense, this kind of drama is a kind of performance. The transformative drama is in fact a special kind of clearly delineated model of literary, which is built on theatrical genres of rite and drama (especially classical and ancient drama). The form of the drama is constructed not on the basis of certain delineated *ad hoc* rules, but it is based on models that are reproduced not only allowing to build therapeutic content, to teach, but also to think and maintain dialog. Its construction in every detail has to be built in subordination to a practical purpose. And the aim has to be provided in a suggestive way, in order to change the psychical and psychological reactions of the author/reader. The drama requires lightness, freedom and power of expression, brevity, references to the mundane, which make it possible to reflect the individuality of the author of the problem. The content of the transformative drama has to be tailored to the reader in order to reflect the intellectual property and the emotional and volitional world of the reader.
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