

Gestalt Theatre – Integration of Applied Drama into Gestalt Therapy

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Abstract (EN): Gestalt Theatre is an integrative approach to psychotherapy. It stands firmly grounded in the conceptual framework and philosophy of Gestalt therapy, into which it brings the best practices and principles from drama therapy, applied theatre improvisation and the theatre of the experience. The article defines the underlying theoretical framework for Gestalt Theatre. It argues for the natural proximity and connection of Gestalt therapy and applied drama and useful principles of their interconnection in therapeutic practice.

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Gestalt Theatre – Integration of Applied Drama into Gestalt Therapy¹

1. Introduction

Gestalt Theatre is an integrative approach to therapeutic work. The author of the underlying basic ideas is a Spanish Gestalt therapist and acting coach, Claudia Fres², who introduced it in her final thesis³ (Fres, 2013) within the Spanish Association for Gestalt therapy⁴. In 2014 she started a three-year post-graduate training programme for Gestalt therapists⁵. One of the graduates of the programme is also Diego Marín, who has regularly been facilitating workshops in the Czech Republic⁶ and other European countries since 2017.

Claudia Fres based the method mainly on her own professional experiences. She linked 15 years of practice as a Gestalt therapist with 25 years of experience in the field of theatre, acting training and directing, which she built her method on. Her specificity is that she integrates elements of acting training, namely Theatre of the Experience⁷, into the framework of Gestalt therapy. Further sources for this text are workshops, materials and discussions with the Gestalt therapist

¹ This is English translation of an article originally published in Czech journal: Psychoterapie 14(2).

<https://journals.muni.cz/psychoterapie>

² Her full name is Claudia Beatriz Shifres Berenstein. Claudia Fres is the name that she has regularly been using professionally, which is why we will be using it in this work in harmony with the wishes of the author.

³ With the kind agreement of the author, the work is currently in the process of being translated into the Czech language at the Department of Social Education at Masaryk University. Selected passages have been consulted with a translator.

⁴ Asociacion Espanola terapeutica Gestalt (www.aetg.es)

⁵ Escuela Espanola de Teatro Terapia Gestalt (<http://www.escuelateatroterapiagestalt.es/>)

⁶ Since 2017 we have organised three weekends with Diego Marín, and the fourth is planned for autumn 2020. A two-year course is being prepared to take place between 2021 and 2022.

⁷ Teatro de la Vivencia, Theatre of the Experience, in Czech “divadlo prožitku“, refers to The System of K. S. Stanislavski, The Method of Lee Strasberg and further authors and approaches to acting training which are based on it.

Diego Marín, with whom we have co-operated intensively in the last four years. Moreover, I am also offering my observations and experience with teaching/learning through applied drama, theatre improvisation, Gestalt therapy and my research in the field, where the approaches overlaps. The text integrates the above-stated knowledge.

This article aims to introduce the basic principles of the Gestalt Theatre to the Czech professional society, and, especially, to offer the integration of Gestalt therapy and applied drama to be used in practice. It is a relatively new approach which is at the stage of postulates being formulated, and of being understood at both the theoretical and the practical level. One of the first steps of this process is that I put forward the theoretical framework, which illustrates the mutual complementarity of Gestalt therapy and applied drama. I will focus on what drama and theatre can offer in the service of Gestalt therapy. I believe that this article will illustrate the therapeutic potential that lies within this integration.

Applied drama and improvisational theatre were at the beginning of my journey to Gestalt therapy. When I look back in time, I believe that ten years in an improvisational group and many courses and seminars on applied drama were my first self-experiential training. In the process of selecting psychotherapy training, I was browsing through the book by J. Mackewn (2004) and I realised that she was describing my experience with theatre improvisation, simply using different words. The same principles apply to the Gestalt therapy approach – “here and now”, a holistic approach to people, a focus on the process, creativity. The principles of improvisational theatre correlate very closely with the dimensions of creative adjustment (Parlett, 2003), which will be dealt with below. Those mentioned above enabled me to understand my previous experiences with

⁸ By January 2020 two self-experiential groups of Gestalt Theatre had been set up in Brno, and a third group is halfway there. In January 2020 a group was launched in Prague. The students of the Faculty of Education at Masaryk University can take part in several courses that include the above-stated topics.

drama and realise its therapeutic value, which I had been encountering for some time both in the role of a drama educator and as a psychotherapist.

In the following chapter, I will first explain the key terms and the title Gestalt Theatre. I will describe the concept of the Theatre of Experience, improvisational theatre and further phenomena linked with drama and theatre which are therapeutically significant. I will introduce the processes of Gestalt Theatre in the context of a group arrangement, describe the role of a psychotherapist and ground Gestalt Theatre in the theoretical frame of Gestalt therapy.

2. Through Key Terms to Gestalt Theatre

First, let me take you for a short excursion into the terms drama, theatre, drama therapy, theatre therapy, and subsequently, I will explain the term Gestalt Theatre, as it holds specific terminological difficulties.

The term *drama* has many meanings and connotations, not only in the Czech language. Jones opens his book on drama therapy with a citation from Esslin (in Jones, 1996): “Drama is mimetic action, action in imitation or representation of human behavior.” (p. 1). Machková (1998) states that it is “mutual action of people within a drama play (p. 32)”. If this activity is used for other purposes than aesthetic, e.g. psychotherapy or education, we can, for clarification, speak about “*applied drama*” as an umbrella concept (Remsová, 2011, p. 19). From now on, the text will be talking about *drama* within this meaning. Also, *theatre* has applied forms and can be used in therapy, education, or when addressing and dealing with social problems. The critical difference is that *drama* focuses on the process; it aims at the group (or its individuals). The term *theatre* is used only if the aims are exclusively aesthetic, or one of the goals of the work is a theatre product, a performance. The target group in such a case is not only the creators of the performance but also

its recipients. Analogically, in the therapeutic context, *drama therapy* is defined as an activity procedurally focused on a group or individuals, where drama is used with “healing intentions” (Jones, 1996, p. 6.). Valenta (2011) offers the definition of the National Association for Drama Therapy in the United States of America: “Drama therapy can be defined as the intentional use of dramatic/theatrical processes for reaching a therapeutic aim of symptomatic relief, psychological as well as physical integration and of personal growth (p. 23).” In his own definition (ibid.) he emphasises its therapeutic and formative dimension, the focus on group work, and also the support of personal and social growth and integration of personality. However, besides the process, *theatre therapy* also focuses on the product (Valenta, 2011). According to Polínek (2012), it lies in the overall preparation and the subsequent theatrical performance.

In this regard, Gestalt Theatre is not theatre therapy; it focuses exclusively on the process and on the group itself. When applying it, we will find many analogies with dramatherapeutical work and the word Theatre in its title may give a misleading impression to a Czech reader. Our terminology is not shared with the Spanish language literature as the terms applied drama or drama therapy have their origins in the English language tradition. The original term “Teatro Terapia Gestalt” started to be translated into English as Gestalt Theatre⁹. Therefore, the decision was made to keep the term Gestalt Theatre as the name for the method, which is applied in the context of psychotherapy, but also in education, self-experiential courses, development of emotional intelligence, and so on. The use of the term drama appears at first glance to be more accurate terminologically; however, the term Gestalt drama is also used by Polínek (2016) for his approach. In his text he describes the essential principles which link drama, theatre and Gestalt therapy, but at the same time, the text clearly shows the differences between the two concepts (comp. Polínek,

⁹ Therapy is not in the title as Gestalt Theatre is currently used also in the context outside psychotherapy.

2016). In an effort to avoid confusing the terms or introducing new ones, the English language title, under which the approach is presented in Europe, has been kept in the Czech environment.

3. Gestalt Theatre

Epistemological and philosophical closeness of Gestalt therapy and arts

The idea that: “psychotherapy is as much an art as it is a science (Perls & Rosenfeld in Amendt-Lyon, 2001, s. 229)” has been expressed by Laura Perls. Roubal (2019) describes psychotherapy as a “mixture of art, craft and science (p. 221).” The “art & science” concept is observed in both in the original and contemporary theory of Gestalt therapy. Aesthetic and creative values and closeness all forms of art and art activities have had a solid place in the philosophy of Gestalt therapy from the beginning (Amendt-Lyon, 2001; Mackewn, 2004; Parlett, 2003; Spagnuolo Lobb & Amendt-Lyon, 2003).

Bloom (2003) considers aesthetic values to be “the key aspect of the theory and practice of Gestalt therapy (p. 63)” and states that, “This same aesthetic attitude that creates art and appreciates beauty accounts for life's harmonies and rhythms (ibid).” Parlett (2003) speaks about “the art of living well”. He creates parallels among arts, life, and the Gestalt therapeutic approach as its “ideas and methods overlap with the world of the arts and artists (s. 51).” Similar parallels can be found through the whole book *Creative License: The Art of Gestalt Therapy* (Spagnuolo Lobb & Amendt-Lyon, 2003). The work of an artist, as of a Gestalt therapist, arises both from their skills as well as from the creativity that they put into their creation. Zinker (1977) says that for him “doing therapy is like making art (p. 37)”; he expresses the regret that many therapists “do not see themselves as artists (ibid. p. VII)” and emphasises the creative approach of a psychotherapist. Spagnuolo Lobb (2003) develops the idea further: the therapeutic encounter needs to be developed

creatively, following the principle of *improvisational co-creation*, by both its active agents. Laura Perls declared that “good therapists are simultaneously good artists (Amendt-Lyon, 2001, p. 229).” The topic could be discussed ad infinitum. In Parlett’s (2003) words: “Epistemologically, Gestalt psychotherapists are engaged in an enterprise that is art and not medical science (p. 51)”.

Thus, philosophically and historically, the connection between the Gestalt therapeutical approach and the arts makes a lot of sense. Drama and theatre are forms of art. Fritz Perls “loved theatre” (Amendt-Lyon, 2001, p. 228) and took up elements from Moreno's psychodrama into the new psychotherapeutic approach (ibid.), and Paul Goodman was active within the *Living Theatre* in New York (ibid.). The famous two chairs comprise an element of dramatisation (Jones, 1996, p. 63). In experiments, a Gestalt therapist frequently offers situations that, from the point of drama therapy, involve work with a role and fiction. Drama has the potential to be a means for raising awareness, creating contact with one’s self and one’s life experience in the situation in the “here and now”, and therefore the potential to become a useful tool in the hands of a Gestalt therapist. Offering a client the role of an actor is one of the ways to enable them to explore the art of living. According to Jones (1996), the very act of participating in drama and theatre allows connections to unconscious and emotional processes to be made (p. 3). Drama does not serve the therapy. “The drama itself is the therapy (ibid. 4)”.

Gestalt Theatre as an integrative approach to therapeutic work

Gestalt Theatre is the result of the assimilative¹⁰ integration of applied drama into the theoretical framework of Gestalt therapy based on their mutual complementarity¹¹. Their

¹⁰ Assimilative integration: the psychotherapist draws on one or two main theoretical orientations, takes techniques from elsewhere and assimilates them into his / her approach so that the therapeutic procedure is as useful as possible for the client. (Vybírál, 2010, p. 279).

¹¹ Evans and Gilbert (2005) Complementarity is based on the premise of the use of strengths and for the client useful complementarity of several therapeutic approaches.

interconnection lies in the systematic use of expressive¹² processes in the context of the Gestalt therapy approach. Gestalt Theatre differs from Gestalt therapy in the fact that **expressive work is intentionally foregrounded before verbal processing within a therapeutic encounter**. The psychotherapist integrates in their practice the techniques, processes and exercises from applied drama and uses them in an experimental way within a dramatic play (see chapter 3.6). The process resulting from such a dramatic play can be either directly transformed into an experiment, as we know from the theory of Gestalt therapy (Roubal, 2009, 2019), or it can be “reflected on verbally and further worked upon therapeutically (Šupa, 2010, p. 513).” The Gestalt therapeutic approach provides solid theoretical and practical support for therapeutic work within Gestalt Theatre. Drama offers a practical and safe way to experience contact within a dramatic play, support awareness, and it opens space for experimental work. Gestalt therapy allows this experience to be explored phenomenologically, to understand the strategies of creative adjustment and to identify unresolved matters, and subsequently to process them and direct clients to personal growth. The next chapter will clarify the principles on which the complementarity of Gestalt therapy and applied drama lie. By applied drama we mean especially the concepts that come from **drama therapy, the Theatre of the Experience and applied theatrical improvisation**.

The purpose of the message in this text is not that Gestalt therapy would not be able to exist without drama and vice versa. Both Gestalt therapy and drama therapy have undergone more than half a century of dynamic development, practice and research. Gestalt Theatre draws on this experience and seeks complementary elements that can be useful to certain clients and client groups. The practice and research of the use of applied theatrical improvisation in therapy is still in its infancy and the principles of the Theatre of Experience with Gestalt therapy have been

¹² The essence of expressive approaches in therapy is self-expression. (Šupa, 2010, p. 513)

connected by Claudia Fres (2013). Gestalt Theatre is an alternative way to approach therapeutic work. Drama offers primarily work with the body. Dramatic projection, play, role and fiction open an imaginary back door for many clients to access their themes.

3.1 Use of drama and theatre in psychotherapy

For drama therapy as for all expressive therapies the following applies: “It does not matter if we use movement, sound, image or words, it is always a process in which the form emphasises the core. Creative action in time and space becomes a reality, which can be perceived, confronted with, and changed. The activity as such awakens healing forces and evokes a state when a human being gets in contact with themselves, others or with the world (Šupa, 2010, p. 513)”.

Drama work in the context of drama therapy contains several phenomena, which fundamentally influence the process of therapeutic work in Gestalt Theatre.

Drama is an action, and this action is foregrounded to verbal processing. It is a process taking place at the physical, emotional and cognitive level simultaneously. It is a short cut towards an emotional and physical experience. A psychotherapist working in a traditional context sometimes faces the problem of how to get the client “from their head” to their emotions and body. With drama techniques the whole personality is involved immediately, which is the necessary starting point also for Gestalt therapeutic interventions (Spagnuolo Lobb & Amendt-Lyon, 2003).

Embodiment is closely related to dramatic action. Acting out a situation involves the physical experience of the material in the present. That is to say that “through embodiment, the client presents and encounters their issues in the ‘here and now’ (Jones, 1996, p. 113)”. The body experienced through the senses and emotions can be a source for more abstract reflection (ibid. p. 114).

Playfulness. Jones (1996) indicates that playfulness is the primary framework for drama therapeutic processes. A group meets in a space, where they can play, be creative and spontaneous. We support “playful relationship with reality (ibid. p. 116)”. This all contributes to a relaxed and safe environment. Experiencing playfulness in psychotherapy also “enables authentic self-expression” (Amendt-Lyon, 2001, p. 225).

Dramatic projection. In Gestalt therapy, we describe *projection* as non-acceptance of one own's characteristics and its unconscious projection of it onto one's environment (Roubal, 2010). In drama therapy, the *dramatic projection* is a process, in which clients project aspects of their personality or experience into a dramatic situation (Jones, 1996, p. 101). This is how they externalise their inner processes and conflicts through action. Dramatic expression creates a unique representation of the material of a client and offers an opportunity to explore and gain insight through the created dramatic situation. It is useful for Gestalt Theatre that conscious as well as unconscious characteristics are integral parts of dramatic projection. The group arrangement of Gestalt Theatre even amplifies the projective potential.

Symbol and metaphor allow self-expression and a different form of approaching the therapeutic material of a client. Working with symbols provides an opportunity to access unconscious contents and externalise inner conflicts. Dramatic expression adds form to symbols through embodiment. Metaphors provide the sometimes needed distance from problems which the clients are facing. Thanks to that, metaphors allow clients to relate to the problem in a creative way and gain a new perspective, which would not be possible without the distance (Jones, 1996, p. 242-243).

The triad of the great alibi of therapeutic drama – fiction, role¹³ and immorality – these are the three principles which are the most highlighted by Fres (2013). **Fiction** can induce the feeling of impunity in an actor. It enables them to explore emotions which are normally avoided in their daily life or take actions which they do not normally allow themselves to take. They know that there will be no judgment or harm as nothing from what happens on the stage will influence their life (ibid.). The clients get the freedom to do what is generally forbidden by their introjects, follow customary retroflected impulses or in general, to try new ways of relating to themselves and the world. They can experience first-hand how they would react if they found themselves in a given situation. Fiction allows dramatic projection, symbolism, metaphors and security. Fiction is the primary framework for dramatic work in Gestalt Theatre.

Jones (1996) described three forms of identification with a **role** - summarised in Valenta (2011): (1) *The client is working with a fictional identity which is unfamiliar to them* (another human, animal, objects, abstract phenomenon), so they can say “it is not me”. In Gestalt Theatre these roles serve mainly for exploring the phenomenon of dramatic projection and figures which arise from it. (2) *The client plays him/herself* (in the present, past or future), in Gestalt Theatre in this form the client explores mainly “roles they play in the theatre of life” and the possible ways of handling them. (3) *The client plays some aspects of themselves*. In Gestalt Theatre these can be characteristics, desires, polarities, introjects and so on. An important effect is the embodiment and externalisation of these aspects so that the client is able to explore them in creative way. The work is directed towards the support of awareness and integration of the suppressed characteristics.

¹³ The term *role* is used in the meaning “dramatic persona assumed by an individual within theatre” (or drama, note from the author) (Jones, 1996, p. 196). The term *role*, as understood in the context of cultural anthropology and social psychology, in relationship to drama therapy, is written about by Valenta (see 2011, p. 104-107).

Dramatic work in Gestalt Theatre takes place primarily in a fictitious situation, which offers space for projection and exploration. Real situations (the clients represent themselves, and the situation is real) are entered into only rarely and only within therapeutic interventions. The psychotherapist should be aware of the risk which lies in real situations from the past, especially considering traumatised clients or clients of whose personal history we do not have sufficient awareness. When working with trauma we need to anchor in the “here and now”; it is possible to work with symbols, at a distance, not through abreaction. One of the ways to create an anchor in the “here and now”, is to stay in a role and a fictitious situation – “this is not me, and it is not happening to me”.

Amorality means a morally indifferent situation and/or character. Morality is not relevant (as is a political belief or religion); it stops being a reference point and does not fall into the categories of right/wrong (Fres, 2013, p. 19). What happens, is the function of the field. The principle of amorality has two significant effects on the concept of Gestalt Theatre: (1) It allows for a phenomenological exploration. We can explore the experience with sincere interest. (2) It evokes the existential dimension in Gestalt Theatre. The individual is confronted with the concept of existential freedom (cf. Yalom, 1980, part II) and taking over responsibility for their own life, way of being in the world and related choices in the dramatic action. It is as if we imagined that there were no rules, ethical systems, values, no external reference or universal design (Yalom, 1980, p. 221). It is like taking away a “safety net”¹⁴ (Philippon, 2018). The individual finds themselves in a world without any external support for decision making, without guarantees of what is right and what is wrong, which causes anxiety. Drama provides the clients with the opportunity to try out how they would react if they were in a situation in which they would not

¹⁴ Yalom (1980) also speaks of a “feeling of groundlessness”.

normally find themselves, i.e. to face the problem in an “as if” situation. Fiction and role offer a probationary safety net, which is present at least in practising life situations – in a dramatic play. A person is responsible for their own being on the stage of the world, and therapeutic work aims at accepting this responsibility.

Dramatic improvisation¹⁵ is denoted by Valenta (2011) as one of the fundamental tools of drama therapy as it “better than a structured play reflects the inner state of the client, their conflicts, free associations, and allows the expression of the current state and feelings, develops spontaneity... improvisation is closer to real life than any structured form (p. 41)”. Improvisation is one of the fundamental building stones of Gestalt Theatre. Its therapeutic potential is used and reflected upon by Claudia Fres (2013), who bases her work on the principles of the Theatre of Experience, created by Stanislavski and Strasberg (see chapter 3.2). Further principles and knowledge are derived from applied theatre improvisation¹⁶ (see chapter 3.3).

3.2 Theatre of Experience – System, Method and Gestalt therapy

Theatre before Stanislavski¹⁷ had been a theatre of representation, which mimicked, exaggerated and was pompous. It had focussed only on the external aspect of acting. Stanislavsky lived at the beginning of the 20th century in Russia. His work is based on the assumption that the credibility of an actor is directly connected to their inner experience. “He sought a natural approach to creative stimuli within man, often hidden below the threshold of consciousness (Lukavský, 1978, p. 9).” Stanislavski created a work known under the name *System* or *psychotechnique*, and he changed the approach to acting forever.

¹⁵ Mutual activity of people within a dramatic play without any prior preparation (script, role and so on.)

¹⁶ also: improvisational theatre, improv theatre, improv comedy

¹⁷ Konstantin S. Stanislavsky was an influential Russian director and acting coach.

In the United States, his work was continued by Lee Strasberg, an acting coach and director, who was inspired by his insight into psychoanalysis (Fres, 2013, p. 14). His legacy is known under the name *The Method*. Strasberg (1988) described the therapeutic effects, essentially side effects, of acting training through the Method. He worked in the Actors Studio, and he coached stars like Paul Newman, Al Pacino and Marilyn Monroe (Strasberg, 1988).

In Stanislavski's and Strasberg's concept an actor approaches a role in a fictitious situation as if it were their lived reality. They use their own experience as well as emotional states by which they reach a higher level of authenticity and reality of the characters. The actors had to undergo systematic training to be able to devote themselves fully physically and emotionally to the service of their characters. Furthermore, if we focus on the process of the training, we come across interesting parallels with therapeutic process.

The first building block of the bridge to Gestalt therapy is organic acting, which is characterised by the experience of "here and now", comprising the emotional as well as physical experience in the service of the character (Fres, 2013, p. 14). The emphasis lies on the "credibility of actions and the authenticity of emotions (ibid., p. 15)". In the practice of this form of acting, something intimate and personal moves in the performer, new inner spaces open, old memories emerge from sensory, emotional and bodily memory (ibid., p. 18)."

The key aspects of this training were the work with relaxation, emotional memory¹⁸ and improvisation (Strasberg, 1988). Its goal was to evoke a natural creative process, or not to interfere with naturalness, if it creates by itself (Lukavský, 1978, p. 10). To be capable of the above, an actor has to explore and understand their rigid patterns of experiencing and behaviour in order to

¹⁸ Strasberg (1988) states that what he calls emotional memory has three components – motor, sensory and emotional. On the basis of his description (pp. 94-122), we believe that his term overlaps with what is now called implicit (procedural) memory/knowledge (cf. Levine, 2017, pp. 25-38; Stern, 2003).

be able to change them in the service of a character. In this training, the actor needs to "brush up" his acting "instrument", which is the actor himself. He needs to become aware of his deepest emotional experiences. (Strasberg, 1988, p. 104). "His instrument responds not only to the demands of the actor's will, but also to all those accumulated impulses, desires, conditioning, habits, and manners of behaviour and expression. They are so automatic that the actor is not aware of them and is, therefore, unable to deal with them (ibid. 103)". "The self that the actor presents to an imaginary Juliet is the same as the self he uses in his most private and intimate experiences (ibid., p. 122)" of his life because he uses the same areas of his emotional memory.

Strasberg was sometimes criticised for embarking on a journey that might belong more to an analyst, psychiatrist or physician (ibid., p. 103). Strasberg does not deny that he "crossed areas that are dealt with in other contexts (p. 104)". He describes how some traumata manifests itself by an incapability to relax muscles in specific areas, and he explores methods how to achieve that. He is aware of the fact that it is not possible by mere physical exercise.

As a consequence of the intensive work on the awareness process and the approach through embodiment, implicit memory becomes activated. In Gestalt therapy, we focus on the process of creative adjustment through which an individual strives to meaningfully organise themselves in the field and fulfil their needs (Spagnuolo Lobb & Amendt-Lyon, 2003). As a result of creative adjustment to difficult situations in clients' past, fixed gestalts emerge. These are behavioural patterns which have once been creative, but became rigid and are, automatically, without choice, applied even in situations that require a new approach. A fixed gestalt can be therapeutically affected only if it is activated, which can be achieved only through activation of implicit memory processes in the "here and now" (Roubal, 2010, p. 174). Strasberg had his own term for these patterns - *mannerism*. He thought that the actors did not understand "the behaviour" of their

emotions and the means of their expressions, and they expressed their emotions in very limited ways. He also noticed that these habits resulted from specific life experiences, which led to unconscious habits. “I had to find ways of dealing with an actor’s mannerisms that obscured the truth of expression” (Strasberg, 1988, p. 95).

The Theatre of Experience is an instrument, through which, using the process in the “here and now”, we activate the patterns in implicit memory. And that opens the gate for therapeutic intervention and the possibility of corrective experience.

3.3 Improvisational Theatre

Improvisational theatre, i.e. improvisation as a stage art, has its roots in North America. These are theatre performances of mostly a comedic nature. Actors do not have any scripts, roles or story prepared in advance; however, they build these on the basis of incentives from the audience directly on the stage and during the performance. Even though the performances are not rehearsed as is known from the practice of theatre plays, the art of improvisation is characterised by regular training built on clearly defined principles and the development of improvisational skills without which the improvisational acting will not work. Romanelli, Moran and Tishby (2019) claim that “it might seem paradoxical to maintain that improvisational spontaneity can be taught. (p. 299)”, but regular training leads to the creation of a holistic set of improvisational skills (ibid.). The principles and skills from theatre improvisation proved to be useful in other areas of human development too. We can find them being used in formal as well as non-formal education (Machalíková & Musil, 2015; Spolin, 1986), and in the development of organizations (Van Bilsen, Kadijk & Kortleven, 2014; Tint & Froerer, 2014). In the Czech Republic, the first group focusing on theatre improvisation was established in 2000. These days there are dozens of such groups.

After 2012 the first courses of theatre and applied improvisation¹⁹ for the general public with a focus on personal development started to appear. The popularity of these courses is on the increase to such an extent that in spring semester 2020 there are about a thousand people entering either semester-long or weekend courses across the republic²⁰. Applied improvisation found its way into corporate education in areas like the support of collaboration in a team or development of creativity and soft skills²¹ as well as into universities in undergraduate teacher training²².

Over the last ten years, events and articles started appearing in the professional discourse linking improvisation with psychotherapy. In the spring of 2019, a symposium of *Improv in Therapy* took place in Berlin. Terms like *CIT – comedic improv therapy* (Felsman, Seifert & Himle, 2019; Sheesley, Pfeffer & Barish, 2016), *Medical improv* or *Thera-prov*²³ (Krueger, Murphy & Bink, 2019) were introduced to the discourse. These articles are related to psychotherapy primarily on two levels: a) **improvisation as a therapeutic intervention in work with clients** (Felsman, Seifert & Himle, 2019; Krueger, Murphy & Bink, 2019; Sheesley, Pfeffer & Barish, 2016); and b) **benefits of improvisational training for the development of therapeutic skills** (Kindler, 2010; Kindler & Gray, 2010; Romanelli, Moran & Tishby, 2019; Romanelli & Tishby, 2019).

¹⁹ This text treats the term applied improvisation analogically to the term applied drama (chapter 2), i.e. as an umbrella term for using theatre improvisation in contexts other than theatre performance and acting skills training.

²⁰ The estimate of the author on the basis of personal communication with the organisers of these courses and online research: Škola improvizace (Praha), Paleřáci – kurzy Improve yourself (Hradec Králové, Litomyřl, Pardubice, Praha), Bafni – kurzy improvizace pro osobnostní rozvoj (Brno, Praha), Rozlety – kurzy aplikované improvizace (Brno), Divadlo Odvaz – Impro Academy (Ostrava) and others

²¹ Courses for business are offered, e.g. by. ImproVISION s.r.o, Improvizuj s.r.o, Yes and, s.r.o.

²² Masaryk University in Brno – Faculty of Education: course of Improvisation for personal development since 2015 found its way into the set of the compulsory courses in the discipline of Social Education (since the spring semester 2020) and on the basis of it another compulsory optional or optional course came into being: Gestalt Theatre – course of personal development. The Institute of Pedagogical Sciences at the Faculty of Arts has been offering improvisational workshops since 2016. Meanwhile, these became compulsory options courses for students of the MA programmes at the Faculty of Natural Sciences.

²³ Abbreviation from *therapeutic improv*

Krueger, Murphy and Bink (2019) published a replicable clinical study of a short intervention programme with psychiatric patients suffering from anxiety and depressions. The results show a comparable efficacy in symptom reduction as in treatment using the CBT approach (p. 624) in a shorter period of time (p. 625). Two research studies focus on the treatment of social anxiety (Felsman, Seifert & Himle, 2019; Sheesley, Pfeffer & Barish, 2016). Krueger, Murphy and Bink (2019) formulate the assumption that improv-based interventions show “great promise in the field of mental health treatment to address common psychiatric conditions (p. 625).” These processes already have “strong theoretical support” (Felsman, Seifert & Himle, 2019); however, empirical research is in its infancy.

A lot has been published about the need for creativity, spontaneity and the capability of improvisation on the part of a psychotherapist in the literature on Gestalt therapy (e.g. Amendt-Lyon, 2001, 2003; Parlett, 2003; Spagnuolo Lobb, 2003; Zinker, 1977) and the cultivation of these skills presents a challenge for educational institutes as well as for psychotherapists in practice. The explicit connection between these skills in psychotherapy and improv theatre comes from the psychoanalytic environment (Kindler, 2010; Kindler & Gray, 2010; Ringstrom, 2001). Kindler and Gray (2010) point to the fact that “there are compelling parallels between the creative and spontaneous moments that occur in the therapeutic encounter and in a two-person drama improvisation found in theatre training (p. 254)” and they point towards the idea that improvisational training could be a method to enhance therapeutic skills. Recent research supports this hypothesis (Romanelli, Moran & Tishby, 2019; Romanelli & Tishby, 2019). Romanelli, Moran and Tishby (2019) highlight that “theatre improvisation and psychotherapy share the same focus of relational, co-created action (p. 296).” Such a dialogic principle in Gestalt therapy is called *improvisational co-creation* by Spagnuolo Lobb (2003) and she links it with implicit relational

knowledge (Spagnuolo Lobb, 2013a, p. 29; Stern, 2003). If the client and the psychotherapist are fully in the present moment, i.e. devoted to the mutual contact that they co-create, so-called *now moments* may arise from the implicit relational processes (Stern, 2004). *Now moments* in psychotherapy are the critical moments which contain the potential of change through contact with the contents of the implicit relational knowledge. Romanelli, Moran and Tishby (2019) introduce the term *Improvisation experiences* for those moments, which are essential for the therapeutical process, because these are situations which open the space for therapeutical experiment. In their research, they reach the conclusion that theatre improvisation skills can increase psychotherapists' ability to "achieve and create I'mprovisational moments in their sessions (p. 299)." A pilot study in the education of social workers (Romanelli and Tishby 2019) suggests that improvisational training increases flexibility, therapeutic presence and other factors supporting the therapeutic alliance. Kindler and Gray (2010) state that "the skill of improvisation, essential in theatrical training, contributes significantly to the psychoanalytic process (p. 264)" because it supports the spontaneity and authenticity of the therapeutic encounter – aspects highly valued in the Gestalt therapeutic approach. Bermant (2013) creates a parallel between the basic improvisational stance and the concept of unconditional positive regard and assumes that improvisational training can help psychotherapists to develop this ability.

The core improvisational principle "**Yes and...**" is improvisational co-creation at its core. It is precisely this principle that Bermant (2013) links to unconditional positive regard in the humanistic approach (p. 3), and yet there is more involved in the principle. "Yes and..." involves attentive listening, full acceptance of situation and the partner. Improvisation is mostly practised in a group. Sheesley, Pfeffer and Barish (2016) describe the support of group cohesiveness as an essential part of improvisation training and, simultaneously, the most crucial component of CIT.

If we transfer the principle “Yes and…” to the group process, we obtain an accepting supporting environment (ibid.). It is also true in improvisation that play is an essential phenomenon, which, with increasing security in the group, opens up space for humour and laughter. The procedures in CIT explicitly highlight humour and laughter as a component of the therapeutic process (ibid.).

3.4 Improvisation in the theory of Gestalt therapy – supporting the dimensions of creative adjustment

Improvisation encourages the release of inner creativity and supports individuals in their distinctive way of self-expression (Spolin, 1999). “Being creative is synonymous with normality in human nature (Spagnuolo Lobb & Amendt-Lyon, 2003, p. VIII)”. “Creativity characterises the individual’s spontaneous adjustment to his or her environment (ibid.)”. In the concept of Gestalt therapy creativity is “considered to be a quality of spontaneous adaptation in interpersonal processes, as well as an important ingredient of healthy social living (ibid., p. IX).” Regarding improvisational principles and skills, we have already mentioned flexibility, spontaneity, the ability to react to a new, unexpected situation and improvisational co-creation. The list is remarkably similar to the Gestalt therapeutic concept of **creative adjustment**. Parlett (2003) emphasises the importance of creative adjustment by declaring that the whole of life is improvisation. He describes five abilities – dimensions of creative adjustment: (1) the ability to *respond* to the existing field and the ability to self-organise within it, (2) the ability to *interrelate* with others, (3) the ability to *self-recognise*, (4) the ability to *embody*, (5) the ability to *experiment*. Even the simplest improvisational games contain these five elements. Improvisational spontaneity contains the essence of creative adjustment, i.e. “the moment of personal freedom, when we are faced with a reality and see it, explore it and act accordingly. In this reality the bits and pieces of

ourselves function as an organic whole. It is the time of discovery, of experiencing, of creative expression (Spolin, 1999, s. 4)". With a little exaggeration, we could say that **practising improvisation is something like attending a creative adjustment gym as improvisational training develops and activates its dimensions.**

Improvisation enables us to observe what happens at the contact boundary, raise our awareness and identify problems in the five above mentioned areas. It reveals contact styles, fixed gestalts, addresses unfinished issues that are dormant in the background so that they can be activated in the newly organized field of the improvisational scene. We agree with Parlett (2003) that "improvisation, as we know it from jazz or improvisational theatre, is a pure experiment (p. 61)", and experiment is a method that is suitable for the therapeutical processing of fixed gestalts (Roubal, 2009). The focus on "here and now" allows us to be fully present in situations with the qualities of "now moments", when a possibility to influence the implicit relational memory occurs (Romanelli, Moran & Tishby, 2019). In western societies, it is typical that many people have over-active self-critical thinking patterns that lead to self-degradation (Parlett, 2003, p. 55). The environment of an accepting group leads clients to question their conviction that they are "basically repugnant, unacceptable or unlovable (Yalom in Sheesley, Pfeffer a Barish, 2016, p. 160)". In CIT the clients are deliberately exposed to the possibility of experiencing embarrassing feelings because the improvisational exercises intentionally aim at confronting the barriers of creative expression. "Creativity is an act of bravery. It states: I am willing to risk ridicule and failure... (Zinker, 1977, p. 3)." Becoming aware of the processes resulting from introjects and shame that some clients are bound by is the first step towards disrupting them. A natural part of the process is the integration of such experiences in the context of an accepting group (Sheesley, Pfeffer and Barish, 2016, p. 163).

In her description of the last generation of clients, Spagnuolo Lobb (2013a) talks about the absence of intimate relationship, as most of their contacts take place in the virtual space of social networks, they lack physical contact, have problems creating bonds and are disconnected from physical experiencing. For many, it is difficult to perceive the other as the field is full of anxiety and worries. The response of the therapy is supporting the process of contacting, re-sensitisation of the body and awareness to what is happening at the contact boundary - being healthy means experiencing the warmth of intimate relationships, emotional and bodily responses towards another human being (Spagnuolo Lobb, 2013a, p. 27-28). The improvisational practice responds by providing a safe space that is characterized by playful approach. It consists in an atmosphere of unconditional acceptance, in which the "fear of failure loses its sting" (Bermant, 2013, p. 4). To enter into improvisation means to be in contact with another person with your whole personality, in a way that is not threatening. This enables anxieties to recede into the background and frees the space for creative expression, experiment and experiencing intimate feelings of interrelatedness, mutuality and co-creation in one-to-one contact. Work with the body compensates for desensitization and allows safe physical contact.

It is for these reasons that improvisation is (in all its forms described in chapters 3.1-3.3) the basic instrument of Gestalt Theatre. It can be supportive, interconnecting, offering excitement, contact and the joy of creativity, which clients sometimes find difficult to allow themselves to experience, if there is not the protective bubble of a role, fiction and play. On the other hand, it provides the opportunity to raise awareness concerning the problems in contact either with others or with ourselves and to influence the implicit relational memory. The characteristics and skills connected with improvisation, such as creativity, co-creating, experiment, spontaneity are also

desirable in Gestalt psychotherapy (cf. Parlett, 2003; Roubal, 2009; Spagnuolo Lobb, 2003; Zinker, 1977) and dramatic improvisation has tools to develop them.

3.5 Gestalt Theatre in Group Arrangement

In the rest of the text, we will refer primarily to the group arrangement, which is very advantageous for the Gestalt Theatre. Using Gestalt Theatre in the individual therapy is possible, though still somewhat uncommon. However, Fres (2013) offers examples of individual therapy using Gestalt Theatre approach.

The group has high projective potential; group dynamics support the process, and possibilities for contacting and interrelating are significantly wider. Improvisation provides a secure, accepting environment for spontaneous and authentic self-expression (see chapter 3.3). A group can move towards becoming a social microcosm (comp. Yalom & Leszcz, 2007, p. 51). In Gestalt Theatre, we emphasise in group process “both symbiotic layers” described by Yalom and Leszcz (2007). Through experimental work with drama, we focus on “here and now”, which is “the key concept of group therapy (ibid., p. 49).” We focus on what is happening in a given moment in a dramatic situation in the field of the group. The second symbiotic layer is reflection, the verbal processing of the material which emerged in the process. “The reflective loop is necessary if the emotional experience is to become a therapeutic force (ibid.).” Working with both the layers is inherent in Gestalt therapy: it is the creative movement between the dialogue and the experiment (cf. Roubal, 2009, 2019; see chapter 3.6). Clients, therefore, can go through the pure experience, live in “here and now”, experiment and reflect on this experience, explore it phenomenologically, understand it and integrate it.

3.6 Experimental Process Arising from Dramatic Techniques – Induced Experiment

In chapter 3 it was stated that in the Gestalt Theatre “we integrate techniques, processes and exercises from applied drama and use them in an experimental way within the dramatic play”. The differences between exercise/technique and experiment are defined by Roubal (2009, 2019) and Zinker (1977).

The authors (ibid.) talk about the techniques and exercises in such a way that they do not primarily emerge from the process; they are prepared in advance and have established procedures and a purpose. A psychotherapist “can employ [techniques]²⁴ if they want to induce a particular state or to direct the client to a particular aim (Roubal, 2019, p. 224).” Their overuse or inappropriate application poses a risk of rigidity and may reduce attention to the processual aspect of the work. On the other hand, the experiment emerges from the process, and its result cannot be predicted (Zinker, 1977). It is a joint “creative adventure” (Roubal, 2019, p. 224) of a psychotherapist and a client (or a group), requiring curiosity, acceptance of uncertainty and a willingness to take risks. The therapist suggests to the client, “Do this, to see what you experience,” and not, “Do this in order to change” (Greenberg in Roubal, 2019, s. 224) while accepting responsibility for actively offering the structure and task which develops into the experiment (Roubal, 2009, p. 266). The experiment is “integral part of Gestalt therapy” (Roubal, 2019, p. 221).

In the same place, Roubal (2019) further states that “techniques can be used as an inspiration for experiment” (p. 225). “If the therapists stays open in the here-and-now therapy situation with the client... the ‘frozen technique’ can be ‘warmed up’ again into a creative experiment (ibid.).” In Gestalt Theatre we use dramatic techniques, exercises and processes; however, we work with them in the spirit of “try, and you will see what you experience”; we do

²⁴ author’s note

not expect any specific outcome, but a new experience. We invite our clients on an adventurous journey, which activates creative processes. Coming back to Parlett (2003) – “improvisation is a pure experiment (p. 61)”, we do not know in advance what is going to happen, what we will experience or what the result will be.

In Gestalt therapy the experiment emerges from the process. In Gestalt Theatre the process emerges from the experimental approach to dramatic techniques. With the use of fiction, roles, and play we create a new projective field, within which through the offered structure we create an opportunity for experimenting. It is as if we built a playground for our clients, indicated the basic rules, but did not say how exactly the game should be played or how it is supposed to end. And because the literature does not offer a suitable term for this procedure, I offer my own: **induced experiment**.

Induced²⁵ experiment initially has the attributes of a technique; it does not necessarily emerge from the process, but it is offered to clients, and it can be prepared in advance. It is “a particular structured task” with “open outcome” (cf. Roubal, 2009, p. 268). Through the magic of fiction, clients can, using symbols and metaphors, go through an imaginary door to another dimension of the group field, e.g. become an animal for a while and spend a day in its skin (see chapter 3.7 C). By creating such a context, we create an experimental space, in which the clients improvise. Thanks to the dramatic projection, the figures that organize the field begin to emerge from the consciously and unconsciously projected contents. The distance through the symbolism and metaphors allows the clients to safely widen their awareness, get in touch with their needs, and experiment with “relating differently to the problem by creating new perspective (Jones, 1996, p. 243).”

²⁵ Intentionally created

Such an experimental process can either be allowed to take place and further worked through therapeutically after completion, or the process can be directly developed as an experiment in the spirit of the theory of the Gestalt therapeutic approach. An indispensable part of Gestalt Theatre is, however, preparation for the experimental work and its subsequent integration. We work carefully on finding an optimal balance between the supportive dialogic approach and the experimental approach, which brings novelty, challenges, excitement, uncertainty, risk and creative process. According to Roubal (2009, 2019), these are the two opposing poles of the same, and the task for the psychotherapist as the facilitator of the process is not to let the imaginary pendulum swing too much to one side or the other. “The contribution of the Gestalt approach is the therapist’s flexibility in the differentiated use of both of these polarities, the continuous creative movement between them, depending on the situation “here and now” in the therapeutic relationship (Roubal, 2009, p. 269).”

3.7 Structure of Gestalt Theatre Encounter in a Group Arrangement

Group work within the Gestalt Theatre method is structured into units, which are in accordance with the contact cycle. In the case of long-term groups the typical length of one encounter is between four and five hours at a frequency of once every three weeks to a month. For weekend and intensive training courses, the daily work is also structured into half-day or all-day units. The encounters can be both thematic and processual.

In the background of Figure 1. is the contact cycle²⁶ (Roubal, 2010, p. 182); the upper layer is the typical structure of an encounter (described below). On the bottom line is the intended path

²⁶ Roubal uses Zinker’s model (2004) revised by other authors (Mackewn, 2004; Woldt, Toman, 2005; Joyce, Sills, 2006)

from the dialogical principle through experimental structured activities back to the dialogical principle in the group (cf. Roubal 2009, also a focus on the relationship and a focus on the task).

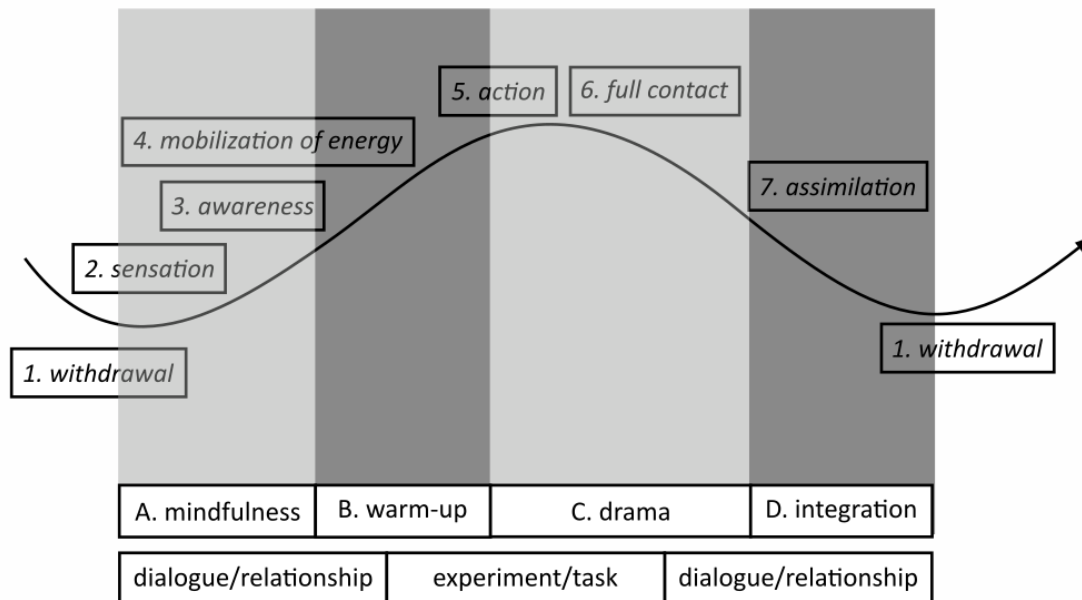


Figure 1: Structure of Gestalt Theatre Encounter

A) A moment of mindfulness. The meaning of the introductory part is to enable clients to disengage from the day and its worries and joys (*withdrawal*), with which they come. To concentrate for a moment on the breath, get in contact with themselves and notice the *sensations* which come from the body, emotions and mind. The meditation leads to *awareness*: “Realise how you are right here and now.” Subsequently, every participant has the opportunity to share what they become aware of. It is their first step into a group space. It gives us information about which figures are emerging / are present within the field. This may be followed by space for sharing what are the participants coming to the group with or the ongoing processes from the previous sessions.

B) Warm-up. The aim is to involve the body and senses in the process, to deepen the *awareness* and *mobilise energy* for the main part of the encounter. This section usually contains very few

words, is interactive, invites the participants to make contact in the field of the group. It can have the form of a dance, interactive dramatic exercises, improvisation. Ideally, it gradually prepares the ground for the third part. The imaginary pendulum swings slowly in the direction towards an experiment. For example, if the main topic of the encounter is going to be polarities, the clients can be invited to a Mirror activity. The work can then take place in pairs, where one person makes a move or offers an activity through pantomime, which the other reflects as a specific mirror (e.g. mirror of anger or sensuality). After the end of the second part, there is usually space for reflective diaries, work in smaller groups or whole group reflection.

C) Drama. Through dramatic *action*, usually improvisation, which aims to activate the implicit memory in the process of “here and now”. In this main part of the encounter, we use the induced experiment described in the previous chapter. The psychotherapist offers a structure (task), to allow a group process. The members of the group enter the field through improvisation and co-create the experience from which the figures emerge (*contact*).

Examples: (1) in controlled imagination, clients find an animal which they transform into. This is followed by group improvisation called “a day in the life of the animal”, when the clients meet in the roles of animals in the nature. Such a setting offers huge space for dramatic projection. (2) The psychotherapist offers the topic of polarities. Within their work in small groups, the clients themselves choose the polarities with which they want to work. These are first sculpted as statues of both poles²⁷. We continue with group improvisation called “night in the museum”. Each client first places themselves as one of the statues in the museum and with music the whole exhibition “comes to life” and thus the clients enter an improvised experiment. In the role the clients represent

²⁷. We invite the clients to try to go to extremes in their polarities. We start from the principle described by Zinker (1977, p. 202-206) "stretching the self-concept".

an aspect of their personality. We repeat it also for the second polarity. During the whole process, we aim to raise awareness through physical and emotional experience.

At the end of the dramatic part, there is room for the integration of experience in the main part of the encounter. From the experimental work, we go back to dialogue. The contact cycle curve points downwards, and the *assimilation* phase begins. Space opens for reflective diaries, reflection on the activity in smaller groups and creating connections between the experience in “here and now” and life experience outside the group.

D) Integration. In Gestalt Theatre it is essential to pay proper attention to the *assimilation* part. When looking at the contact cycle, it is spread over almost a third of it. We leave the roles and fictitious space to bring the processes to closure. We calm the body, emotions and the mind. An integral part of the final phase is usually some form of physical relaxation, massage, diaries or drawing. Group sharing follows. It provides space to therapeutically develop the processes from the previous part and bring them to closure. The imaginary full stop at the end is a small ritual. *Withdrawal.*

3.8 The Role of a Psychotherapist in Gestalt Theatre

The basic task of a psychotherapist in the Gestalt Theatre process is to hold the ground for group work, i.e. to take care of safe space, relationships and to create a favourable base, from which figural elements can later grow. The psychotherapist offers a structure but does not enter the process with a defined goal. It is favourable if they can step back and trust the group process. Psychotherapist works phenomenologically, focuses attention on the field of the group and helps to sharpen the figures.

They get into a more active role in moments when the clients are in contact with their issues either in improvisations or during the reflective part. The psychotherapist can support the figure

using interventions, help to raise awareness, foster an experiment and offer support for a corrective experience. They can also enter the process in a role and become a partner in a scene, as is common in drama therapy practice (Dočkal, 2010).

3.9 Target Groups

For the time being, it is common practice to work with clients who come to support their personal growth. The above-mentioned studies from the field of applied theatre improvisation also show promise for working with clients with less severe psychological difficulties, specifically with anxious and depressed clients (chapter 3.3). In general, Gestalt Theatre seems to be a suitable and accessible method for clients, whom we could describe as clients with difficulties in the neurotic spectrum. For clients who survived a trauma, it depends on the type of traumatic experience and the difficulties they experience. Here we advocate for an individual approach and assessment.

The use of Gestalt Theatre with patients with more severe psychiatric diagnoses has not yet been the subject of practice or research. We assume that working with clients with a disturbed relationship to reality would be risky. Caution is appropriate with clients with PTSD, and strongly aggressive behaviour on the client's side can also be considered a barrier to joining a therapeutic group (Dočkal, 2010).

3.10 Summary of the Functional Principles of Gestalt Theatre in the Context of Gestalt Theory

This chapter is based on the relational approach of Gestalt therapy (Francesetti, Gecele & Roubal, 2013a), which views healthy, neurotic as well as psychopathological ways of being in the world as “a co-created phenomenon of the field that emerges at the contact boundary (Greenberg, 2013, p. 12)”. We can say that “experience is as healthy as the person’s ability to be present and aware at the contact boundary, and that neurotic and psychotic experiences are two different ways

of being absent from the contact boundary (Francesetti, Gecele & Roubal, 2013b, p. 63)”, this absence is a result of creative adjustment to a difficult field (ibid., p. 67). For the purposes of this text, we will focus only on the dimensions of healthy and neurotic contacting.

The Gestalt therapy approach in diagnostics “focuses on the modality of contact (Spagnuolo Lobb, 2013a, p. 49-50)”. It operates with an “intrinsic criterion²⁸ to evaluate the experience (Francesetti, Gecele & Roubal, 2013b, p. 63)”. We can “directly feel how good is the Gestaltung - the process of figure forming (ibid., p. 64). “A healthy experience is an experience of a good Gestalt that has grace, strength, harmony, rhythm, fluidity, intensity, etc. This criterion is aesthetic because it is an implicit knowledge that comes immediately from our senses (ibid., p. 64)”, it “has its genesis before language (Francesetti, 2012, p. 6)” and is not “a cognitive judgment” (Francesetti, Gecele & Roubal, 2013b, p. 64). Therefore, when we talk about **contact that is aesthetic**²⁹ (Francesetti, 2012; Francesetti, Gecele & Roubal, 2013a, Spagnuolo Lobb, 2003), we are talking about the capacity to be “awake to one’s own senses and feel the excitement at the contact boundary (Francesetti, 2012, p. 5).” A healthy experience is a process of contact with continuous novelty of life, which is nurturing and the result of which is the growth of an organism (Francesetti, Gecele & Roubal, 2013b, p. 61). “The function of creative adjustment allows us to repair relational blocks and to correct our movements toward the other. The freer our senses are, the more we can openly perceive the field, the more we are able to adjust creatively. (Spagnuolo Lobb, 2003, p. 38)”. A healthy experience has an aesthetic quality. “In neurotic experiences contact with novelty at the contact boundary is dimmed: there is reduced contact with the potentialities

²⁸ In English: “intrinsic criteria” – intrinsic (coming from inside) diagnostic criteria. Used in contrast to “extrinsic criteria”, which are the criteria given from outside (e.g. DSM).

²⁹ English: aesthetics, Greek "aisthesis" means "perception" and aesthetics, therefore, represents perception through senses (Francesetti, 2012, p. 5).

present in the field. This limitation is realised by the so-called contact interruptions³⁰. These were healthy protections of the organism when they were established, the best way to be present in past relationships, but then they became unaware habits - fixed Gestalten (Francesetti, Gecele & Roubal, 2013b p. 62).” The originally creative adjustment turned into neurotic adjustment and, as a result, presence at the contact boundary is diminished (ibid., p. 67). The aesthetics of contact is interrupted, and the capacity to be present is replaced by the absence that is evident in contact. The distortion of the attributes of aesthetic “are the ways through which we can perceive in the ‘here and now’ the contact interruptions: the suffering of our co-constructed experience, the limitations of our present contact, the degree of our absence (ibid. 64).” A neurotic experience is not unique and nourishing because it does not allow full contact. The goal of therapy in the case of neurotic adjustment is to restore awareness of broken contact, to assimilate this experience, and to renew the possibility of a new creative adjustment, i.e. full spontaneous contact (Francesetti, Gecele & Roubal, 2013b; Spagnuolo Lobb, 2013a). “People grow and develop through contacting... and through assimilation of the experiences that come from these contacts” (Mackewn in Roubal 2010, p. 166).

Drama in the relational approach of Gestalt therapy

Drama is an action/process that takes place at the level of the whole personality, which begins with embodiment. Spagnuolo Lobb and Amendt-Lyon (2003) emphasise that therapeutic interventions have to be created in such a way that clients can experience them “**holistically**, i.e. not me rely cognitively, but also senso-motorically and emotionally (p. IX).” Self-expression in the form of drama, repeated improvisational encounters offer opportunities to perceive the process of contacting. In other words, thanks to the **embodiment** that precedes verbal conceptualisation,

³⁰ Also, the other contact styles (cf. Roubal, 2010, p. 184-185), e.g. projection, introjection, retroflexion, confluence, deflection

implicit relational knowledge is activated (Stern, 2003). According to Stern (ibid.) implicit relational knowledge includes ninety per cent of what we rely on when we relate – sensorimotor skills, affects, thoughts, anticipations, ability “how to be with somebody” (p. 22). It all comes from implicit knowledge, and all this is reflected in the process of contacting, in the aesthetics of the contact. Drama evokes primarily implicit relational processes in the situation of “here and now”, which has significant implications for use in Gestalt therapy.

Through dramatic play, clients enter a newly emerging field where the safe space is provided by role and fiction. As the agents are creating the content, the layer of fantasy, symbols and metaphors have a similar effect on the field as if we placed a filter on a photograph, i.e. emphasising some phenomena in the field and suppressing other. **Supporting awareness** enables us to understand how creative adjustment works, to perceive contact interruptions and to map the course of a contact cycle while meeting needs. Abilities and their deficits related to dimensions of creative adjustment are reflected in the aesthetics/absence in the contact. Therefore, **creative adjustment** and the development of the abilities associated with it are an organising principle of Gestalt Theatre. These five “key dimensions of human development” (Parlett, 2003, p. 61; see chapter 3.4) are incorporated in every improvised dramatic situation, and recent practice and research suggest that dramatic improvisation understood within the principles of Gestalt therapy can contribute to their cultivation. This is also supported by the “playful relationship to reality, which is characterised by a more creative and flexible attitude... This enables the client to adopt a playful, experimenting attitude towards themselves and their life experiences (Jones, 1996, p. 116)”. At the same time, the quality of the client's presence in improvisation can also serve as a diagnostic tool through which the psychotherapist can observe how the client copes with the

challenges brought by the new situations. They can perceive whether the process of contacting is aesthetic or what is behind the absence at the contact boundary.

What arises in the dramatic situation in “**here and now**” is “the creative Gestalt, that summarizes the physical and socially relational schemas assimilated in the preceding contacts (Spagnuolo Lobb, 2013b, p. 103).” Thus every “here and now” (and therefore every dramatic situation) includes reflections of many “elsewhere and another time”, some of which we identify as unfinished businesses or fixed gestalts. And because unresolved figures organise the field (Mackewn, 2004, p. 38), we can assume that, when contacting, the client will first rely on their more rigid relational patterns from their implicit relational memory. The dramatic situation offers the opportunity to focus on the figures, manifestations of neurotic adjustment, in “here and now” and therapeutically turn them into **corrective emotional experience** (cf. Yalom & Leszcz, 2007). We use **experience** of contact in dramatic situations and the emphasis on sensory perceptions to expand awareness. Through it, we lead the clients to **a phenomenological exploration** of the process and verbal understanding of the phenomena in a dramatic situation as the **functions of the field**. “Gestalt therapy approach leads through awareness to greater freedom of choice and to taking the responsibility for the way in which one relates to the world around as well as to oneself. (Roubal, 2010, p. 166).” This responsibility touches the **existential** level of being in the world, and the weight of the choices associated with it can prevent some clients from accepting this responsibility in life. Drama offers a so-called “fail-safe” laboratory (Sheesley, Pfeffer & Barish, 2016, p. 162) and allows the clients to project themselves into unknown situations (Spolin, 1986). Through **experimentation**, they try out living in various situations in a fictional, low-stake environment. Therefore, experiencing dramatic situations does not involve an existential threat even though the clients are confronted with existential reality. In addition, the distance resulting

from dramatic projection, symbols and metaphors offers a different perspective and creates space for new creative possibilities of relating (Jones, 1996). This is how Gestalt Theatre implements Laura Perls' concept of “**three Es**” for therapeutic work (cf. Spagnuolo Lobb & Amendt-Lyon, 2003). Finally, the triad of the great alibi – fiction, role and amorality of drama allows us to approach **polarities**. And polarities provide ground for work with intrapersonal as well as interpersonal conflicts (Zinker, 1977). An alibi of a drama simplifies the process of stretching the self-concept (cf. *ibid.*), and thus the client can experience acting from the poles they normally suppress, the emotions that they inhibit, they can overcome the filter of introjects, and try new, non-stereotypical ways of relating and, therefore, step forward towards the integration of their personality. In short: “Through drama we reconnect to our inner selves, make them come back to life and thus re-integrate ourselves (Dočkal, 2010, p. 530).”

Strasberg (1988) said that he helps “each individual to become aware of the deepest sources of his experience and creativity and to learn how to recreate them at will in the process of achieving an artistic result (p. 104).” Gestalt Theatre strives to turn these sources of creativity towards the art of living.

4. Conclusion

The implicit connection between Gestalt therapy and drama has existed since the moment Gestalt therapy saw the light of day. The continuing interest in aesthetic values, creative processes and art as such confirms that Gestalt therapy can be defined as a scientific as well as an artistic field (Spagnuolo Lobb & Amendt Lyon, 2003; Zinker, 1977). It is only logical that a form of art, which is an integral part of the cultural development of humankind appears as one of the sources for its practice. Gestalt Theatre is essentially a creative adjustment of drama and theatre to Gestalt

therapy, and it brings the connection explicitly into the therapeutic practice. And since the dawn of time, drama has been not only the bearer of aesthetic values but also the channel to experiencing emotions and reflecting on them. Thus, it had a therapeutic dimension and function even in times when psychotherapy had not yet come into existence.

I have already mentioned in the introduction that the direct connection of Gestalt therapy and drama, represented by the Gestalt Theatre, is at the beginning of its journey into the professional discourse and there is a need for it to be validated by practice and research with various client groups. I believe that through this text, we have managed to take one of the first steps on this path.

Gestalt Theatre offers new possibilities for approaching the art of Gestalt therapy. It supports work with the body, brings an element of playfulness, support and appreciation of the individual's creative approach to the situations in which they find themselves. The framework of play, fiction and a role can bring ease even to difficult topics: it allows for distance and insight. And these are promising prerequisites for the symbiosis of drama and Gestalt therapy in the service of our clients. Especially for those for whom, through drama, the door opens to a more creative adjustment to existential reality, awareness and growth.

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