

*I knock at the stone's front door...*  
**Existential theater in the biographical experiences  
- pedagogical and andragogical contexts**

The doctoral dissertation covers the subject of existential theatre in the biographical experiences of adults from the perspective of experiencing existential disability. The rationale for beginning research on the above subject area was the personal need to take up the missing discourse related to a significant – in my opinion – educational phenomenon, which is existential theatre. It is also an attempt to throw a discussion open on the place of theatre in the space of pedagogy and andragogy, which often limit their research potential using and interpreting theatre only for methodical purposes or narrowly (technically) therapeutic. A trap contributing to the absence of in-depth reflection on the existential dimension of theatre may also be the radical polarisation of science and art. Meanwhile, searching for inspiration beyond social research stands a chance to deepen the pedagogical and andragogical sources and indicate new directions and ways of building stories about the human experience.

The concept of *existential theatre* is related to human experience and biography. This concept cannot be found in the source literature. I created it by combining the theatrical perspective with the term *existential disability*. The fruit of this coalescence is the vision of a theatre focused on working with human experience, individual identity and biographical needs, which supports people in undertaking in-depth self-reflection. The dissertation also considers the fundamental question about the tension between art and therapy in educational and artistic activities. I wanted to picture the duality in the space of pedagogical thinking and emphasise the significant threats in widespread theatre practice.

The research has an interdisciplinary character, combining interests in pedagogy, andragogy and theatre studies. Their objective was to recognise the theatre as one possible form of adult education in a biographical perspective, presenting the activities of non-professional adult theatres and exploring theatrical experiences in terms of shaping the strategy of coping with existential disability. Based on the collected empirical material and contexts from the source literature, I developed the concept of *existential disability*, distinguishing its three dimensions: 1. unfamiliarity of one's own body and psyche as well as excessive complication

and opacity of life situations; 2. being out of touch with socio-cultural changes and being different with external requirements/expectations; 3. experiencing various life crises.

Theatre groups associating adults with disabilities participated in the research, implementing the idea of existential theatre in their work. The reason for this choice was the desire to show, for the purposes of andragogical reflection, adulthood burdened with a double disability: a universal ailment and, additionally, psychobiological limitations. In this perspective, existential disability, interlapping with disability understood colloquially, is compounded; thus, experiencing it may become more visible.

The dissertation consists of an introduction, three chapters and an ending. The first chapter is an introduction to the project's theoretical and methodological contexts, embedding the conception of research in an interpretative/hermeneutical paradigm that emphasises the value of the concept of understanding and meaning, and also at a qualitative research centre. I used the method of narrative interview, analysis and interpretation of visual materials (theatre performances), and elements of observation and autoethnography. The two other theoretical and research chapters are focused directly on the main concepts – existential disability and existential theatre. The work ends with a narrative (ending), in which I attempted to answer the main research problems, and I included reflections for theatrical practice in the space of educational activities.

The task of existential theatre (what I try to show on the example of the studied theatre groups) is to search for a place for self-realisation of oppressed and voiceless people; inclusion in the local community of people experiencing marginalisation; support in dealing with inner crises and supporting the development and rearrangement of the identity of participants and creators of theatre projects. Based on source literature, the collected research material, and my own thoughts, I have constructed a system of key categories that constitute the original concept of existential theatre and determine the direction of thinking and acting in pedagogical andragogical theatre activities.