

WHAT DOES THE STREET TEACH ME? CHANGES IN THE PERCEPTIONS OF AN INDIVIDUAL ARTIST DUE TO BUSKING

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ABSTRACT

Art has always been connected with metamorphosis, defined as *“a major change in the appearance or character of someone or something”* (Merriam-Webster, 2016). It has the ability to change one’s perception of other people, values, space, and much more. One of its purposes is to inspire humans, to encourage, to provide an impulse for reflection or meditation or simply to bring joy. The main focus of this paper is to provide a short demonstration of the changes which occur within each artist who performs in an open space. After some experience with busking, they can confirm that art has that ability to change perceptions, they experienced it in their own cases. It must be mentioned that the art which they perform is rather specific; it is offered to the public out of a stage setting, which indeed may be a harder context in which to perform. It is the best platform for them to improve their skills and to learn how to adapt to a changing audience. However, it holds a deeper resonance. Some of the artists discovered something new about themselves which they had not known before. Some of them broke habits or mindsets when they began busking. This article is mainly based on the testimonies of various artists in the Czech Republic. Among the buskers featured are musicians, living statues and members of the itinerant theater.

INTRODUCTION

The research has been conducted within the Czech Republic, with the intention of processing data for the publishing of a doctoral thesis. The data has been acquired through semi-structured interviews and participant observation. The author has collected information about performers in many fields of busking, such as musicians, living statues, actors, bubble makers, magicians etc. To demonstrate the various processes which occurred in each performer, the author chose two cases from the field of itinerant theater; three musicians and three living statues.

One might argue that itinerant theatre is performed in different contexts, that the factor of journey is involved on a wider level and that they might play in more various places, while city street buskers can face different challenges in their cities. However, to quote David Cohen and Ben Greenwood: *“The distinction between itinerant and street performers is, for our purposes, largely redundant. The terms are obviously not synonymous, but there is a fair amount of overlap, and it is often a matter of environment. Street life is a characteristic of cities and towns, while a wider horizon shows us itinerants, but the characters are essentially the same”* (Cohen & Greenwood, 1981).

Change in life direction

In the year 2012, one Czech girl named Tereza was set to graduate from the Academy of Arts in Prague. She created a project, an itinerant theater called *“Koněm vozem”* (*“By a horse and a cart”*), which travelled for one month and a half in the Bohemia part of the Czech Republic through many villages and towns. In the middle of their journey they stopped at a small village of approximately 200 inhabitants called Pošná. Their common practice was to ask the mayor of each village if they could stay, as they needed some suitable piece of land on which to reside and to perform. The son of the mayor, **Radek**, is the main character to whom this chapter will refer. His first impressions of this strange group were as follows:

“I used to meet them in the village while I was going to a shop, I always greeted them, but it was kind of strange for me as the village is very conservative. Then these people came, chilling at the petrol station, reading books in sleeping bags, dirty, cooking in a kettle, Jesus Christ; so it was really strange, yeah” (Radek, 2015). However, when it was time for their performance, Radek and his family decided to watch the play. It was held in a small playground. *“It was incredible,”* he said (Radek, 2015). In the evening, the actors encouraged people to come and chat with them by campfire. Radek took a brave step and went there. Up until that time he used

to be a closed and quiet boy, very ordered and diligent. He was used to an ordered life and had never imagined that his life could take another direction. However, it happened. Radek spent the evening with them, showed them around and invited them to come to his home the next day, thinking that they probably would not come. They came, and it was Radek's grandmother who suggested that Radek should join in the performance too. So they caught at her word and offered Radek the opportunity to join them, providing that he was ready to leave in 30 minutes. He remembers his state: *"I was standing in the middle of our garden, thinking about what will happen after they leave... Then I grabbed my sleeping bag, dropped in on my mum - she is a saleswoman in a small shop - she went crazy and criticized the decision, she was very upset"* (Radek, 2015). Nevertheless, after a while Radek saw himself turning his back on his old life style and saying goodbye to his village. Radek mentioned: *"I was charmed by the nomadism, but also by the collective way of life, it has some magic in it"* (Radek, 2015).



Figure 1, the itinerant theater "Koněm vozem," Tereza (left), Radek (second left in the blue jacket), photo: personal collection

He knew that it would be good to breakdown the stereotypes which he held, but he also worried about what would happen afterwards. At first, he became involved by providing assistance with practical issues and by inviting people to the play. Later, he became an actor. Tereza said that during hard times and periods of tension within the group Radek was a peacemaker. Radek travelled with them until the final performance in Prague, then he went back home. However, he had already decided deep inside of him that he had to leave his village. When he returned home, his baggage was already packed waiting for him. His father was angry, shouting that if he wanted to leave then he could do so immediately. However, Radek needed to finish his studies in České Budějovice and with much perseverance he managed to overcome this difficult period. He studied at the Faculty of Pedagogy, specializing in secondary school teaching. According to him, his father never understands him; he wanted his son to be a tractor driver, as is common in the village. The second play, which Radek took part in, dealt with a story in which a father and son do not get along. Radek played the son. After his second theatrical journey Radek definitively decided to leave his village. *"Our opinions are very different. My focus is completely different so I decided to leave the village. I also thought that it would make our relations*

better and enable me to develop a detached view of my childhood world" (Radek, 2015). What drew him was the excitement of adventure and a vision for inner development and personal growth. As quoted by Maslow: *"You will either step forward into growth or you will step back into safety"* (Maslow, 1954). Radek has certainly achieved the former.

"Everybody has weaknesses which we sometimes hide, but we have them; I had never imagined that I would ever blindly go somewhere with strange people, but actually it is great experience, such self-confrontation" (Radek, 2015). He also claimed that it gave him much experience and courage for his profession, teaching, as both activities feature an audience. He said he gained confidence and learned methods on how to approach children. Radek's final encouragement for others:

"We should not believe just what society tells us to believe, what our environment serves us, because when we are reliant on mass media only, when we just sit at home and observe who kills who, who stole what, refugees, what is happening everywhere, fear, fear, fear, but when you go out of this box you realize that the reality is different, people are generous, the experience is really different and I recommend it to everybody" (Radek, 2015).

Changes of various perceptions

Another case where the itinerant theater played important role in someone's personal development is that of the actor **Lenka**. Lenka comes from a city called Opava in the North Moravian region. She studied at the Faculty of Education in Ostrava, specializing in drama for elementary school. However, she had no previous acting experience. Her challenge came all of a sudden when her classmates told her about the opportunity to participate in a travelling theater project. Although Lenka is naturally a very closed and introverted person, the words *"Yes, I wanna join the group"* burst from her lips (Lenka, 2016). Her enthusiasm was stronger than her constraints, even though she was to be joining some very strange people who had already started without her. It was not easy at the beginning, but she overcame her shyness and her fear of the audience and the other actors. She said:

"I was very nervous at the beginning, but I improved a lot, I was stressed about every mistake, but today, I can benefit from what it is. Today I know that there is no need to be fixed on the exact text, on exactly what I am supposed to say or do, it was more of a fight with myself" (Lenka, 2016). The theater is very important for her. It is a way in which she can express herself and communicate with people. Theater enables this in a different way compared to ordinary contact: *"You can use shortcuts, you can be an elephant in the desert, a crazy one, this is what I like, to work with imagination"* (Lenka, 2016). She stated that she could perceive the support of those around her and that they were creating something together as one unit. This experience, which took place approximately over the course of two weeks, changed her life. She joined an improvisational theater group and is experiencing the benefits of her experience in her profession. She is now on maternity leave, but she goes once a week to a kindergarten, where she said she can use the skills she acquired:

"We are outside with children and they are quite wild as kids usually are. They need to calm down before lunch, so I can either yell at them or I can, for example, take spoons and pretend they are talking but cannot hear each other. And they begin to pay attention. It helps me with communication, it works better than commands" (Lenka, 2016). Lenka said that a person should not be afraid to do anything strange or crazy, this was what the itinerant theater showed her. What is interesting is that she undertook this journey without the knowledge of her parents: *"My parents don't understand me. They told me: read, study. We live separated lives. They even do not know today that I did it"* (Lenka, 2016). Lenka mentioned that before her experience she was more interested in nature than in people, but this experience changed her. Moreover, before she tried to busk, she used to think that she should refrain from talking to the buskers as she believed that it would be annoying to ask him/her something. Nowadays, she hopes for the opposite, for someone to come and talk to her after her performance. This is the reason why she does what she does, to be in contact with the people. For Lenka this was *"a step to express more in front of the people, it was a step outside. I believe in it"* (Lenka, 2016).

Aleš, a guitarist was born in Broumov, Western Bohemia. Aleš studied in a military high school in Martin, Slovakia. While there he started to play the guitar. He fled from his work as a soldier, saying later that it was not the life he wanted. Then he moved to Prague where he worked as a metro driver. Aleš is from the generation which experienced busking directly after the revolution in Prague, something which is quite rare. Later he moved to Brno in 1997. Currently he is homeless. What has playing on the street taught him? He said: *"It taught me to rely solely on myself. I cannot rely on anybody. It also taught me to be patient. It lifted me, it rescued me"* (Aleš, 2015).

Another musician from Brno is the violoncellist **Matěj**. He graduated from a conservatory and became a professional violoncellist. However, alcohol led his life down a dark path. Nevertheless he said:

"I see more homeless people and disabled people than the average person due to busking. I remain positive, because I realize that I am still quite young and relatively OK. And I improved a lot in my technique. I cannot explain it to you as you don't play any string instrument. The street teaches me a lot" (Matěj, 2015).

Terka is a recent psychology graduate from Masaryk University. She comes from Vysočina, the central part of the Czech Republic. She started her "busking career" in 2015. Terka has been playing the accordion, although not for very long. It was a big challenge for her to go onto the street and play. It was her big dream and she has always been amazed by buskers. She said that she wanted to change the shyness that resided within her:

"I am a big introvert and this is the issue I would like to change, to be more open to the world, to be less afraid, to be more spontaneous. Street performing is great training, a big step in that direction. I think it gives me the courage to be in contact with others. I am getting better for sure" (Terka, 2016). She is pleased and proud of herself that she overcame her worries and concerns about busking. Even though she still makes some mistakes, she is actually surprised at how little it bothers her. **Šimon** is a barrel-organ player, who comes from a city called Stříbro in the West Bohemian region. Šimon still studies at the Faculty of Pedagogy in Brno, specializing in language and speech therapy. He has been busking on the street since 2014. He has gained a lot from performing on the street in his costume with such a rare instrument. It builds his patience. While on the one hand there are people who laugh or criticize him, on the other there are those who want to share their lives with him: *"I enjoy when people share their lives with me, I am like a psychoterapeutist, like a barman, the people have confidence with me. They are annoying sometimes but I have learnt how to deal with them"* (Šimon, 2015).



Figure 2, the barrel-organ player Šimon, photo: author
Figure 3, the violoncellist Matěj, photo: author



Šimon said that he has developed more compassion towards people. He mentioned how now he may buy a magazine sold by a disabled or homeless person, while previously he would not. Playing the barrel-organ has contributed to his artistic development. People are mostly focused more on the instrument than on him. So he challenges himself to be more interesting than the instrument, he tries to make an impression on them using his voice, speech, look etc. Living statues are the people who rely on their look, who change themselves

completely to catch people's attention. Two of these statues can be found in Prague – **Zdenek and Jarda**. Zdenek worked in a chemical company until he developed leukemia. Jarda, an English teacher, helps him from time. They portray city townsmen from the turn of sixteenth and seventeenth century, from the Baroque period. They confirmed that the mask enables them to be bolder, in terms how they deal with people, what they tell them and what they do: *"We become someone from a fairytale and we can act how we want"* (Zdenek and Jarda, 2015). There are also people coming and sharing their lives, issues which they would not probably share with two normal strangers on the street: *"For example they tell me their stories, because to them I am only a statue, not a human being, I am something that is staying there and they tell me something they wouldn't ordinarily, he would not tell it to me now for sure"* (Zdenek and Jarda, 2015).



Figure 4, the living statues Zdenek and Jarda, photo: author

Another living statue in Prague, originally from Slovakia, is a silver pilot named **Matěj**. He is quite young, a recent graduate from a secondary school in the field of construction. He started to busk quite soon after his

graduation. He said that busking enlarged his sense of space and his peripheral vision. He is more sensitive in his perception of passers-by, he learnt the best ways in which to catch their attention. He said he can better estimate what is inside of people, even though from time to time he got “burnt”: *“Some of them are quite arrogant, so they just couldn’t stand my jokes”* (Matěj, 2015). Busking also changed his self-confidence: *“Three years ago you wouldn’t be able to speak with me as you are now... I wasn’t so open, it moved me more towards people. I became more natural and free, I am no longer shy”* (Matěj, 2015).



Figure 5, the silver pilot Matěj, photo: author

CONCLUSIONS

The act of performing in an open public space can have many lasting effects concerning busker’s perception of themselves and the world around them. The biggest impact is clearly the self-confidence which each performer developed within themselves. After they broke down stereotypes, fought prejudice and fear, they realised the joy and satisfaction which this new experience could bring. This satisfaction was achieved through the artist’s ability to experience personal growth; winning the battle between their own shyness and the urge to step into the unknown, becoming more professional in their fields, developing the confidence to interact with passers-by and becoming more aware of their surroundings. Busking provides these people with some form of income (even though some of them are homeless) and allows them to develop a greater sense of self-reliance. This kind of performance can also lead to a better understanding and awareness of people and leading to greater compassion towards people, both towards the audience and towards other buskers. Although this way of a making living is a tough one, it builds patience in each busker and patience with other people also. As the Czech saying goes: *“Patience brings roses”* – this ability to make a decision, to fight for it, to step into a strange crowd, to be spontaneous, not to be afraid, to express themselves and so on. The “roses,” in this case, are new ways of dealing with people, other individuals with their own problems, emotions and perceptions. This is an important issue which, unfortunately, is often neglected. Who knows, maybe some of the passers-by will rethink their mindsets, break their habitual patterns, and also take this step. In fact, such a chain has been continuing since human existence; a chain of inspiring, breaking, trying, fighting, enjoying, entertaining and living...

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