

# UNATC PRESS

*Theatre Education Series*



Adelina Georgiana Dobra

***APPLIED THEATRE***  
**IN THE INTEGRATION**  
**OF REFUGEE CHILDREN**  
**AND TEENAGERS**

UNATC PRESS  
UNIVERSITARIA CRAIOVA PRESS  
2025

***Applied Theatre in the Integration of Refugee Children and Teenagers***  
**Adelina Georgiana Dobrea**

Published as part of the  
***Fair and Inclusive Education through Theatre and Film***  
**Project**, CNFIS-FDI-IEI-2025-F-0543,  
funded by the Ministry of Education and Research  
through the Institutional Development Fund (FDI) 2025.  
Project Director: Lecturer PhD Andreea Jicman.

**Descrierea CIP a Bibliotecii Naționale a României**  
**DOBREA, ADELINA GEORGIANA**

**Applied theatre in the integration of refugee children  
and teenagers** / Adelina-Georgiana Dobrea ; translated from  
Romanian by Victor Mongescu. - București : U.N.A.T.C. Press ;  
Craiova : Universitaria, 2025

Conține bibliografie

ISBN 978-606-082-074-1

ISBN 978-606-14-2182-4

I. Mongescu, Victor (trad.)

792

ISBN UNATC PRESS: 978-606-082-074-1

ISBN Universitaria Craiova Press: 978-606-14-2182-4

**UNATC PRESS 2025**

*Theatre Education Series*

[www.unatcpres.ro](http://www.unatcpres.ro)

Editors: Prof. PhD. Bogdana Darie, Assoc. Prof. PhD. Mihaela Bețiu

Translated by **Victor Mongescu**

Proofreading & layout: Cosmin Bădulețeanu, Victor Mongescu, Mihaela Bețiu.

DTP & Cover: Cătălin Furtună

[smartprint.ro](http://smartprint.ro)

© UNATC PRESS for this edition

In collaboration with UNIVERSITARIA CRAIOVA PRESS

---

## INTRODUCTION

Migration is a global phenomenon of the modern world which has increased in scale and intensity over the last decades. People move away from their place of origin, either within or outside countries, in search of favourable economic, social or political opportunities. Thus, a number of interconnected factors fuel this global trend: the world economy, with major gaps between rich and poor countries, armed conflicts, climate change, discrimination against certain populations/minorities and political instability. Understanding this multidetermined phenomenon helps to develop policies and programmes in order to manage migration in an effective and sustainable way.

In this complex context, migrants are the main concern of security organizations due to terrorism, as well as drug and human trafficking. It is the United Nations and other security bodies that manage these issues on a regional and global scale. The most vulnerable migrant populations are refugee groups.

In these new socio-cultural contexts, refugee children and teenagers require immediate integration and educational measures by the host countries, whether they are in transit or have reached their final destinations. The transition to formal education in schools is preceded by adaptation courses and language acquisition. At the same time, integration programmes aim to train teachers who can work with them, as many refugees have never been to school. Some were born and raised in conditions of extreme poverty and war, have emigrated in dangerous circumstances, have coped with the loss of significant people in their lives, have been victims of sexual violence, are experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder or acute anxiety, which is why integrating them into safe and protective environments is a priority.

Teachers in European schools are currently being trained to work with this highly vulnerable population of pupils. They are learning how to deal with a panic attack of a refugee child, how to create conditions of general acceptance and a safe learning environment in their classroom so that migrants feel accepted, how to raise awareness of human and refugee rights among pupils from the majority population or how to create a cohesive group in a class of children who do not

—

speak the same language and do not have the same cultural background<sup>1</sup>. It has been shown that, until the refugee child learns complex language, interactions can take place through nonverbal communication channels and simple verbal messages, but even opening these channels requires the teacher to possess a range of expressive skills in order to convey their message to all pupils.

Refugee integration studies cover a wide range of issues, including the educational and inclusiveness aspects mentioned above. These studies are at the crossroads of several sciences: sociology, psychology, pedagogy, political science and global economics. They are also a matter of interest for several fields of application, which can offer methods of effective integration into host societies, such as learning foreign languages or concepts of culture, civilization and history.

Applied arts, in particular socio-cultural integration through theatre, is also becoming a prolific field of research and practice in stimulating the adaptation of refugees to their new living environments. Refugee children who have been exploited through labour or sexually abused, children with mental health problems, etc., all of whose well-being has been severely affected by humanitarian crises, conflict or war, can be helped through theatrical art. Theatre workshops support all these victims of the modern world, encourage social cohesion, promote trauma healing, the acquisition of new identities, individual and collective development, and learning new ways of expression and dialogue.

The role of theatre education as a platform for integration has been reinforced in recent years, thanks to the resources it offers, its ability to appeal to active participation and acceptance of differences (seeing them as potentialities rather than deficiencies), its power to deconstruct prejudices, and to strengthen the human personality in a peaceful and creative environment. The systematization of theories and practices that use theatre for non-traditional purposes and the selection of those most suitable for the integration of refugee groups into host societies have facilitated social change in favour of respect, equal opportunities, access to goods and solidarity, and have reduced inequalities and social gaps.

Nowadays, performing arts are used as a device to learn the host country's language and socio-cultural customs and enrich the expressive possibilities of disadvantaged groups of refugee children and teenagers, who carry huge global problems on their shoulders. Through theatre workshops they acquire new skills and competences, become mentally strengthened, practically transformed, which is why art has been recognized not only for its role as a socio-cultural facilitator, but also as a tool of individual transformation for victims of extreme poverty, wars

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Nassia Choleva *et. al.*, "Teaching Human Rights through Educational Drama; How Difficult Can It Be? A quantitative research with in-service teachers in Greece", in *World Conference on Research in Social Sciences*, second edition, 2021.

and other global scourges. In the workshops, major social issues are addressed and the tools of theatre are used to generate the framework for seeking solutions, finding meaning and developing empathy. This enables participants to understand complex concepts, such as economic or humanitarian crises, migration, to grasp the principles of human rights and to become more sympathetic to those suffering.

This book, entitled *Applied Theatre in the integration of refugee children and teenagers*, responds to the demands of today's society to ensure the successful integration of refugees into Romanian society, through the specific means of the art of Applied Theatre: theatre games, improvisation games, role-playing, games specific to the active methods of Playback theatre and theatre of the oppressed.

The chapter called *Applied Theatre as an Experiential Learning Method and as a Tool for Social Intervention in Vulnerable Groups* sets the theoretical and conceptual framework of Applied Theatre – an excellent method of experiential learning and a powerful tool for social intervention in vulnerable groups. Theatre contributes to the development and cohesion of a community spirit and helps the integration of migrants into the community by promoting perennial general-human, aesthetic, creative, moral and altruistic values for optimal pro-social interaction.

Starting from these coordinates, the first chapter presents a comparative analysis of the forms of Applied Theatre, in order to select the best practices of social intervention and, subsequently, to lay the foundation of the specific way of working, which is necessary for the integration of refugee children and teenagers in Romania. The analysis shows that Applied Theatre is a form of cultural activism. The means of theatre are used to bring social problems to the attention of the general public and to stimulate social change by solving social-community problems.

Applied Theatre is getting recognized as a major method of social intervention in vulnerable groups, with the aim of restoring their hope, courage and helping them change their perspective. There are several forms of Applied Theatre, which involve the active participation of the audience in the process of creating the performance and even in the performance itself. Educational Theatre, Social Theatre, Forum Theatre, Interactive Theatre, Playback Theatre belong to this universe of Applied Theatre, each with its own range of benefits. The target audience is generally made up of disadvantaged groups – victims of domestic violence, victims of physical and verbal abuse, children in foster homes, refugees, victims of drug abuse, etc. Applied Theatre offers appropriate means of intervention in support of all these vulnerable people. These means can also be used *in educational settings* (supporting children to assimilate information in a fun, dynamic and interactive way), *in psycho-emotional counselling* (as a therapeutic tool in individual and group interventions, with a cathartic effect), as well as in *approaches to optimize pro-sociality* (to improve communication and interpersonal relations and reduce general social violence).

Current Applied Theatre studies with refugee groups address issues such as forced displacement, collective violence, abuse of power, poverty, unequal distribution of resources, social exclusion, and their results are encouraging – participants acquire adaptive skills to cope with trauma and exile. Besides shaping a new kind of actor-spectator relationship, Applied Theatre has emerged both as an arena for debating major geopolitical issues and as an art that addresses general human concerns and heals the spirit through a core mechanism that is about play. Language can be learned through play (*playway*), social rules and culture can be discovered through improvisation games. In the case of children, handling situations at school can be done using the techniques of dramatic action or the pedagogy of the oppressed.

Experiential learning through theatre, which involves developing values, as well as an array of cognitive, affective, interpersonal, and motivational skills, moving from practice to theory, can be beneficial for refugee groups. Knowledge of new socio-cultural contexts has resulted from different combinations of understanding and transforming the experiences of participants in theatre workshops. Their adaptive style of learning was reinforced in contact with concrete and active experience, which is why the art of theatre once again proved the major role it plays in human learning. It provides the individual with the necessary space for experimentation in order to discover oneself and the paradigms of the surrounding world. Theatre games and improvisation have thus become basic means in the process of education and experiential learning through theatre. They are conducive to unlocking the intuition and emotional and creative blockages caused by traditional, purely theoretical educational models.

The second chapter, *Multidisciplinary Explanatory-Interpretive Models of Refugee Integration – From the Psychology of Culture Shock to Cognitive, Affective and Behavioural Adjustment*, is dedicated to the study of international strategies and models of refugee integration. Issues of adaptation are examined along a continuum – from the psychology of culture shock to cognitive, affective and behavioural adjustment.

The research starts from the premise that not all people are born equal and with the same rights. As persons with severe vulnerability, refugees need help to lead a normal life, similar to the lives of individuals who live in societies unaffected by poverty or war. Refugees have not chosen to be born in a place which is more dangerous than other parts of the world, and no one can blame them for aspiring to a better life.

The therapeutic role of theatre in the psychological and psychosocial (relational) problems of the refugee has been noted not only by representatives of Applied Theatre, but also by psychologists who apply the aesthetic forms of role-play and storytelling in psychotherapeutic practice or use improvisation to

achieve their clinical goals. In fact, theatre is a celebration of life, a mirroring of the human condition and an exposure of truth. It is the art form closest to life, which is why it can be transformed into a powerful vehicle for therapy, with a positive effect on individual psychological well-being. From another perspective, with the help of theatrical techniques, it is possible to capture the struggle within the refugee's psyche regarding the rules and patterns of thinking imposed by the social norms of the host community. If they do not conform to the rules imposed by society as moral, normal, good, natural, they risk being marginalized, excluded and labelled. This is precisely why theatrical techniques can stimulate desirable behaviour, thus preventing social exclusion.

Multi-disciplinary explanatory-interpretative models of refugee integration capture both the obstacles and pitfalls of refugee integration into the host society and the efforts of sociologists, psychologists, lawyers, social workers, artists, etc. to streamline and make integration smooth and successful, to the benefit of the refugee and the host state. The models for ensuring migrants' quality of life show that integration is a long-term, complex process which must be strongly supported by political actors and civil society organizations.

Today, many non-governmental and humanitarian organizations are implementing integration programmes, carefully structured around the needs of vulnerable migrant groups. All programmes are based on major refugee research strategies – political, economic, socio-cultural, therapeutic and educational. Following traumatizing experiences such as violence, abuse, loss of family or home, refugees may face immediate survival problems as well as cognitive, affective and communication problems. Adjustment disorder, for example, is a condition that occurs when a child has difficulty adjusting to a significant change in their life, such as moving to a new country. Symptoms include sadness, sleep disturbances and difficulty concentrating. Disruptive behaviour may occur in response to trauma – the child may become aggressive and have difficulty following instructions. Even developmental delays can occur in refugee children, due to gaps in their education and inadequate access to healthcare. With the right support, they can activate important resilience factors and find the resources to build a new life. Some of these organizations have introduced theatrical techniques in their programmes because they have understood that theatre enhances the human capacity to observe oneself in action, to be aware of being a subject for other subjects (being an observer and a protagonist at the same time)<sup>2</sup>, which contributes to the successful integration of refugees into host communities.

---

<sup>2</sup> Idea taken from the philosophy of Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*.



## CHAPTER I

# ***APPLIED THEATRE AS AN EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING METHOD AND AS A TOOL FOR SOCIAL INTERVENTION IN VULNERABLE GROUPS***



Applied Theatre encompasses a broad spectrum of artistic manifestations and means of expression. Conceptually, Applied Theatre is used as an umbrella term, under which various theatrical practices are harmoniously merged. These practices serve the common purpose of supporting human beings on a social, relational and psycho-emotional level. This branch of theatre thus becomes a powerful tool for social intervention, fostering integration and inclusion processes and improving the quality of life of disadvantaged groups.

According to specialized literature, Applied Theatre is an extension of dramatic theatre which contains in its structures the original aesthetic form of theatrical art, imbued with a unique style through which the actor connects to the spectator. In other words, Applied Theatre is defined by its hybrid-interactionist nature. Although the core of Applied Theatre remains theatre, there is always *something* from another, seemingly different, area of interest around this core, predominantly from the sphere of social relations.

### I.1. Forms of *Applied theatre* – conceptual delimitations

There are multiple forms of Applied Theatre: *Social Theatre*, *Theatre in Education*, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, *Prison Theatre*, *Documentary Theatre*, *Museum Theatre*, *Community Theatre*, and *Theatre for Development, Inclusion or Integration*.<sup>3</sup>

All these forms of Applied Theatre involve interaction with the participants, as opposed to the more performance/aesthetic-oriented forms of dramatic theatre, which involve a more passive relationship with the audience. However, both Applied and Dramatic Theatre have similar values (therapeutic, educational and social), aiming to activate the audience's awareness, reflect certain socio-political issues, etc.

The aim of Applied Theatre is to debate a problem, to fulfil a need of an individual or a group, inviting to dialogue all those present in the auditorium. This changes the traditional role of the spectator from that of an observer to that of a protagonist, i.e. someone involved in the dramatic action.

Theatre artists have constantly sought new ways of staging a performance and ways of achieving a high degree of communication and intimacy with the audience. Artists were dissatisfied with their contemporary theatrical forms,

---

<sup>3</sup> Monica Prendergast, Juliana Saxton, *Applied Theatre: International Case Studies and Challenges for Practice*, second edition, Intellect Bristol, UK/Chicago, USA, 2016, pp. 3-6.

believing that the purpose of theatre had strayed from its original trajectory. The desire to preserve the true meaning of theatre made them rebel and step outside the criteria that were seen as normal.

The great theatre revolutionaries believed that theatre should be a tool through which a nation gets educated, purified and liberates itself. They wanted their audiences to have the courage to speak out so that they would no longer be led without reacting. They argued that theatre must give a voice to the people, to the majority, and that it should no longer be just a form of culture accessible to the wealthy upper class, who attended performances to flaunt their outfits and enhance their prestige.

Some of those criticisms are still valid today. Collectively, theatre is seen more as a form of entertainment than a powerful vector for social change or a change of attitude. The theatrical universe is reduced to the image of classical theatre, in which the spectator is an uninvolved observer of what unfolds on stage.

Applied Theatre was born, in fact, out of the need to change and reshape the function of the spectator. The emergence of Applied Theatre, or Applied Drama (dramatic action)<sup>4</sup>, is closely linked to the socio-political changes of the 20th century, to the new way of thinking and conceiving the world, shaped and influenced by wars, political movements, problems caused by globalization and consumer society, by the rise of technology and, last but not least, by the multimedia information flood.

Theatre, like other art forms, has been able to reflect and react to all these areas of change, thus broadening its sphere of influence. In this way the concepts of Applied Theatre and Dramatic Action emerged. The foundational techniques of these two forms of theatre have been adopted by artists as well as by specialists in other fields – psychologists and pedagogues use them for psychotherapeutic or educational purposes.

To better understand the intervention models of Applied Theatre, Monica Prendergast and Juliana Saxton have defined the differences between two forms of theatre in their approach: representational and presentational. Thus, “in representational theatre, there is a fourth wall most of the time, whereas in presentational theatre the fourth wall is penetrable, transparent, and often breached by audience members, who participate directly in the action of the play.”<sup>5</sup> Representational theatre brings to the audience a fictional, hypothetical

<sup>4</sup> The translation from English into Romanian is not the most appropriate to express the complexity of the concepts of Applied Drama and Applied Theatre.

<sup>5</sup> “Whereas in representational theatre a fourth wall is in place much of the time, in presentational theatre the fourth wall is permeable, transparent and often breached by audience members who directly participate in the action of play”. Monica Prendergast, Juliana Saxton, *Applied Theatre*, Intellect Bristol UK/Chicago, USA 2016, p. 13.

world in which the actors make use of stage play and disregard the presence of the audience. In contrast to this well-known and appreciated form, the actor in presentational theatre is less hidden behind a dramatic persona and much closer to being himself – the role he assumes is the image of a person in the audience or from a community close to the participants.<sup>6</sup> In presentational theatre, actors play multiple roles and relate to the audience who actively participate in creating dramatic situations.

*Applied theatre* always aims to elicit reactions that extend beyond the artistic experience itself to the everyday life. Augusto Boal, the founder of the field, points out that the purpose of theatre should not be to show *the right*, universally valid *path*, but to give each individual the means to explore his or her own life. In other words, it is like the old Chinese proverb: *Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.* With the help of Applied Theatre techniques, a person can test multiple ways of solving problems and try different ways of finding the *right path* in life. Thus, they will develop an analytical, critical way of thinking, which will help them make better decisions in the future.

Today Applied Theatre is a major method of social intervention in vulnerable groups, with the aim of restoring hope, courage and helping them change their perspective. Augusto Boal, the father of Applied Theatre, pointed out that while “in the beginning theatre was dithyrambic – free people singing in the open. Carnival. Party”<sup>7</sup>, it later became an important community event, capable of reshaping relations between people.

After the emergence of social classes and the division of the world into hierarchies, the ruling classes used theatrical practices to build walls between people and to shape the thinking of the masses according to their own interests. Boal proposed – and succeeded – in reconstructing this flawed relationship by involving entire communities in theatre. It is true that there were also favourable factors – the populations of the past were less numerous; one could easily organize meetings where citizens could discuss the problems they faced.

Boal’s community-centred work was a return to the origins of theatre. It is worth noting that the first theatrical events were initiated during religious ceremonies. Most of them were held in the name of deities and all members of the community were actively involved. Thanksgiving rituals turned into long parties. Primitive people used impressive performance tools, uttered specific formulas, sometimes in dialogue, other times sung by a priest and accompanied by suggestive, often exaggerated movements. In order to make the ritual as

<sup>6</sup> Monica Prendergast, Juliana Saxton, *op. cit.*, pp. 12-13.

<sup>7</sup> Augusto Boal, *Teatrul oprimaților și alte poetici politice* [The Theatre of the Oppressed and Other Political Poetics], Nemira, București, 2017, p. 175.

impressive as possible, people used masks, animal skins, symbolic make-up, and let themselves drift in the rhythm of the musical instruments, enjoying the energy created. Through such rituals, they felt they were charging themselves with pagan energy, but it was actually a good opportunity for interaction and building relationships.

In India and China, theatre also evolved in close relation with religious rituals. Those with more imagination and courage animated others. Play and the joy of *play* have always driven mankind to find artistic means of expression. Through song, dance and poetry, man created, unintentionally, small performances in which he also encouraged the audience to take part and respond. In the beginning, the space for artistic joy was not formal, as is the case with *invisible theatre*. Those who wished to express themselves could do so in squares, bars or even in the fields. Over time, the “games” in which some of the participants in the ceremonies got caught up slowly lost their original form.

This glimpse into theatre’s past is necessary to support the unbreakable link between man and theatre. Man is the reflection of all his experiences, family legacy, traditions, etc. The art of theatre is also a symbolic channel of interhuman communication, full of symbols, intended to bring messages from the past in order to reshape the present.

Peter Brook paints an evocative current picture of the role of theatre: “Today the theatre of doubting, of unease, of trouble, of alarm, seems truer than the theatre with a noble aim. Even if the theatre had in its origins rituals that made the invisible incarnate, we must not forget that apart from certain Oriental theatres these rituals have been either lost or remain in seedy decay.”<sup>8</sup> Rituals are, in fact, the roots of a people, which is why they must not be forgotten, but kept alive and included in the life of the modern man.

### I.1.1. Representatives of Applied theatre and their contributions

Starting from the analysis of the origins of theatre, Grotowski, in *Theatre and Ritual*, pointed out that theatrical performance differs from other forms of performance in its closeness to the essence of art. “I thought that, if it was precisely the primitive dances that brought theatre into the world, perhaps by returning to ritual – in which two categories of persons participate: the actors or choristers and the spectators – we might find again that ceremonial of unmediated, live participation, that specific reciprocity, that unmediated, open, liberated and authentic reaction.”<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Peter Brook, *Spațiul gol* [The Empty Space], Unitext, București, 1997, p. 16.

<sup>9</sup> Jerzy Grotowski, *Teatru și ritual. Serieri esențiale* [Theatre and Ritual. Essential Writings], Nemira, București, 2014, p. 132.

In his writings, Grotowski argues strongly for the reshaping of the relation between actor and spectator. By doing away with the tendency to do theatre by imitation – clownish and stereotypical – the actor confesses to the audience, exposes himself without the use of lighting, make-up and scenery. Grotowski achieves closeness to the audience by transforming the space in such a way that he demolishes the concept of dividing the auditorium into two different sectors. The raising of the fourth wall brings the actors closer to the audience and facilitates interaction with them.

In the performance of *Kordian*, after *Slowacki*, the sector of the audience was the same as the one where the action took place. The space was the representation of a hospital ward where everyone was a patient. Put in the middle of the action, the audience was invited to co-create. The format of the performance was designed in such a way that the audience could have spontaneous reactions, join in to hum a song or even have lines.<sup>10</sup>

Grotowski's actors, in rehearsals for the show, used simulation. They imagined the possible reactions that might come from the audience, came up with a variety of responses and constructed different versions of continuing the show. The script was not, however, an improvised, spontaneous one; they chose the appropriate version according to the predictable reaction of the audience. Some spectators were carried away by the actors' proposal and were willing to participate with joy, sincerity and curiosity, others resisted, not necessarily deliberately, by inappropriate behaviour, but by getting nervous, trying to be funny or other manifestations that disturbed the performance. It was understood, however, that their reactions could be forced, unnatural and therefore couldn't be condemned. Being put in the middle of the action, they felt pressured and obliged to do something, anything.

After a while, in which he experimented with this way of approaching the audience, Grotowski came to the conclusion that the audience could not be educated in the way he wanted, and that in order to be able to understand the message of the performance, for the authenticity of the creation and the actor-spectator relationship, the audience needed a physical distance from the action. Division into sectors has thus become vital in the artistic process. Without this demarcation, chaos is created, and chaos jeopardizes any artistic act. The position of observer requires the audience to watch, but without forcing it to act directly, only emotionally, thus favouring the emergence of catharsis.

Grotowski was not alone in his desire to create a different, new and unique relationship with his audience. Artaud, through *the Theatre of Cruelty*, called for an

---

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 134.