

A young man with glasses and a dark hoodie, standing in a dark room with his arms outstretched, illuminated by a warm orange light.

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Methodology of Inclusive Theatre Practice with Young People with Autism

introduction

Inclusive art is not simply a fashionable term; it is a path toward profound social transformation, capable of changing the very nature of education, creativity, and professional development for people with disabilities. Inclusive education in the arts seeks to ensure accessibility, participation, and equal opportunities for everyone, regardless of physical, mental, or neurodivergent differences. Inclusive educational models aim to value each person's unique way of learning and self-expression rather than requiring individuals to adapt to rigid institutional norms.

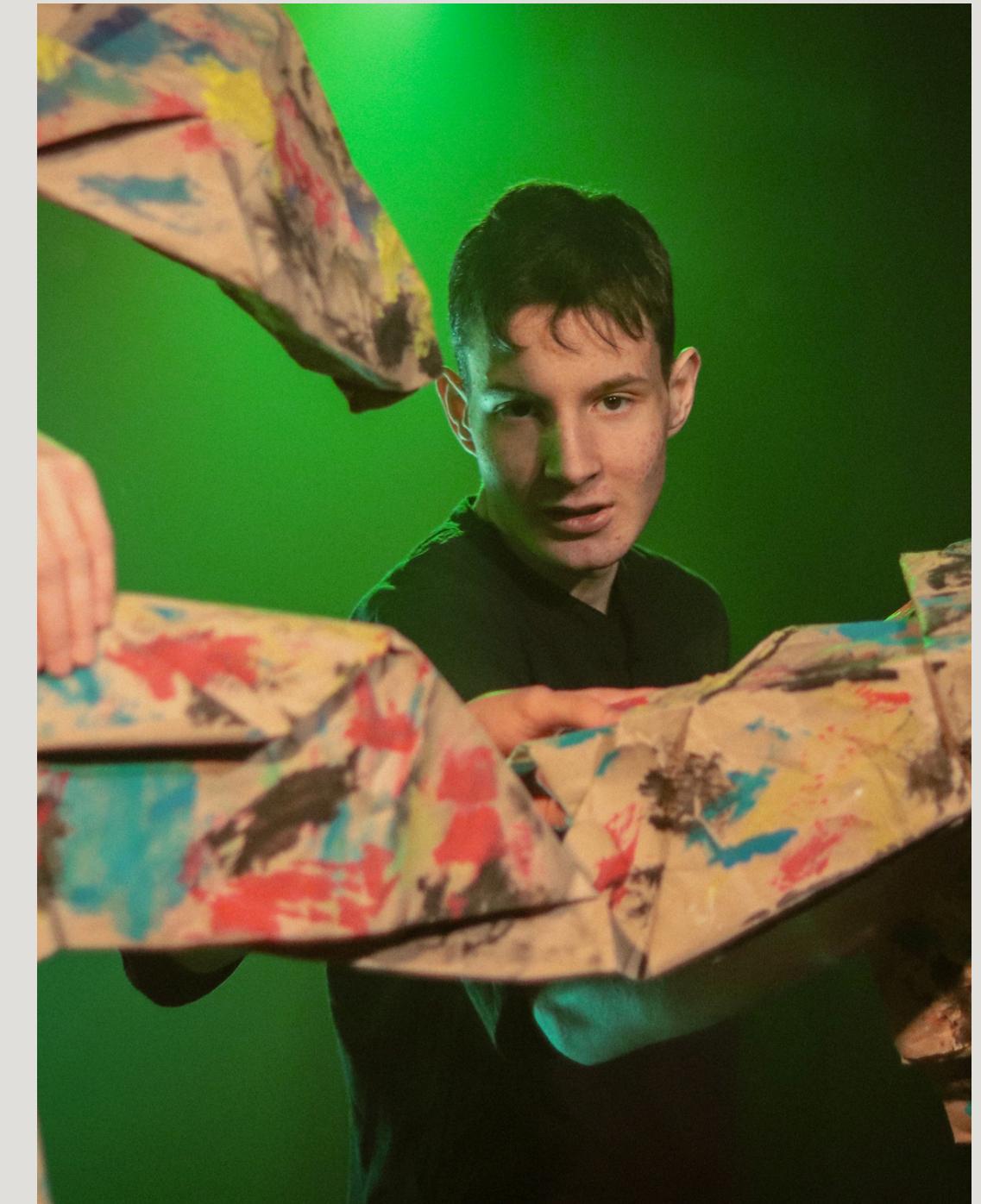
For educational institutions, inclusion means developing strategies and resources that support diversity at every level: from professional training for educators and the adaptation of teaching methods to the creation of a culture in which difference is recognized as a value rather than a problem. Schools and educational programs committed to inclusion focus on removing barriers—structural, social, and cultural—that prevent full participation in learning and creative processes.

This article presents an authorial methodology for inclusive theatre practice with young people with autism. At its core lies a fundamental shift in perspective: the goal is not to adapt the person to the theatre, but to adapt the theatre to the person. Theatre is understood here not as a system of norms and expectations, but as a flexible space in which different ways of perceiving, moving, communicating, and being present are equally valid. The methodology is grounded in principles of safety, predictability, voluntary participation, respect for personal boundaries, and ethical responsibility within the artistic process.

our goal

is to support people with disabilities in purposeful preparation for professional education in the fields of theatre and dance. Inclusive art should not be an exception; it should be a space of equal opportunities for all. This means rejecting patronizing approaches and the logic of “permitted participation” and instead creating educational pathways that enable genuine professional development, artistic agency, and long-term engagement with the arts.

We believe that inclusion is not only about changing environments but about transforming ways of thinking. Art becomes not merely a subject of study, but a powerful tool for self-expression, social inclusion, and creative autonomy—one that allows individuals who have long been excluded from professional artistic spaces to claim their place within them.



This text



presents an authorial methodology for conducting theatre sessions with young people with autism within an inclusive framework. The methodology is based on long-term practical work in inclusive theatre projects in different cultural and social contexts. It is intended for pedagogues, theatre practitioners, educators, and cultural workers who work with neurodivergent participants.

The foundation of the method is a shift in perspective: the task is not to adapt a person to theatrical norms, but to adapt theatre to the person. Theatre here is understood not as a system of requirements, but as a flexible space in which different ways of perceiving, moving, communicating, and being present are equally valid.

The methodology is grounded in the principles of safety, clarity, predictability, voluntary participation, and deep respect for individual boundaries and rhythms.

General Principles of Work

WORK WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

with autism requires a fundamental reconsideration of traditional theatrical pedagogy. Many classical theatre approaches are based on pressure, acceleration, competition, emotional provocation, and verbal dominance. Within this methodology, such approaches are consciously avoided.

THE PEDAGOGUE

does not demand expression, emotional openness, or productivity. Instead, the pedagogue creates conditions in which expression may emerge naturally, if and when the participant is ready. Silence, withdrawal, observation, repetition, and refusal are all recognized as meaningful forms of participation.

THE PEDAGOGICAL POSITION

is non-hierarchical. The pedagogue is responsible for structure, safety, and the overall framework, but does not position themselves as an authority over the inner experience of participants. Participants are treated as co-authors of the process, regardless of their verbal abilities or level of independence.



Safety as the Core of the Process



Psychological and physical safety are the absolute priority of the methodology. Without a sense of safety, no theatrical or creative process can take place. Safety is understood broadly. It includes predictable structure, clear communication, respect for personal space, sensory comfort, emotional acceptance, and the right to opt out at any moment without explanation. The pedagogue continuously monitors the group's state, paying attention to signs of overload, anxiety, or withdrawal. Any exercise or activity can be interrupted or modified if it becomes overwhelming for one or more participants. Mistakes are not corrected in a punitive or evaluative manner. There is no concept of failure within the process. Any action taken by a participant is treated as information, not as a problem.

Work with the group begins before the first session. At the preparatory stage, it is recommended to gather information from parents or caregivers through questionnaires or individual conversations. This information may include sensory sensitivities, communication preferences, triggers, calming strategies, interests, fears, and previous group experience.

This information serves as orientation, not as a prescription. In practice, participants often behave differently in a group than in a family context. The pedagogue remains open to revising initial assumptions based on direct observation.

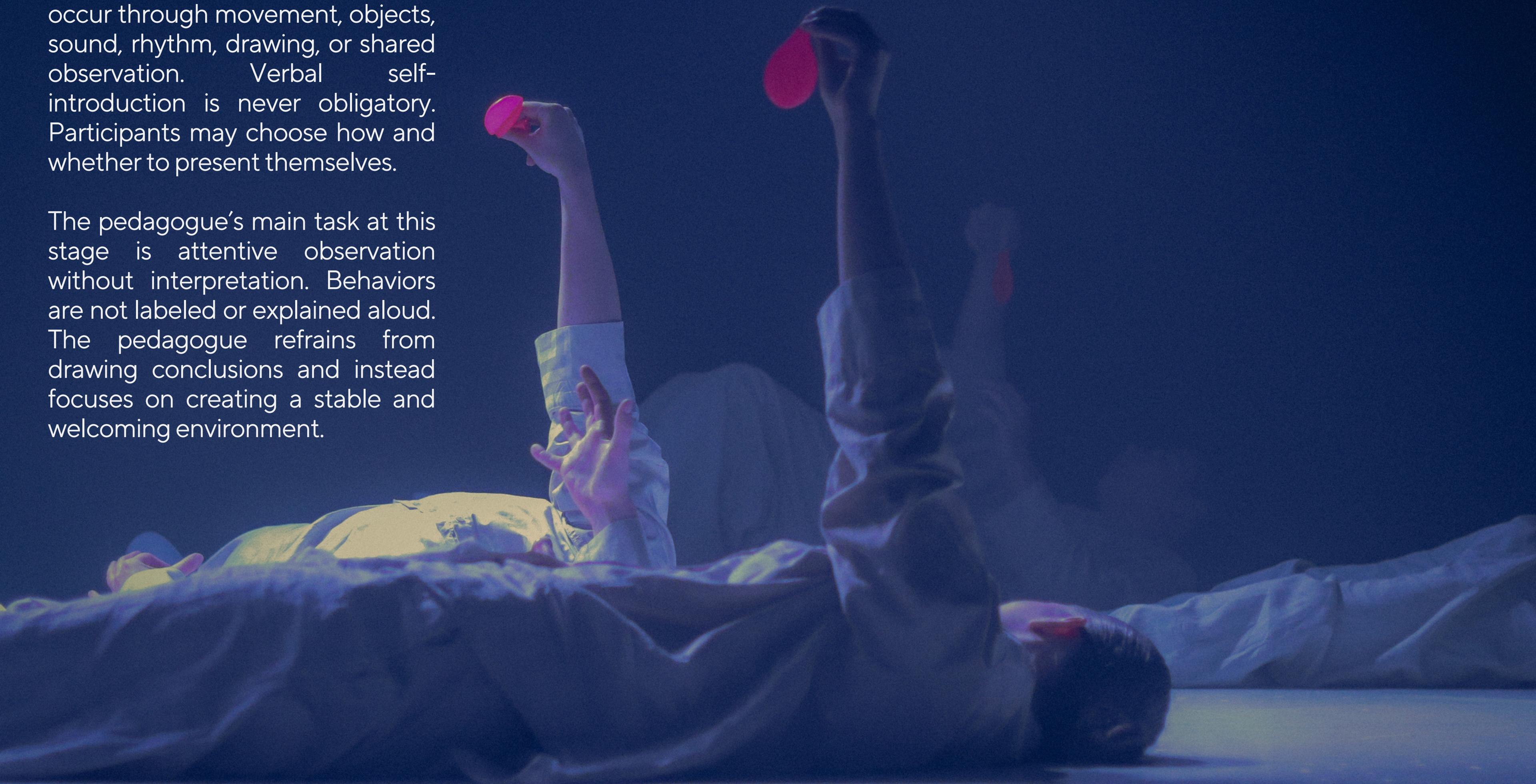
The first sessions are not intended for assessment or diagnosis. Their primary purpose is to establish trust and familiarity with the space, the pedagogue, and the group format. Activities at this stage are simple, repetitive, and non-demanding.

Initial Stage of Work with the Group



Getting to know each other may occur through movement, objects, sound, rhythm, drawing, or shared observation. Verbal self-introduction is never obligatory. Participants may choose how and whether to present themselves.

The pedagogue's main task at this stage is attentive observation without interpretation. Behaviors are not labeled or explained aloud. The pedagogue refrains from drawing conclusions and instead focuses on creating a stable and welcoming environment.



Work with Parents and Caregivers

Work with parents and caregivers is an integral part of the inclusive theatre process. Many parents experience anxiety related to expectations of progress, behavior, or future outcomes. One of the key pedagogical tasks is to shift attention from measurable results to lived process.

Regular communication with parents helps build trust and transparency. Feedback focuses on observations and process rather than evaluation or comparison.

Any home-based tasks or suggestions are strictly optional. They are intended to support continuity of interest, not to train skills or correct behavior. Examples include observing everyday movements, discussing images or stories, or attending cultural events together.

Inviting parents to open sessions or rehearsals allows them to see their children in a new context and helps demystify the theatrical process. This often changes parental perceptions of their children's abilities and autonomy.



Space and Physical Environment

The physical environment has a direct impact on participants' emotional regulation and sense of safety. The space should be clear, calm, and predictable.

Strong contrasts, aggressive colors, flickering light, and excessive visual or auditory stimuli should be avoided. Whenever possible, the space should allow for free movement and easy orientation.

Clear zoning of the space is essential. Separate areas should exist for work, rest, personal belongings, and breaks. Visual markers, simple maps, or pictograms can support orientation and reduce anxiety.

If possible, a dedicated quiet room should be available. This room is not a disciplinary space, but a resource for self-regulation. Participants should know that they can use it freely and without justification.

Inclusive theatre work cannot be carried out alone. A stable and well-coordinated team is essential.

The core role is that of the leading pedagogue, who is responsible for the artistic vision, methodological coherence, and overall structure. Supporting specialists or tutors may assist participants who need help with regulation, orientation, or communication. Support staff do not replace participants' agency. Their task is to enable participation, not to control behavior or speed up processes.

Whenever possible, inclusive groups should include neurotypical peers of a similar age. This creates a genuinely inclusive environment based on coexistence rather than segregation.

Team Structure and Professional Roles





Rehearsal Process and Understanding Theatre

From the very beginning, participants are introduced to theatre as a process rather than an outcome. They learn that a performance is created step by step and that every contribution is valuable.

For early performances, it is recommended to develop material together with the group or to adapt existing material to the participants' interests, rhythms, and modes of expression.

Participants gradually become familiar with all aspects of theatrical creation, including script development, scenography, costume, sound, movement, and stage presence.

Responsibility toward the audience is framed as an act of mutual respect, not as pressure or obligation.



Structure, Rituals, and Predictability

Predictability is especially important for participants with autism. Clear routines reduce anxiety and support orientation in time.

Each session follows a recognizable structure, such as greeting, warm-up, focused work, breaks, and closing ritual. The sequence may change, but the existence of a structure remains constant.

Rituals are developed together with the group and may include specific gestures, sounds, or phrases marking transitions.

Acting and Creative Work

A photograph of a person with glasses and a striped shirt, sitting in a dark room with purple lighting. The person is looking off to the side. The background is dark with some purple light.

Acting work begins with exploration rather than performance. Participants engage with themes through bodily images, movement, objects, or rhythm.

Exercises are introduced gradually, starting with observation and imitation and only later moving toward improvisation. Fixation on results is avoided.

Participants are informed about the purpose of each activity and are invited to contribute ideas. Their choices influence the development of scenes and material.



Work with Voice and Sound

Voice work is approached as exploration of breath, vibration, and bodily sensation rather than speech training.

Exercises include gentle breathing, humming, sound combined with movement, and resonance exploration. Clear articulation is never demanded.

Sound is treated as material equal to movement or objects and may exist independently of words.

Partnership and Group Interaction

Exercises for partnership develop attention, trust, and sensitivity to others.

Activities include mirror work, leading and following through movement or sound, and group improvisations without verbal communication.

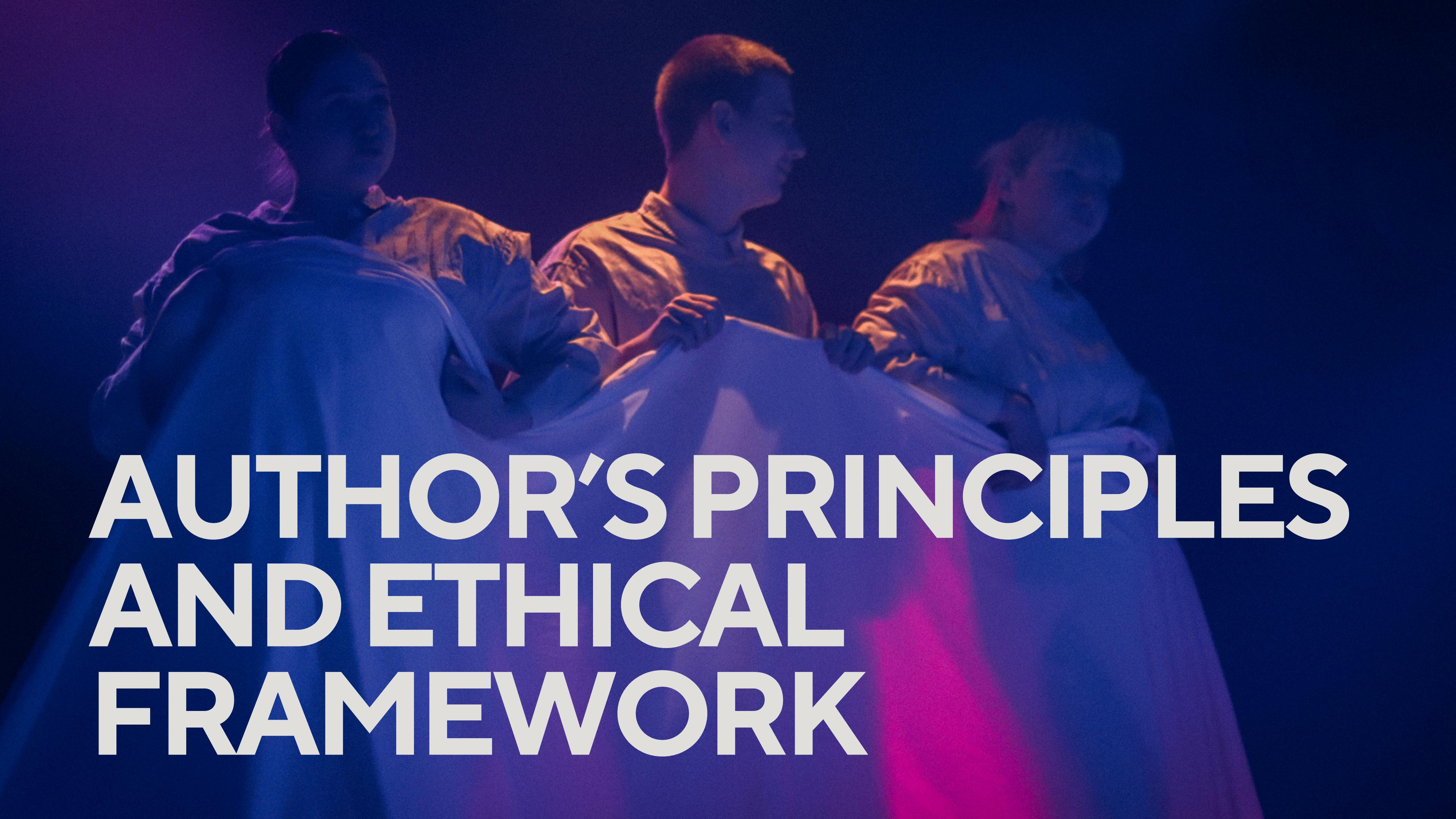
Boundaries are always discussed explicitly. Physical contact occurs only with clear consent and agreed forms.

Stage Movement

Stage movement supports bodily awareness, coordination, and spatial orientation.

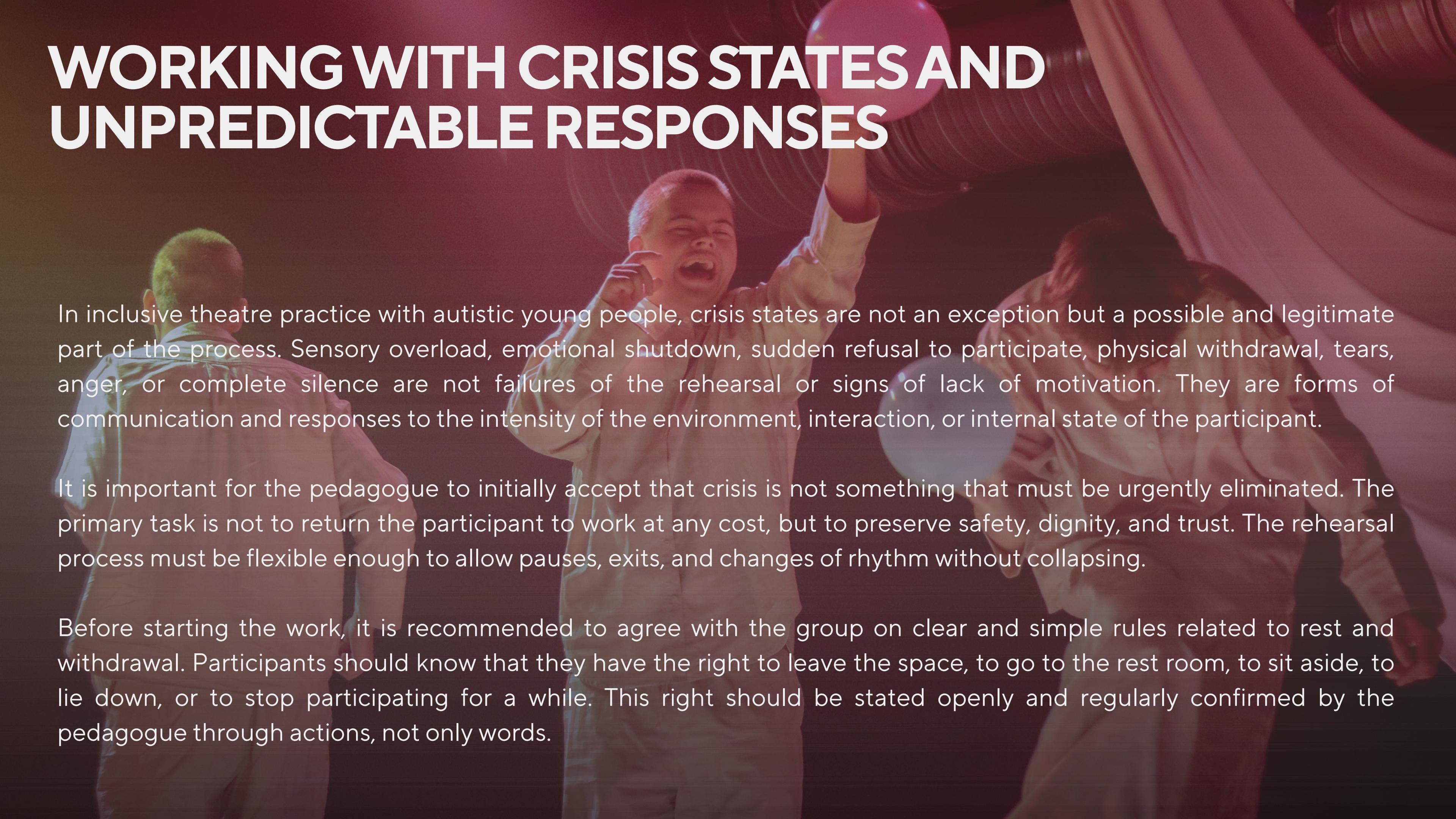
Exercises are adapted to individual abilities and introduced progressively. Demonstrations are slow, clear, and repeatable. Movement work includes exploration of speed, levels, rhythm, weight, and stillness.

Special attention is given to the connection between emotion and body without forcing expression.



AUTHOR'S PRINCIPLES AND ETHICAL FRAMEWORK

WORKING WITH CRISIS STATES AND UNPREDICTABLE RESPONSES



In inclusive theatre practice with autistic young people, crisis states are not an exception but a possible and legitimate part of the process. Sensory overload, emotional shutdown, sudden refusal to participate, physical withdrawal, tears, anger, or complete silence are not failures of the rehearsal or signs of lack of motivation. They are forms of communication and responses to the intensity of the environment, interaction, or internal state of the participant.

It is important for the pedagogue to initially accept that crisis is not something that must be urgently eliminated. The primary task is not to return the participant to work at any cost, but to preserve safety, dignity, and trust. The rehearsal process must be flexible enough to allow pauses, exits, and changes of rhythm without collapsing.

Before starting the work, it is recommended to agree with the group on clear and simple rules related to rest and withdrawal. Participants should know that they have the right to leave the space, to go to the rest room, to sit aside, to lie down, or to stop participating for a while. This right should be stated openly and regularly confirmed by the pedagogue through actions, not only words.

During a crisis situation, the pedagogue should reduce verbal communication to a minimum. Long explanations, questions, or attempts to reason often increase overload. Calm presence, predictable actions, and a stable tone of voice are more important than finding the right words. If physical contact is not previously agreed upon, it should not be initiated.

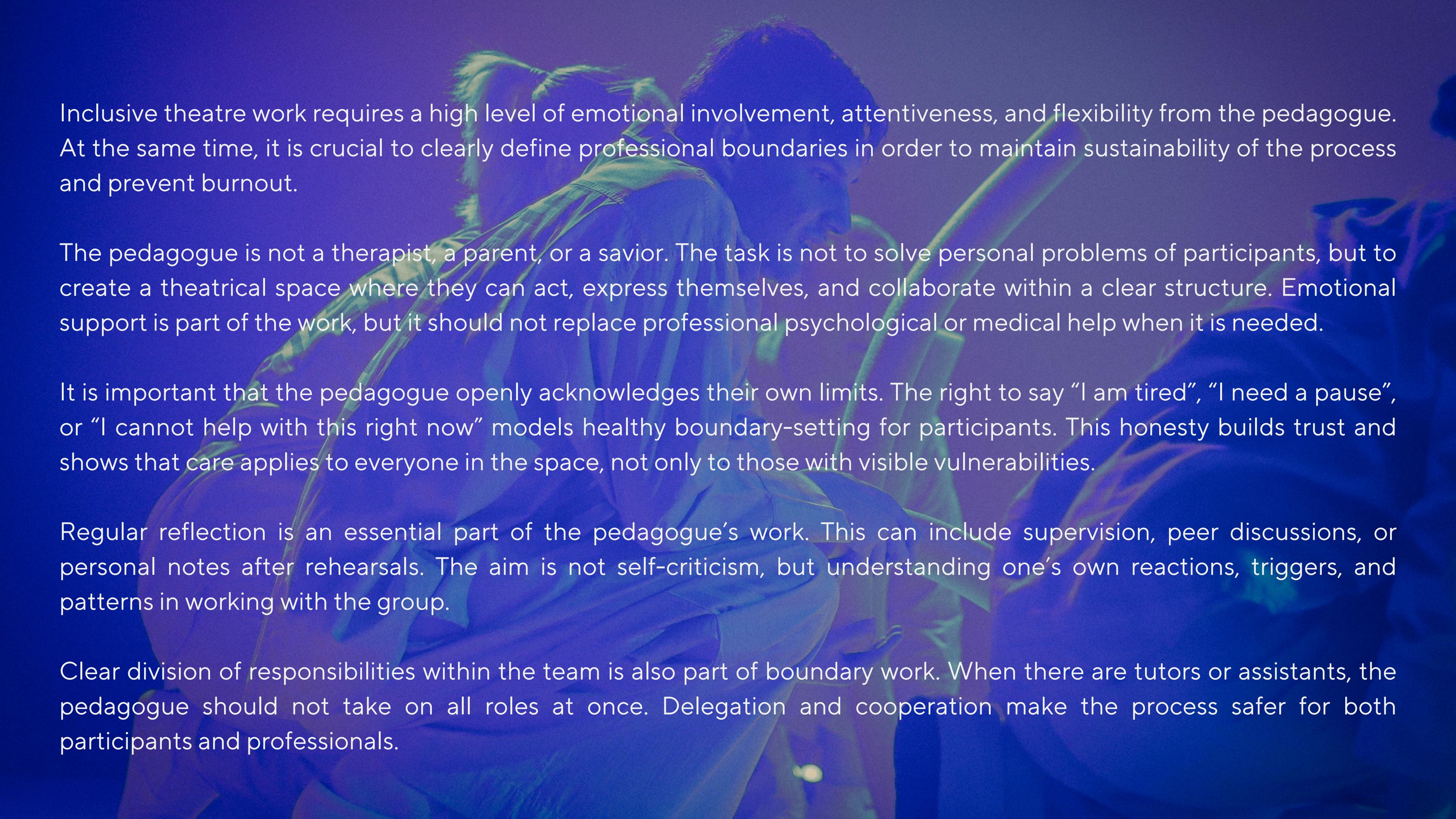
If one participant is in crisis, the pedagogue must also hold the group. It is useful to have prepared neutral activities that can be offered to the rest of the participants, such as slow movement, breathing with sound, working individually with objects, or quiet drawing. This helps to avoid turning the crisis into a spectacle and protects the dignity of the person experiencing it.

After the situation has passed, it is important not to analyze it publicly or to demand explanations. Reflection, if needed, should happen later and individually, and only if the participant is ready. The pedagogue's role is to observe patterns over time and adapt the structure of rehearsals accordingly, rather than correcting individual behavior.



A group of people are gathered in a dimly lit room, possibly a backstage area or a backstage. In the foreground, a person is holding a red folder or book open, showing it to others. The lighting is low, with some red and blue hues, creating a dramatic and focused atmosphere. The people are dressed in casual to semi-casual attire.

POSITION OF THE PEDAGOGUE AND PROFESSIONAL BOUNDARIES



Inclusive theatre work requires a high level of emotional involvement, attentiveness, and flexibility from the pedagogue. At the same time, it is crucial to clearly define professional boundaries in order to maintain sustainability of the process and prevent burnout.

The pedagogue is not a therapist, a parent, or a savior. The task is not to solve personal problems of participants, but to create a theatrical space where they can act, express themselves, and collaborate within a clear structure. Emotional support is part of the work, but it should not replace professional psychological or medical help when it is needed.

It is important that the pedagogue openly acknowledges their own limits. The right to say “I am tired”, “I need a pause”, or “I cannot help with this right now” models healthy boundary-setting for participants. This honesty builds trust and shows that care applies to everyone in the space, not only to those with visible vulnerabilities.

Regular reflection is an essential part of the pedagogue’s work. This can include supervision, peer discussions, or personal notes after rehearsals. The aim is not self-criticism, but understanding one’s own reactions, triggers, and patterns in working with the group.

Clear division of responsibilities within the team is also part of boundary work. When there are tutors or assistants, the pedagogue should not take on all roles at once. Delegation and cooperation make the process safer for both participants and professionals.



ETHICS AND LANGUAGE OF INCLUSIVE THEATRE

Ethics is not an abstract concept in inclusive theatre; it is expressed through everyday decisions, language, and artistic choices. The way participants are described, addressed, and represented directly influences how they perceive themselves and how they are perceived by the audience.

In this method, participants are not viewed as patients, clients, or objects of help. They are artists and collaborators, regardless of their level of experience or abilities. The theatre process is not therapy, although it may have therapeutic effects. The primary goal remains artistic work and shared creation.

Special attention should be paid to language. Avoiding deficit-based or medicalized terminology helps to shift focus from limitations to individual ways of perception and expression. It is important to speak about needs, sensitivities, and preferences rather than diagnoses.

When working towards a performance, the pedagogue must constantly reflect on questions of representation. The personal stories, behaviors, or specific traits of participants should never be used to shock, entertain, or provoke pity. Consent, agency, and understanding of what is shown on stage are fundamental.



Public communication about the project also requires ethical attention. Descriptions for festivals, funders, and media should emphasize the artistic value of the work, not the vulnerability of the participants. Inclusive theatre is not about demonstrating difference, but about creating a space where different forms of presence and expression are equally valid and where artistic work is built on respect, consent, and shared responsibility, allowing all participants to be fully recognized as co-authors and agents of the process.

In conclusion, it is important to emphasize that inclusive art is not a privilege and not a special case, but a necessary component of the contemporary educational and cultural landscape. Today, theatre and dance education must move beyond exclusivity and become spaces that are accessible, supportive, and respectful of all forms of human difference.

Working with inclusion in the arts is not a temporary trend; it is a sustainable strategy for social integration and empowerment of people with disabilities. We strive for a future in which creative self-realization is a realistic and accessible path for everyone, and in which educational programs recognize and support the individual needs, rhythms, and strengths of each student.

This project reflects that vision. Its aim is not only to teach artistic skills, but to create creative communities in which every participant feels valued, empowered, and recognized as a co-author of the process. We seek an artistic landscape where diversity is understood as a source of richness rather than a limitation, and where all participants have the right to be seen, heard, and taken seriously as artists.

SUCH STEPS – FROM SHAPING INCLUSIVE EDUCATIONAL CULTURES TO DEVELOPING CONCRETE PROFESSIONAL PATHWAYS – HAVE THE POWER TO TRANSFORM THE FUTURE OF THEATRE AND DANCE. THEY OPEN THESE ART FORMS TO GREATER HUMANITY, FAIRNESS, AND DEPTH, ENSURING THAT THEY REFLECT THE FULL SPECTRUM OF HUMAN EXPERIENCE AND EXPRESSION.