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ACT-ABLE
**drama education lab for young people with
disabilities**

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Intellectual Output 6
“ACT-ABLE method”
Good practices of inclusive theatrical methodologies

By Spazio Reale Formazione
with the collaboration of all Partners
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Introduction

The ACT-ABLE Project - *drama education lab for young people with disabilities* is a strategic partnership supporting innovations of the school sector, this partnership is composed of Fondazione Spazio Reale, being the applicant, Soccorso Clown (Italy), Fondazione Toscana Spettacolo (Italy), University of Usak (Turkey) and Residui Teatro (Spain). The project started in September 2020 and ends in December 2022, as a few months of extension were requested due to the Covid.

The project wants to favor the educative inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities through inclusive methods such as theatre, with innovative methodologies such as physical comedy and visual theatre, storytelling, dance-theater and vocalism as instruments of personal potential and enhancing their learning abilities.

This Project starts from multi-yearly experience of the concerned partners based on the idea that guarantees the actual function of the right to study and training, is one of the main factors that mainly touches the world of the disabled. As this is an important condition to the aim of their complete integration and inclusion in a social and working life. It is intended for children and youths with intellectual disability, the age range aimed at this educational cannot be decided with chronological strictness, both for the type of disability and for the variables that coincide on the advantageous participation to the proposed course. Generally, the project is aimed at students within the range of first and second grades of the secondary school.

The project included:

- Five days training course for the staff, to share their own methods of inclusive theatre and activate a common method to use during the project.
- Drawing IO1, the European guidelines which contain the methodology to use during the inclusive theatrical pathways in Italy, Turkey and Spain.
- The realization of the inclusive theatrical laboratories in Italy, Turkey and Spain.
- The creation of the theatrical group ACT-ABLE, made up of actors/mentors and the youths that have participated in the inclusive theatrical pathways held in Italy, as an example and inspiration for the birth of other mixed theatrical companies at a European level.
- The realization of the present document, which contains, based on the results obtained during the laboratories, good methodological ways of inclusive theatre.

Through these activities the project intends to improve the learning capacity of young people, help the scholastic institution with a new and inclusive offer, with an exchange of good ways between mentors and European organizations that use these inclusive theatrical methods; form professionals and make aware the stakeholders and the local communities through these artistically inclusive events.



1. Brief description of theatrical laboratories in Italy, Turkey and Spain

1.1 Italy

The activities of theatrical laboratories in Italy have started on June 2021. The pedagogical coordination of the training process has been led by Elisa Consagra, Christian Prestia and Caterina Turi of Soccorso Clown and the meetings have been carried out together with Laura Belli, Ettore Marrani and Lorenzo Torracchi from Fondazione Toscana Spettacolo.

In the first phase the team of dedicated Italian professionals were carefully crafting their way firstly to create understanding among the participants with differences disabilities in order to establish as much as it possible an homogeneous group which is capable to listen, to understand each other and to communicate overcoming as much as it possible they personal mental and physical limitation, always under the direction and the guidelines of the staff. In the second phase the team started to introduce the theatrical elements and bases of improvisations adapted to the specific circumstances regarding the development of intergroup communication. Particularly there were employed the elements of Soccorso Clown's method for training of actor-clown modulated for the specific group of the participants.

Italian partners, under the coordination of **Soccorso Clown**, will realize inclusive theater courses through the physical comedy methodologies and the visual theater.

1.2 Turkey

Studies that started in October 2022 were conducted under the coordination of Meral Özçınar. During the workshops, Duygu Ebru Öngen Corsini designed materials suitable for participants' individual interests and storytelling techniques, Kerim Dünder adapted theatrical plays and improvisations to be compatible with educational materials, and Özlem Duğan conducted communication exercises within the group. In addition, UNIMA member Deniz Özgökbel provided support with puppetry techniques.

Although storytelling is often associated with verbal communication, but in reality, it is a special method that intertwines all forms of art, thereby gaining strength by being combined with different disciplines. Theatre provides an opportunity for storytelling to intersect with other disciplines. From this point of view, we placed our participants' story in the main story by believing that every person has a valuable story and that a story becomes stronger when it touches the story of another. We produced a frame story involving multiple interrelated stories. We designed improvisations and theatrical plays based on this concept. The limitations of the participants in communication due to mental disabilities, especially verbal communication, were overcome by puppet design and the voicing of designed puppets, hence the limited use of words became an advantage. Other designed materials are based on the transformation of easily accessible materials that can be found everywhere in daily life as well. The basic logic here is the idea that all the details in life can be a part of storytelling. This mindset has changed the way of participants view on objects in their surroundings even outside of the theatre workshops. Theatre permeates all aspects of life.



1.3 Spain

The activities have been carried out since January 2022. The pedagogical coordination of the training process has been led by Viviana Bovino, and the meetings have been carried out together with Eirini Sfyri.

Viviana Bovino and Eirini Sfyri have been companions in this transformative process for participants, teachers and auxiliary personnel; we chose this word because we identify ourselves with those who facilitate a journey from a perspective that is based on active listening, non-formal education methods, the approach of the game as a primary tool for the development of the person and the development of adaptation strategies, as a necessary basis to allow the participation of each and every one. The task of the companions has been to make their skills available, but always in relation and in dialogue with the circumstance and with the specific demands of each participant. This is why we believe that we have been able to share with the participants but, to the same extent, we have been able to learn a lot from the attitude and stake of each person with whom we have created an interaction during the meetings.

2. The theatrical methodologies used

Italian partners, under the coordination of **Soccorso Clown**, will realize inclusive theater courses through the physical comedy methodologies and the visual theater.

Soccorso Clown's method of training professional performing artists and drama actors, actors-clowns, who want to improve their visual theater techniques, applied for the persons with disabilities, based on the discoveries of the traditional theatrical training by K. Stanislavsky, Michael Chekhov, Meyerhold and the "Manuel of Clown-therapy" by Vladimir Olshansky (Edizione Dino Audino, 2016) and introduces an innovative approach found in the latest research in the field of quantum physics, which considers that the human being is not a passive observer of events, but an active creator of his reality.

The Soccorso Clowns's method utilizes many concepts from Michael Chekhov's book *On the Actor's Art*. From there came the idea of working with the energetic centers of the human body. *Mime Spoken Here*, by the wonderful Tony Montanaro, had strong influence on the basis of method, especially his ideas about the role of the "ego".

The proposed method applied for people with disabilities, helps to better understand the mechanism of one's mental and physical apparatus and to participate consciously and interactively in the learning process. The method proposes the tools to re-evaluate and rediscover one's own talents and bring it to its maximum potential.

Usak University's methodologies have been based on storytelling: write and perform own story. As is known, storytelling is one of the ancient therapeutical methods: just think at the Prince Shas Sehriyar of One thousand and one night.

Each student learned the storytelling methods of telling and narrating their own stories. The stories has been narrated with words, rhythm, gestures, and dance. They used percussion instruments because the rhythm gives fluidity and catchiness to the story. As a result of the improvisation, role playing, dance, and music during the meetings, have been developed as methods to create, tell the story through physical elements, audio and video.



Residui Teatro's methodologies are based on theater-dance and singing techniques, for people with different intellectual and sensorial levels. Residui Teatro defends the idea that Performing Arts involves a personal and communitarian transformation. Physical theater methods, in particular, also benefit the person on a psychophysical and emotional level.

The practical work are focused on the body and the principles that activates the body and the senses; personal and group energy; personal and group emotion; the emotion and the voice; listening; personal space, the space of the other, scenic and collective space; improvisation, in couples, in groups, individually and through the use of tales; theater games with imagination, fantasy and fictional creation; adaptability of the theater activities according to the demands of the group with functional diversity.

3. Participants: description of target group

ITALY:

Two groups of participants have been created: 5 boys and 7 girls between 11 and 23 years old.

The Italian participants were characterized by different kinds of disabilities from autism, down syndrome, intellectual and physical disabilities. Some of the participants had a very high degree of functional diversity with several cases of delay and/or developmental delay together with motor and/or language and blindness but motivated to learn and by the perspective to participate in the theatrical performances presented to the public.

TURKEY:

The group consists of 17 people, 5 boys and 12 girls; 7 boys and girls between 7-12 years old; 10 boys and girls 15-22 years old.

Turkish participants consist of individuals with intellectual disability for different reasons. Young adults with Down syndrome, autism, learning difficulties and multiple disorders were selected. Some participants are children who have been diagnosed with down syndrome as well as autism.

The main feature of the group is their interest in theatrical work. Two of the participants were good in speaking skills, 3 people were good in terms of using puppets and similar materials in terms of motor muscle skills, but all participants had a significantly higher interest and skill in dance. All of our participants were very positive and had a great interest in comedy elements.

SPAIN:

Three groups of participants have been created: 8 boys and girls between 7 and 13 years old; 6 pre-adolescents and adolescents between 12 and 16 years old; 4 teenagers between 15 and 17 years old.

The participants have been characterized by their special interest in the activity and strong motivation to get involved. Each participant had a level of autonomy, mobility, and cognitive development different from the others. And although they wanted to create groups establishing age or the level of autonomy and participation as a common element, we cannot affirm that there was homogeneity.



On the contrary, the participants have put us in front of a dialogue with the paradigm "Conquest of differences"¹ which is one of the methodological axes in our pedagogical approach.

Regarding the state of health, all the participants had in common a disorder of the nervous system, epilepsy. Some of the participants had a very high degree of functional diversity with several cases of delay and/or developmental delay together with motor and/or language disorder and conduct disorder, reduced mobility, severe epilepsy and difficulty in language, coordination and orientation.

All participants with a low level of autonomy have been supported by auxiliary personnel from the institute. For each group of participants there were, on average, two Actable companions, two auxiliary personnel, one teacher.

4. Starting of the activities, presentations, group creation

About the sessions in Italy:

In Italy the first meeting was signified by the mutual curiosity of the participants and the team, and the search of the first approach to the common language through delicate exercises in order to know each other and overcome the first difficulties of the communications. The first meeting created the foundation for the approach to communication and group work considering each participant's particular conditions. It ended with the first group exercise consisting of the proper evaluation and feedback of each participant.

In the following creation of the group mostly were employed the artistic language of actor-clown method developed by Soccorso Clown and included various phases to discover various hidden creative possibilities of each participant starting with an individual (teacher-pupil) face-to-face approach. One of the aims of the first phase was not only to open up the possibilities of each person but to establish an important trust between the teachers and participants and between participants themselves and which was developed during the all the process of the project.

Each session was started with the warm up by creating a circle where everyone could sit down on a chair in order that the participants would be able to observe each other including the persons in the wheelchair. Then one by one, each participant with the help of the trainers was asked to tell in synthesis one good thing which they had been doing during the past week. Each one was expressing themselves in their particular way. In some cases when some of the people had a speech limitation the coordinator would lead the person asking the more detailed questions and suggesting the answers which could be approved or disapproved by the participant. In this kind of approach the people with the speech limitation were able to create their own stories and be included in the group exercises. Among other exercises from the start of the session in particular, we always used the "mirror exercise": organizing the group in one circle we proposed to each person one by one, to invent a few movements in slow paise, which were simultaneously copied by the rest of the group as in a mirror. This simple improvisation was received with enthusiasm and laughter and activated the work of psychophysical apparatus and the much needed span of attention, group collaboration, fantasy, concentration on the simple actions, memory, self awareness and self-confidence. From the very beginning it was important to create the proper structures of each session which could be repeated

¹ Paradigm developed by the director of the Odin Teatret (Denmark), Eugenio Barba.



and memorized partially by the participants according to individual possibilities. Eventually this approach sustained their own security and self-assurance.

In the beginning of the laboratories we introduced a series of exercises in order that participants could remember each other's name.

As the project proceeded we introduced various actor-clown skills exercises-laboratories: improvisation with objects; work with the emotions; improvisation on the theme; laboratory of the basic juggling (colorful juggling scarf); dance laboratory (construction of the simple choreography with music accompaniment); verbal, "one word" improvisations under the different given circumstances (for example two people who meet each other using just one word "hello" with different emotions according to the circumstances: meeting first time or after a long time, with different relationship between them, mother-child, famous singer and his follower, friends etc.); liberal group improvisations which later has been developed into the proper sketches on various themes; single improvisations of each person with objects and different emotions according to the circumstances (the hat, the jacket); and other laboratories directed to the development of actor-clown individual skills specifically modeled for the participants with their particularly limitations.

Every session was concluded with exercises regarding the possibility for each person to express their impression of the session of the day and sharing the particular emotion which each participant would like to carry home.

All the proceedings of the project from time to time were evaluated by all the staff involved.

About the sessions in Turkey:

At the beginning of the project, small ice-breaking activities were held to get to know the participants. In these activities, exercises were carried out for participants to get to know each other and the trainers who would run the project. Participants gathered in a circle and expressed themselves through voice, words, body movements, and dance. This expression helped them to introduce themselves. This was developed in every activity. This was a very entertaining, stress-reducing start-up exercise that prepared participants for theater study.

Each session consists of five stages:

Ice Breaking Activity: Since our participants are interested in dance and music, each session started with music and free dance. This exercise not only warmed up the body but also prepared the participants for theater study.

Voice-Breath-Speech Exercises: Voice-breath-speech exercises were strictly applied in each workshop due to the limitations in the participants' speech skills. Problems such as speaking with a limited number of words, unclear words, and low volume were attempted to be resolved through proper breathing techniques such as diaphragmatic breathing and rhymes; as a result, significant changes were observed.

Theatrical Games: Theatrical games were played for getting to know each other and building trust. Examples of these games include sculpture, mirror, and factory games.

Improvisation: As the Turkish team, the individual interests and skills of our participants were determined and the materials were designed accordingly. For instance, maracas and rhythm instruments were created from recycled products and improvisations were made with these instruments.



Finger, hand and string puppets were designed for the storytelling method which we developed and these puppets were used in storytelling. Selected situations and characters from Western and Turkish fairy tales were animated with puppets Little Red Riding Hood, Alice, Crow and Fox, and the Flying Carpet are a few examples.

As the project progressed, a game story was formulated by combining storytelling improvisations with rhythm improvisations.

Closing Session: Each session was concluded with the group holding hands and celebrating themselves loudly.

After the study, the trainers evaluated the daily work, and improvisations and material design planning were made for the next studies. In these evaluations, the findings were also noted by making one-to-one interviews with the families from time to time. These findings were evaluated in designing subsequent studies.

About the sessions in Spain:

From the pedagogical coordination, the objectives of each session and the training process have been established and the development calendar of the sessions has been defined.

The planning has been constantly evaluated from the companions and with the teachers of the school; This has made it possible to apply readjustments in relation to specific demands of the participants or to the circumstances that have arisen during the development of the sessions. A strategy of action and adaptation of method, language and activities has been established that has allowed a coherent response to the variables that have been presented during the meetings.

The first meeting with the groups had the objective of getting to know the group in more detail and understanding their needs and interests. Applying exercises accessible to all, it has been possible to verify autonomy, self-esteem, fine mobility, level of group collaboration, individual and group play, relationship with auxiliary personnel and teachers, response to the proposals and the companions of the Actable project. Activities based on different artistic languages have been carried out, among others: yoga, coordination exercises, breathing practices, handling objects, songs and storytelling, rhythmic exercises. This variety has been offered with the intention of being able to identify which discipline aroused the interest of the participants and to analyze the relationship between the proposals with indicators such as age/ level of autonomy/ state of health.

A fixed structure has been proposed for each session; although the activities have been constantly retouched; Having a recognizable structure has favored the group in the process of becoming familiar with the proposal, being able to foresee the "future" and its consequences, limiting stress, accepting with motivation the variables that, in a propaedeutic way, have been added to progress in the process. development of motor and cognitive skills.

1. Landing

Each class has started with a first "landing"; The participants stood in a circle and recounted especially relevant experiences, dreams, wishes. This ritual has built a strong and intimate relationship within the group and with us as companions.

To follow the activity "Hello, how are you?"; Through a song, voice, body, fine mobility, group relationship, memory and rhythm have been worked in a playful and fun way.



Depending on the age of the participants, the melody and rhythm has been adapted. With the little ones group, a very sweet melody has been used and with the group of adolescents, it has become a Rap.

2. Zero position and warm up

In each session, the experiential anatomy has been worked through a "self-ception" exercise "zero position". A warm up for the parts of the body has been developed, to activate muscles and joints, to perceive them, to recognize them. It has been very important to look for adaptation strategies because each participant had a different need for support.

3. Training

Some training exercises coming from the performing arts have been developed, which allow activation at the psycho-physical level of the person. The basic paradigm is to consider the person as a holistic unit in which different levels coexist at the same time (physical body, energy, emotions, thoughts, etc.) which are activated through these proposals.

Depending on the age of the participants, their autonomy, level of care, etc. an adaptation strategy had to be applied so that the entertainment proposals were accessible.

One of the objectives of the training was to put the participants in front of new challenges that are especially propitious for their development process and offer them the possibility of observing the possibilities that each person can develop to face the solution of the problem.

In this phase, breathing exercises, voice exercises, rhythmic exercises have been applied; group games to relate to the space, the group, to music, action games in motion to explore other possibilities of moving and energies, etc.

4. Improvisation and creation

Theater and dance games have been worked (in groups, in pairs or individually); with the support of the companions, the participants have improvised, chosen, created and repeated some sequences of actions. Improvisation dynamics have been developed from the use of objects (elastic fabrics, paper threads, feathers, etc.), the use of images, drawings of animals and sensory games. Choosing some actions and repeating the improvisations has turned the proposal into small scenes.

5. Sharing

An important part of creation is sharing it! This is why in the final phase of the meeting, the participants have shared (all together or in front of their classmates) scenes, songs, stories, etc.

6. Closing of the experience

With the little ones and pre-adolescents, the sessions have been closed with an animated reading of an illustrated book.

With teenagers, this phase has gradually turned into the creation of improvised stories. Taking as a stimulus, different objects taken from "The box of secrets" * each participant invented a story to say goodbye to the session.

To definitively close the session: a song and the recap of all the activity carried out, to allow the participants to visualize/ memorize the routine.



The theme that has become the central axis of the training proposal has been emotions.

The choice of this theme has been defined as a result of the analysis of the demands of the groups and with the intention of approaching the subject, and investigating it from different perspectives and artistic languages.

The youngest students have worked on the subject from symbolic language and using group creation (dance, theater and song). Pre-adolescents have developed group and collaborative work, reaching a collective creation in a very organic and non-competitive way. With the adolescents we have worked on developing a character.

The training process ended with the recording of three small audiovisual pieces from each of the groups that were part of the Act-Able documentary (Spain).

* Story improvisation game based on the SECRETS BOX tool developed by the pedagogue Maria Montessori.

5. Creation of the performing setting

In the organization of setting, the role of the learning environment in favoring or hindering communication and the relationship between students and between students and trainers must never be forgotten.

Installations/access/furniture/equipment:

- Accessible space with ramps, restrooms and lounges.
- Seat belts, headrests, etc.
- Foam rubber in the corners of the furniture, diaphanous space, no objects that can disturb the floor (cables, etc.).
- Clearly signal toilets, exits, etc.
- Separation between workspace versus everyday space.
- Possibility to modulate the lighting/wood floor.
- Maintain a work structure: wellcome-circle, warming up/games, training (body's coordination, rhythm, fine mobility, kinesthetic response, voice, use of objects, etc.) improvisation, creation, sharing, closure.
- Adapting the rules of the activity (roles, times of execution, distance, etc.).
- Augmenting or reducing the space of activity.
- Provide areas with limited use.
- Provide "the help" that might be requested and given by the companions. Support is not a substitute for doing in your place, i.e. children.
- Theater space condition:
 - a) stage no less than 6 x 5 meters.
 - b) access to the public with a small ladder or ramp in the center of the stage.
 - c) four black wings and black background.
 - d) light and audio equipment;
 - e) dressing rooms with mirrors and adapted toilets.
 - f) make up, necessary costumes and props: masks, puppets etc.
 - g) stage set design for the show.



- h) guarantee the possibility of realizing a minimum of two rehearsals before the performance.

6. Necessary experts

The groups were led by teachers, trainers and actors with many years of work experience in working through theater with people of all ages with or without functional diversity in different social contexts.

Observation and participation by psychologists and pedagogists are recommended, where necessary.

The experts need to have separate meetings before, in the middle and at the end of the program. It will be necessary to consider the impact of the activities.

At the end of each workshop the experts met and discussed the activities just concluded, their impressions, the behavior of the children, the results and progress obtained. All these details are reported in an observation diary that summarize the obtained results.

7. Useful tools

Some useful tools used during the workshops, which played a significant role, were:

- **Different ways of execution:** variation and adaptation of execution of the activity.
- **Increase the complexity:** start from slow to fast; from big objects to small that require another type of ability in order to handle it; from smooth to hard; from simple to a more articulated trajectory.
- **The repetition of exercises:** repeat the same exercises, facilitates the assimilation but also is a way to train the participants in order to be able to repeat some scenic material or the whole performance.
- **The rules:** few and simple rules but constant in them.
- **Work routine:** maintain the same work structure, that helps the participants to have some kind of control about the future and offers them more tranquility.
- **Peer education:** let people work together, create together, share together.
- **Make mistakes:** to use the mistakes in order to invent new possibilities, to improve other abilities, to discover new paths and to proceed in the process of learning.
- **Exercises:** exercises with own body, vocal exercises, breathing exercises, imitation, mirroring, pictures, etc.

8. Communication tools

Theater, games, individual and group activities, music, can greatly enhance the linguistic development of children and young people with this type of difficulty.

Here are some tools in order to build the bridge that helps the communication:

- **Effective:** allow us to obtain and transmit information.
- **Motivating:** promotes disinhibition.
- **Alternatives:** use different techniques in order to reach the other, gestural, vocal, puppets, pictograms etc.
- **Language:** clear, short phrases, non-symbolic.



- **Different conditions of communication:** in some situations it's useful separated communication, while in others communication in a circle.
- **Provide help:** companions can provide “the help” that might be requested. Although, remember that to support is not a substitute for doing in your place.

In all cases it is important not to overcharge the information.

9. Useful objects

The use of objects can significantly improve the realization of concrete and specific actions.

The introduction of the objects has to happen step by step in order to facilitate the concentration of the participants.

During the theatrical paths, the following objects were used: balloons, feathers, masks, boxes, tissue, hats.

Other objects were specifically created for the project, such as puppets.

10. The role of the relation with parents

Parents play a crucial part in their children's education, especially when it concerns the children's functional diversity.

Specific interviews with parents were periodically organized, to update them on the results achieved by their children.

11. The theatrical “company”

In the laboratories that took place in Italy, an effective mixed theatre company was created, made up of 6 professional operators and 11 students with functional diversity.

At the beginning of the project Fondazione Toscana Spettacolo Onlus decided to involve professionals who could collaborate with Soccorso Clown trainers in the workshops hosted at Spazio Reale. Subsequently, 3 operators were selected to follow the entire laboratory directed by Soccorso Clown, with the purpose of creating two well-matched mixed working groups, aimed by the belief that the possibility of working with heterogeneous subjects could be an enrichment for everyone and bring interesting ideas to the group.

To this end 6 professionals, involved by FTS, could participate to the *LTTA – Short-term joint staff training events Training on Inclusive Theater as didactic methodology*, that took place between January and February 2021, enriching their skills and studying in deep the methodologies of the international partners. Afterwards, 3 operators were selected to follow the whole laboratories directed by Soccorso Clown, thanks to a fee provided by FTS. In this way we were able to guarantee the continuity of the experience for operators and students and give a fair compensation to the professionals involved, as well as more closely following the children and taking care of their needs. The result is a close-knit and heterogeneous working group, able to stage a complete show, where diversity on stage is an element of enrichment and the expressive possibilities of the individual artists on stage are enhanced..



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The resulting show went on stage on 16th June 2022 with the title *Music All*, it was then reworked in the months of October and November 2022 to be staged on 15th December 2022 with the title *Music All (R) evolution*.

Conclusions

The ACT-ABLE project pursued the following results:

- The offer of specific educational paths in the field of theater therapy, aimed at young people with psychic or mental disabilities of various kinds, in the European context.
- The creation of inclusive artistic theatrical events in the European Project partner countries.
- The exchange of good practices between trainers in order to share at European level new models of intervention, enriching and stimulating personal itineraries, with respect to one's way of experiencing culture, art, discomfort, with a view to sustainability and transferability of such models and experiences.
- The realization of a final show that will involve young people with disabilities and expert trainers from the various European countries participating in the project.
- The production of materials related to the exchange of good practices and the training of trainers.
- The production of materials and recordings related to the final event, inclusive performances and theatrical workshops.