
ADOLESCENCE IN THE ERA OF LONELINESS.

THE ROLE OF THEATRE WORKSHOPS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF INTERPERSONAL INTELLIGENCE

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Abstract: Upon completing the master's program *Alternative Pedagogies and Theater in Education* (PED-ArtE) – an academic program carried out in consortium by the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences (University of Bucharest) and the I.L. Caragiale National University of Theatre and Film – I conducted a research¹ study centered on exploring the correlation between interpersonal intelligence and participation in theatre workshops during adolescence. The study sought to move beyond the entrenched societal perceptions of adolescents by identifying the defining characteristics of today's youth – those aged between 14 and 24. This group represents a generation of digital natives, with no lived memory prior to the advent of the internet, and who have emerged as *survivors* of the educational experiment of online schooling and the social isolation brought about by the recent global pandemic. The impetus for this research is deeply rooted in a personal conviction regarding the transformative and therapeutic potential of theatre, as well as its unique capacity to foster personal development and social cohesion. The central research question guiding this inquiry was: What are *the tools* and methodologies that can genuinely make a meaningful impact in a theatre workshop designed for contemporary adolescents?

Keywords: adolescence, loneliness, theatre workshops, interpersonal intelligence.

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"Youth is a wonderful time of life. It allows us to gather the mistakes we later call experience."

George Bernard Shaw

Introduction

We are living in an era increasingly defined by loneliness, and despite surface-level appearances, it is adolescents and young adults who are among the most profoundly affected by this phenomenon. Disconnection from peers disrupts our fundamental human nature regardless of age; however, for those at the threshold of life and self-discovery, the consequences can be particularly severe. Depression, anxiety, and a range of other mental health disorders – including self-harming behaviors, eating disorders, substance abuse, and various forms of addiction – are affecting young people at alarming rates as they transition into adulthood. Yet, as a society, we appear to lack a coherent understanding of how to respond effectively in order to prevent these young individuals from becoming lost along the way.

¹ The dissertation, titled *Theatre and Interpersonal Intelligence in Adolescence*, was completed under the supervision of Professor Elena Stănculescu, Ph.D. (University of Bucharest), and Associate Professor Mihaela Bejiu, Ph.D. (National University of Theatre and Film, Bucharest).

Frequently, we shift responsibility onto external factors: the pandemic, technology, the media, mobile phones, and the internet. In doing so, we often overlook a deeper truth: that all the children in this world are, in a broader sense, *our* children. We each bear some degree of responsibility for their wellbeing, and each of us, in our own capacity, can contribute – however modestly – to supporting them. *If not us, then who? If not now, then when?*

Parents and educators today are confronted with a new set of challenges, markedly different from those faced by previous generations. The lived experience of 21st-century adolescents is fraught with subtler, more insidious threats, which must be acknowledged and understood without prejudice. Only through such empathetic comprehension can meaningful support be offered.

Modern adolescents navigate the chaos of urban life on a daily basis, remain in near-constant contact with peers through digital platforms, engage in real-time communication across continents, and often possess fluency in languages not native to them. And yet, they struggle with basic interpersonal actions – maintaining eye contact, exchanging smiles, holding hands, or simply engaging in unstructured, face-to-face conversation. Behaviors and experiences once abundant in the adolescent lives of previous generations now appear diminished, or altogether absent – lost somewhere in the ever-widening chasm between physical and digital realities.

Communication beyond digital screens has become hesitant, fragmented, and unfulfilling. Social interactions are marked by timidity and discomfort; integration into real-world social contexts is often incomplete or entirely absent. Many young people no longer know how to simply be – how to sit, walk, or occupy public spaces – without being tethered to a screen. The nuances of direct human interaction – eye contact, verbal expression, nonverbal cues, physical proximity – have become sources of anxiety. The result is a pervasive sense of loneliness, social withdrawal, and a growing inability to integrate authentically into the fabric of community life.

In such conditions, the guiding moral imperative to “love thy neighbor as thyself” becomes increasingly unreachable – for it presupposes both self-love and a conscious awareness of the other. Without these foundational capacities, the path toward meaningful connection remains obscured.

Therefore, now more than ever, the engagement of adolescents in collective and creative activities – such as theatre workshops – can yield profound and far-reaching benefits that go well beyond the acquisition of artistic skills.

Within the context of a theatre workshop, identity, self-confidence, creativity, authenticity, spontaneity, adaptability, the courage to be vulnerable, and self-awareness become essential working materials. These dimensions of personal development are cultivated through introspection and empathy, serving as the foundation for shaping and nurturing the human being.

Moreover, theatre has always been – and will continue to be – about the healing power of *togetherness*, a fundamental need that spans the entire human lifespan: from childhood and adolescence to full adulthood. As Maria Montessori aptly observed, “every adult is the fulfillment of a child who has grown” (Montessori, 2019), reminding us that the roots of well-being in adulthood are often found in the emotional and relational experiences of youth.

Loneliness and the Pandemic

In 2021, the European Commission (EC) published the report *Loneliness in the EU – Insights from Surveys and Online Media Data*, which analyzed trends related to loneliness and social isolation. The growing interest in monitoring these phenomena is far from incidental, as both loneliness and social isolation have already been recognized at the EU level as public health concerns. These issues require the development of targeted intervention strategies aimed at mitigating their harmful effects - not only on mental and physical health but also on social cohesion and community trust.

Such attention is especially warranted in light of Europe’s aging population, given that older adults have historically been the demographic most affected by loneliness and social isolation. However, by 2021, the landscape had shifted dramatically. For the first time in the European Union’s history, the data revealed a significantly different pattern:

Prior to the pandemic, older adults were indeed the age group most vulnerable to loneliness. However, the social distancing measures implemented during the COVID-19 crisis disproportionately impacted young adults. In fact, the proportion of individuals aged 18 to 25 who reported feeling lonely nearly quadrupled during the initial months of the pandemic. (EC, 2021, p. 7)

The report also references a study published by Kaspersky Computer Security Company, which revealed that during the COVID-19 pandemic, “the so-called *Generation Z* was the loneliest age group in Europe.” (EC, 2021, p. 41)

Adolescents and young adults have the greatest need for social interaction, and under normal circumstances, they are the age group that spends the most time with peers. It was therefore predictable that they would be the most affected by mobility restrictions and social distancing measures imposed during the pandemic – although, at the outset, this concern was largely overlooked.

The report elaborates on the wide-ranging repercussions that loneliness and social isolation have across various sectors of social life, including the economy, healthcare, and the labor market. Drawing on extensive studies and research, it demonstrates that socially isolated young people are significantly more likely to experience mental health issues, sleep disturbances, maladaptive behaviors, and poor coping strategies in response to stress. (EC, 2021)

Also in 2021, in December, UNICEF published a commemorative report marking its 75th anniversary. What might have been a celebratory edition instead emerged as a resounding wake-up call. The report states: “COVID-19 is the worst crisis for children in UNICEF’s 75-year history. At its peak, more than 1.5 billion students were out of school.” (UNICEF, 2021, p. 8)

Titled *PREVENTING A LOST DECADE – Urgent Action to Reverse the Devastating Impact of COVID-19 on Children and Young People*, the report highlights not only the expected consequences of limited access to education, but also expresses deep concern regarding the psycho-emotional development of adolescents. It concludes that “Mental health disorders affect more than 13% of adolescents aged 10 to 19 worldwide” (UNICEF, 2021, p. 8).

Even prior to the pandemic, children and young people were already burdened by the risks associated with mental health conditions. Research indicates that half of all mental disorders develop before the age of 15, and approximately 75% emerge during early adulthood. The majority of the 800,000 individuals who die by suicide each year are young people, and self-harm is the third leading cause of death among adolescents aged 15 to 19, with higher rates among girls. Additionally, it is estimated that globally, one in four children lives with a parent affected by a mental health disorder (UNICEF, 2021).

Similar conclusions are drawn by Noreena Hertz (University College London) in her book *The Lonely Century: A Call to Reconnect* (2021), which offers a comprehensive analysis of the post-pandemic world. Although “the lonely century did not begin in the first quarter of 2020. Even before we were hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, many of us had already been feeling lonely, isolated, and disconnected for some time” (Hertz, 2021, p. 8), the period of imposed restrictions only deepened this sense of alienation. As Hertz notes: “We are in the midst of a global loneliness crisis. None of us is immune (...) and, perhaps surprisingly, it is young people who are suffering the most” (Hertz, 2021, pp. 11–12).

In *The Lonely Century*, Professor Hertz presents a synthesis of recent international studies, all of which demonstrate that loneliness constitutes not only a crisis of emotional well-being, but also one that affects physical health and bodily integrity.

Research shows that loneliness has more severe health consequences than lack of physical activity, is as harmful as excessive alcohol consumption, and twice as detrimental as obesity. Statistically speaking, loneliness is the equivalent of smoking fifteen cigarettes a day. (Hertz, 2021, p. 13)

Our well-being is inextricably linked to the feeling of loneliness, or more precisely, to the quality of our relationships with others – at any time, at any age. This is especially true during adolescence, when acceptance and appreciation from peers are vital, and popularity is perceived as the ultimate sign of success.

Loneliness and Technology

Howard Gardner, the father of the Theory of Multiple Intelligences, co-authored a thought-provoking book with Katie Davis – *The App Generation: How Today's Youth Navigate Identity, Intimacy, and Imagination in a Digital World* (2015). This complex work, framed through the lens of three generations, examines to what extent the extensive use of new technologies (in general) and applications (in particular) influences cognitive processes, personality, imagination, behaviors, and the ways in which young people relate to one another.

An app (application) is a shortcut, a software program that allows you to perform one or more tasks, guiding you quickly and effortlessly to what you need (no longer requiring you to search the internet). There are apps for everything – music, news, games, and even prayers. GPS apps direct us, through integration with Google Maps, to any destination on Earth, and similarly, dating apps assist us in finding a partner. However, right from the introductory exposé, the authors caution:

Apps are wonderful when they handle routine tasks and, as a result, allow us to explore the new, engage in deeper relationships, reflect on the great mysteries of life, and construct a unique and meaningful identity. But if apps merely turn us into more refined imbeciles, unable to think for ourselves, ask new questions, or form authentic relationships, and incapable of building adequate, well-rounded identities that are always in development, then these digital creations only pave the way for psychological servitude.” (Gardner, Davis, 2015, pp. 9–10)

“How much has the profound need for human connection been affected by the unprecedented connectivity provided by new technologies?” (Gardner, Davis, 2015, p. 92) is one of the questions the authors seek to answer through

detailed analyses. Clearly, the indisputable advantage of these technologies is that they allow colleagues, friends, and family members to communicate and stay in touch, even when geographically distant from one another. However, alongside this major benefit comes a question mark, with studies concluding: “The quality of interaction in the age of apps depends on how we use them” (Gardner, Davis, 2015, p. 93), distinguishing between situations where communication via apps is used to develop, maintain, and support a relationship – and those where it is used “to avoid the discomfort of engaging with the other” (Gardner, Davis, 2015, p. 93). This distinction is critically important because it determines whether young people feel connected or isolated – depending on how they use apps – “to enhance or substitute their offline relationships” (Gardner, Davis, 2015, p. 110).

What is concerning is that a so-called *app mentality* is developing among young people, which “encourages the idea that, just as information, goods, and services are immediately accessible in the digital environment, so too are people.” (Gardner, Davis, 2015, p. 94) Life, however, will soon show adolescents that real, flesh-and-bone people are not always available, accessible, and reachable at any time, like the all-knowing AI interlocutor, ChatGPT.

Another area that the study focuses on is social networks, which “have transformed human interaction into something far more public than it was perceived in pre-digital times” (Gardner, Davis, 2015, p. 96). Facebook, for instance, *knows* the social events you attend, your personal experiences, the parties you go to, the places you visit (and with whom), and even when your romantic relationship begins and ends. The young people interviewed seemed to be fully aware of this, which is why they perceive their online identity as a public announcement, an image they carefully construct – a kind of external *persona*, an avatar (which all social networks encourage us to create), a personality somewhat detached from their internal sense of self – yet, generally, adolescents do not see anything wrong with this.

What is truly surprising, however, is that when communication shifts from Facebook to instant messaging (where there are only two conversation partners), many adolescents perceive this interaction as even more profound (!) than a face-to-face interaction in real life.

For some young people, these exchanges seem more intimate than many face-to-face conversations. The fact that the interlocutors are looking at a screen rather than at each other, combined with the reality that they are not in the same location, provides a sense of comfort, making young people feel more at ease, seemingly with fewer risks to assume when sharing personal feelings with someone else. (Gardner, Davis, 2015, p. 96)

It is more than evident that the social interactions of today's youth differ fundamentally from the way relationships between people were perceived and practiced just 15-20 years ago. This is a reality that needs to be understood, accepted, and integrated into the collective mindset. Interpersonal intelligence looks different now – not necessarily better or worse – but certainly different. Perhaps the only question that is worth and must be asked, considering that Maslow's pyramid still stands and human needs remain the same, is whether this new mode of interaction offers connection, support, and fulfillment. In other words, do today's youth's interpersonal relationships meet their need for love and belonging, and do they come to feel the profound sense of intimacy and communion?

Being connected through social networks and applications does not equate to *being in real connection*. Gardner and Davis also refer to multiple studies and surveys that reveal a dramatic decline in the number of close interpersonal relationships (often referred to as *strong ties*) – from three to none – and a significant decrease, which they describe as *dramatic*, in the level of trust in others, in fellow citizens, and in democratic institutions (Gardner, Davis, 2015).

In addition to referencing official statistics, the authors chose to interview adolescents and, furthermore, analyze the products they created. Here are their conclusions from what is referred to in research as the *analysis of traces*:

The results obtained from the analysis of creative writing and artistic works produced by high school students over the past two decades show that young people have been affected by the trend of social isolation. Artistic products indicating traits of isolation or solitude in the imagination have increased from 15% in the early 1990s to 25% by the end of the first decade of the 21st century. (Gardner, Davis, 2015, pp. 99-100)

The link between social isolation and social media is not immediately obvious; it even seems counterintuitive – how can a technology designed to connect people make them feel increasingly disconnected? One explanation may lie in the very pressure to always be present, the constant pressure of not wanting to miss out, of not being left behind. In the literature, this is already discussed as the *Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) syndrome* (Mayank, Aditya, 2021), which affects our young people and generates a constant worry, impatience, mental fatigue, restlessness, confusion, frustration, and social anxiety – all stemming from the feeling that they cannot keep up with others and from with the shiny lives presented online, which they perceive to be much happier than their own.

One possibility is that social networks make us feel isolated (...) because they create the impression that our friends are interacting with a larger number of remarkable people and having more fun than we are. (Gardner, Davis, 2015, p. 102)

Indeed, there are few studies specifically focused on Romanian adolescents and their relationship with social media, yet there is no evidence to suggest that they are somehow shielded from this global phenomenon – because they are not. In 2022, the *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction* published a study conducted in Romania under the coordination of Professor Elena Stănculescu (University of Bucharest), focusing on Social Media Addiction (SMA). The research involved over 700 participants. Among its findings, the study revealed that girls/women scored significantly higher in social media addiction compared to boys/men. This outcome must, of course, be correlated with the anxiety levels of Romanian females, their self-esteem, and their perception of personal happiness. However, regardless of gender, the study offers a clear recommendation:

Prevention programs targeting Social Media Addiction should focus on dispositional traits (...), on social anxiety, as well as on the unmet need for belonging, and should promote the ability to initiate and sustain fulfilling social relationships. (Stănculescu, 2022)

Once again, it all comes down to relationships – our orientation toward others, the extent to which we are truly connected to people, and how fulfilling and meaningful those connections are. And notably, female vulnerability – especially within the patriarchal context of our Balkan cultural space – is, as we can see, reflected in the digital world as well.

There is yet another factor – one that would have been unimaginable prior to the widespread use of the internet. We find it discussed in the remarkable book

Out of Our Minds: Learning to be Creative (2011), written by Sir Ken Robinson, one of the most influential contemporary voices in the field of education. Robinson offers a scathing critique of educational systems around the world and the multiple, often unnecessary, pressures they place on children and young people. Among the issues he highlights is a study conducted among university students, focusing on suicidal behavior. In addition to academic pressure and other factors, a completely new dimension is identified, almost incomprehensible before the emergence of new technologies and widespread exposure on social media:

Students are pressured to feel fulfilled, happy, successful, talented, and brilliant, and they try to conform to these expectations. (...) They are under pressure not to appear as though they are under pressure. (Robinson, 2011, p. 104)

In the (virtual) reality in which our young people live, it seems that it is socially unacceptable to be alone, sad, or worried. The universally known and accepted obligation among adolescents to exclusively present the bright, shiny, and glittering side of their lives online (whether true or false) inevitably undermines, in the long run, their self-confidence, their own authenticity, and, implicitly, their ability to be open and honest in relationships with others.

Another aspect of *the pressure to avoid appearing under pressure* is that people tend to underestimate the true extent of this subtle constraint, which is never overtly stated, but always implied. Regarding the deeply painful feeling of loneliness, young people (and not only them) avoid talking about it, and they cannot even acknowledge how lonely they feel, primarily because of the contempt they would expose themselves to. It is a vulnerability they understand they cannot afford “in a society that has time only for winners” (Hertz, 2021, p. 21).

Similarly, most people find it difficult to accept, even to themselves, how lonely they truly are, that there is not even one person in their universe to whom they can share absolutely everything, “considering it more of a personal failure rather than a consequence of circumstances and a whole set of social, cultural, and economic factors that we cannot control” (Hertz, 2021, p. 14).

Online versus Offline

Real vs Virtual was the theme that challenged the high school students participating in the 18th edition of the Spir Art Festival-Competition for creation and artistic interpretation, organized in April 2024. One of the awarded paintings belongs to a 17-year-old young artist, Cristina M., with the work titled *Me or Myself?*. A 10th-grade student in a regular high school (not an art school), Cristina M. granted us permission (both herself and her parents) to use her work, which we reproduce here, not only for its remarkable artistic quality but especially for the depth and authenticity of the message it conveys.

The artwork represents a young girl who is looking at herself in a mirror – which is, in fact, the giant screen of a phone. The young girl, depicted in the Real world, strikes a pose that reflects propriety, but also insecurity and a hint of awkwardness. In contrast, she appears exuberant, confident, and victorious in the hyperbolized reflection in the virtual world, with a super cool outfit and attitude.

While slightly caricatured, the image in the mirror is not distorted, not ugly, not monstrous, but rather likable, amusing, and funny. One can feel the author's self-irony, the playful mockery, but at the same time, there is a sense of admiration – a deep desire to be as she appears in the virtual world, especially since her avatar (her online identity) is surrounded by countless hearts (likes) and comments.

The image in the Virtual world is depicted in bright, cheerful colors, while the colors in the Real world are pale and faded, with the entire scene unfolding in a sort of brownish abyss, resembling a swirling, sticky pit that recalls Plato's Cave (Ramsey, 2011). Living for too long in *an apparent reality* (online) and only watching *the shadows on the walls of the cave* inevitably leads not only to a mutilating life of captivity but also to an inability to perceive the real world. *The world outside the cave* (offline) thus becomes an impossible-to-understand story, still a distorted shadow – a chimera that the prisoners will never come to believe truly exists.



Me or Myself? by Cristina M. (17 years old) – acrylic on canvas, 40 x 50 cm
Personal archive

Cristina M.'s painting illustrates, with disarming sincerity, the rift between online reality and offline reality, but especially the inner fracture between who you are and who you appear to be, between how you see yourself and how you want others to see you, between yourself and the image presented to the world, between you and your avatar.

In Hinduism, an *avatar* refers to the incarnation of a deity in a human (or animal) form; it is the way in which a deity intervenes in the current reality through a mortal body. Of course, the deity can choose any identity, descend into any body they wish, and act at their discretion, bearing no responsibility for the vehicle identity they use, which they can abandon at any time and incarnate into another (Britannica, 2025).

We believe that the emergence and propagation of the concept of an *avatar* in the online environment, especially among adolescents, is no coincidence, as this is a developmental stage where they are just beginning to discover themselves and define their identities. *Coincidentally*, young people are led to believe that they can have as many avatars (online identities) as they want – on one social network they can be a 17-year-old girl passionate about reading, and on another (or even the same one) a 46-year-old man, a navigation expert. In other words, they are taught that they can be anyone and anything, and that it's perfectly acceptable – they can abandon their avatar at any time, with no repercussions. This is a way in which adolescents come to believe they have no responsibility for their online identity and, more subtly, that the online space is an escape from all the constraints of their real body and identity. In an avatar, you can be a girl or a boy whenever you want, and most importantly, in an avatar, you are no longer fat, thin, short, or too tall, you're no longer shy or clumsy, you no longer have pimples or a large nose – you are whatever you want to be. It doesn't matter who you are and how you are in reality, because online, you can be anyone and anything. It is an irresistible offer for young minds and souls, for whom, anyway, contact with reality is inconsistent, and living in the real world is often perceived as too painful.

But why do we need the other so much?

Why is connecting with our peers so important? Why does loneliness, isolation, and the lack of connections with others make us so vulnerable? Why do we need human relationships so much?

Of course, the first and most important explanation comes from our evolution as a species - from our hunter-gatherer ancestors who lived in tribes and who would not have survived had they not functioned as a group. Humans, *members of the human species*, were able to hunt animals that ran much faster than they did,

and defend themselves from ones that were bigger and stronger, only because they worked together. Cooperation was – and still is – our superpower.

In his exceptional TEDx Talk – *The Lethality of Loneliness* (2013), neuroscientist John Cacioppo from the University of Chicago, who spent decades researching the link between loneliness, stress, depression, anxiety, addiction, and more, reminds us that, above all, we are part of a *social species*. Or, as Johann Hari humorously puts it in his book, *Lost Connections: Uncovering the Real Causes of Depression – and the Unexpected Solutions* (2019): “You and I exist for only one reason – because those people learned to cooperate” (Hari, 2019, p. 106).

When all the things your life depends on are done *together* – gathering food, ensuring safety, caring for the sick, raising children (*it takes a village to raise a child*) – when your very existence, both as an individual and as a species, hinges on this, then it becomes more than evident that social bonding has been deeply encoded into our genetic structure. It is an intrinsic part of the human genome. “In that natural state, social connection and cooperation didn’t need to be enforced. Nature is connection” (Hari, 2019, p. 106).

Johann Hari identifies several root causes of depression and anxiety, which he distills into a single concept: *disconnection* – disconnection from meaningful work, from values, from nature, and more. Among these, the *disconnection from other people* appears to have the most dramatic physical, psychological, and emotional consequences. Hari draws on dozens of studies about loneliness - some of which were led by Professor Cacioppo - and they reach a striking conclusion:

(...) loneliness causes cortisol levels to spike just like some of the most disturbing things that can happen to you. The experiment found that acute loneliness is as stressful as going through a physical attack. (...) It’s worth repeating this: deep loneliness seemed to cause just as much stress as being punched by a stranger. (Hari, 2019, pp. 101–103)

Since when are “relationships” considered a form of intelligence?

... Since the 1980s, when Howard Gardner – Professor of Cognition, Education, and Psychology at Harvard University, and of Neurology at the Massachusetts Medical School (USA) – published his groundbreaking work *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (1983).

The father of the Theory of Multiple Intelligences continued to develop and refine his ideas in the volume *Multiple Intelligences: The Theory in Practice* (1993), a work he has continued to revise over time, the most recent edition being published in Romania in 2022. In Howard Gardner’s conception, intelligence is a

biopsychological potential for processing information and “involves the ability to solve problems or to create products that are valued within one or more cultural settings” (Gardner, 2022, p. 103).

In the Theory of Multiple Intelligences, Gardner demonstrates that each individual possesses at least eight types of intelligence - or, as he self-ironically notes, I will, for the time being, continue to refer to 8 ½ intelligences— (Gardner, 2022, p. 129): 1. linguistic, 2. logical-mathematical, 3. spatial, 4. musical, 5. bodily-kinesthetic, 6. interpersonal, 7. intrapersonal, 8. naturalistic, and existential intelligence, for which he expresses some hesitation in granting it full status as the ninth form of intelligence.

Each of us represents a unique combination in the development and expression of these intelligences. However – and this is a crucial aspect – these intelligences are not seen as fixed traits, but rather as potentials. They are latent biological and psychological capacities that may develop (or not) depending on how much they are stimulated (or not), what opportunities life provides (or denies), what motivations we have, and so on. This internal potential can be cultivated, expanded, refined, and enriched at any age, thanks to neuroplasticity – the brain’s remarkable ability to adapt, to form new neural connections, and to reorganize its networks. Neuroplasticity has now been indisputably confirmed through the extraordinary technologies available in modern medicine and, consequently, in the field of neuroscience.

The Theory of Multiple Intelligences “multiplies the facets of the traditional concept” (Gardner, 2022, p. 103) of human intelligence and demonstrates that, although the intelligences activate different areas of the brain and may manifest relatively independently, in reality, they never function in isolation. In virtually every human activity, multiple types of intelligence are simultaneously involved - especially when it comes to competencies, performance, talents, or exceptional achievements of any kind. “Virtually every cultural role, regardless of its level of sophistication, requires a combination of intelligences” (Gardner, 2022, p. 131).

Interpersonal Intelligence – A Key Ingredient for Success

What is never missing from any type of success, regardless of its definition or field of manifestation, is interpersonal intelligence, because, clearly, without the appreciation received from our peers, the very notion of success loses its consistency. Furthermore, survival – which is the fundamental success of any species – has been ensured, as a species, precisely by this ability to form and maintain relationships with our fellow humans.

Skills such as hunting, tracking, and killing in prehistoric societies required the participation and cooperation of a large number of people. The need for group cohesion, leadership, organization, and solidarity naturally arises from this factor. (Gardner, 2022, pp. 119-120)

One of the important clarifications that Gardner makes is that at the foundation of all our communication, relationship, and social integration skills lies, in fact, empathy.

Interpersonal intelligence is based on the fundamental ability to observe the differences in others, especially changes in mood, disposition, motivations, and intentions. (Gardner, 2022, p. 118)

Whether we consider it an identification through experience with others, a form of knowing the other, an understanding of their emotional states, intuition, or a sixth sense – empathy plays a crucial role in our ability to relate, especially because, through empathy, people can “decode the intentions and desires of others, even when they are hidden” (Gardner, 2022, p. 118).

Relationships – The Hotspot of Adolescence

Interpersonal relationships appear to be the true *Achilles' heel* of adolescence. The relationship with parents becomes tense and complicated, while friendships take on greater significance. Recognition and validation from peers are perceived as vital. Additionally, interest in romantic and sexual relationships arises – a territory unknown and a constant source of tumultuous experiences, embarrassment, and insecurity. For the young person facing this uncharted territory, the ability to establish positive relationships is invaluable. Understanding others is the key to success. Social integration makes the difference. Empathy, effective communication, successful conflict resolution, spontaneity, sense of humor, and leadership qualities are all desirable traits of adolescents who aspire to be popular, outgoing, and agreeable, but which the functioning behind screens will never fully develop.

Feeling Lonely While Surrounded by People

If we think about how many things people used to do together, at any time – throughout history and at all ages – and how few things we do together today, we realize that, in contemporary times, the collective structure seems to have collapsed. Even the sense that people have friends they can rely on or live in

a community is falling apart. In *Lost Connections*, we find references to a large sociological study spanning two decades, conducted in the United States, focused on the question, *How many confidants do you have?* – “When they began conducting the study (...), the average number of close friends an American had was three. In 2004, the general response was none” (Hari, 2019, p. 109). It seems that all the structures through which we took care of one another (from extended families to networks of neighbors, friends, and colleagues) have disintegrated. And this study was published in 2006, meaning before the 2008 economic crisis and long before the widespread social isolation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

On the other hand, one might say that it’s amazing – we live next to each other, work or study alongside one another, travel side by side – we are closer to each other than ever before, and technology has done wonders in communication and transportation. We are just a click away from anyone on Earth, and in 24 hours, we can reach almost any place on the planet. So why are we so lonely? In fact, why do we feel so lonely? Because *being alone* is not the same as *feeling lonely*. Studies have shown that the feeling of loneliness, of isolation, has very little to do with the objective number of people you interact with daily, and loneliness doesn’t necessarily mean the physical absence of other people, “but the feeling that you are not sharing anything important with anyone” (Hari, 2019, p. 113).

To escape loneliness, you need other people and something else – you also need to feel that you are sharing something with the other person, something meaningful for both of you. You have to be part of *it* together – and that can be anything you both consider to be significant and valuable. (Hari, 2019, p. 113)

If our children no longer share anything important with anyone, isn’t it natural to ask ourselves whether we, as a society, as a civilization, and as an education system, have failed? Could it be that promoting individualism instead of individuality, independence instead of autonomy, and competition instead of cooperation has led us here, to this age of loneliness? Could this ideology of self-sufficiency, of success achieved only through one’s own efforts, of the Facebook-style encouragement message – no one can help you but yourself – be a deception? Could it be that this approach to life “denies human history and denies human nature”? (Hari, 2019, p. 114) Are we misunderstanding our fundamental instincts? If we no longer look towards the other, can we still see ourselves?

Looking into Each Other's Eyes

One of the most evident difficulties young people face when it comes to face-to-face interactions is related to eye contact – specifically, the discomfort or even inability to look their conversation partner in the eye. Naturally, establishing and maintaining appropriate eye contact does not come easily to everyone, especially to adolescents who are still inexperienced in the realm of human relationships. However, Gardner and Davis sought to investigate whether there might be another reason why today's youth find it so difficult to maintain eye contact, beyond the typical challenges associated with adolescence throughout history. For their book *The App Generation* (2015), they conducted a thorough analysis of behaviors observed during video calls made through applications that support video communication (Zoom, FaceTime, Skype, Google Meet, WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, Instagram, etc.). Their analysis highlighted two details that were as simple as they were surprising – precisely because, although obvious, they had gone unnoticed.

The first observation concerns the fact that, during video calls, genuine eye contact is virtually impossible. If one wishes to give their conversation partner the impression of being looked in the eye, they must look directly into the camera - not into the partner's actual eyes. "In other words, to create the illusion of eye contact, you must systematically avoid it" (Gardner & Davis, 2015, p. 109). It is therefore not surprising that we often see young people (and not only them) speaking to us while looking through us, past us, or into the void – downward, upward, anywhere but into our eyes.

The second observation concerns the presence of one's own image in the corner of the screen. All the young participants in the study admitted that it is difficult – virtually impossible – not to glance at it from time to time, a fact that can be confirmed by anyone, regardless of age, who has ever taken part in a video meeting of any kind. The eye's tendency to drift toward one's own image has two immediate consequences: on the one hand, we fall into *the narcissistic trap* far more often, which should give us pause; on the other hand, it distracts us from our conversation partner, causing us to miss facial expressions, gestures, meanings, and nuances conveyed through nonverbal communication.

Eye contact plays a crucial role in all forms of human interaction, conveying valuable information to our conversation partner about who we are – about our sincerity, openness, and authenticity. Avoiding eye contact, or struggling to maintain it, can send misleading signals to the other person, who may, for instance, interpret awkwardness as dishonesty.

However, in a theatre workshop, eye contact is one of the first things that is taught and then continuously practiced through theatre games, improvisation

exercises, rehearsals, and so on. In its absence, any genuine communication between scene partners (and, by extension, between characters) becomes impossible.

Theater and the Power of Being Vulnerable

We cannot speak of genuine communication and authentic relationships without speaking of vulnerability. Of course, it is not easy to reveal one's most intimate thoughts, deepest emotions, greatest fears, or desires in front of someone else. It is difficult for everyone, regardless of age – and it always has been. Yet all psychological studies confirm, without a shadow of a doubt, that it is precisely this vulnerability that serves as both the source and foundation of authentic relationships. “The willingness to take this emotional risk strengthens the bond between people” (Gardner & Davis, 2015, p. 104).

Theatre is, at its core, about people, about their relationships, experiences, triumphs and failures, their inner and outer conflicts, their dreams, joys, and disappointments. It is both about and for people. Within the safe space of the stage, young people can most easily – and securely – explore the benefits of vulnerability. They come to see how similar we truly are, despite appearances; they come to feel that we all have good days and bad days – and that this is entirely normal. Through theatrical games and staged scenarios, adolescents implicitly learn how to listen without judgment, how healing it can be to realize that they are not alone in what they feel, think, or experience, and how the world looks through someone else's eyes.

That is why, in a theatre workshop, empathy, tolerance, and assertive communication are formed and nurtured almost organically. Mutual understanding emerges naturally among troupe members, primarily because it stems from the shared, deeply felt vulnerability that comes with *being exposed on stage*. Accepting and integrating one's own vulnerability instinctively leads to recognizing and perceiving the vulnerability of others – because you know, in your own skin, what they are going through (emotions, insecurity, shame, fear, embarrassment, etc.). This empathy, born of shared vulnerability, significantly contributes to the creation of a sense of belonging – to feeling part of *a tribe* in which your unique self matters, is valuable, understood, and accepted exactly as it is, no matter how odd, awkward, or nonconformist that may be.

Theater Always Means We, Never I

In her work *Elements of Scenic Process Analysis* (2018), Mihaela Bețiu (UNATC Bucharest) discusses the theatre group, which she defines as follows:

It is an educational group (a group for personal development, shaping of personality, and acquisition of knowledge and skills); it is an open group (a closed group has impermeable boundaries, whereas a theatre group cannot exist outside of its direct relationship with the audience); it is an inner group (in which people share similar attitudes, interests, etc.). (Bețiu, 2018, p. 130)

However, beyond its educational role, its support for interpersonal relationships, and its encouragement of personal development, the theatre group – *the troupe* – can play an invaluable role in the social integration of the adolescent. Most importantly, it contributes to the construction of a sense of belonging to a community with which they share meaningful experiences, thereby reducing the risks associated with loneliness and social isolation.

The theatre group is also a contact group (or a “primary group”), characterized by direct interaction among its members, by communication, mutual understanding, the development of emotional bonds, the presence of shared goals that do not hinder individual ones, a certain degree of cohesion, and so on. (Bețiu, 2018, p. 131)

There are thousands of studies demonstrating the immense benefits that participation in theatrical arts programs can have for young people – benefits that manifest across all dimensions of their development: physical, psychological, emotional, social, and cognitive. This is especially relevant today, when adolescents’ lives have largely *shifted online*, leading to a drastic reduction in meaningful face-to-face interactions with their peers.

Under the continuous bombardment of online reality, with its conflicting, confusing, and sometimes disturbing information, today’s teenagers face a level of confusion that is greater and infinitely more dangerous than that of adolescence itself (Siegel, 2017). Nothing in the teenagers’ environment is meant to encourage them to look within, to get to know oneself, to identify their emotions and thoughts, or to understand their changing bodies and different needs. Nothing teaches them how to express or manage their emotions, fears, and insecurities. Emotional illiteracy is as widespread as functional illiteracy. Young people do

not know who they are, what they are, what they like and dislike, what they feel and why, which thoughts are their own and which are suggested or implanted, what they truly want, or what they have been led to believe they want. From this deaf, dumb, and blinded context, a lack of self-confidence in their self-esteem and personal abilities arises; consequently, a state of inner chaos develops, with all its consequences, including excessive openness to the sometimes toxic influences of groups, whether in real life or online.

This is where we, as a society, must step in.

The Research

The research aimed to investigate the correlation between interpersonal intelligence and participation in theatre workshops during adolescence, with the intention of providing objective, data-driven evidence that theatre is indeed an effective means of developing adolescents' communication and social interaction skills. To this end, the study sought to assess the general level of interpersonal intelligence among today's adolescents, to identify gender differences, and to explore any measurable distinctions between adolescent *actors* (those who currently participate or have previously participated in theatre workshops) and *non-actors* (those who do not and have never taken part in such activities).

Another important aim of the research was to identify which interpersonal relationships today's adolescents value most – in other words, to determine the degree of importance young people assign to their relationships with friends and peers, with parents and family, and with the opposite sex.

The research was conducted in May 2024 on 125 respondents aged between 14 and 24, primarily high school students and university students from Bucharest, as well as from Braşov and Prahova counties.

Of these 125 young people, there were:

- 58 *actors* (46.4%) and 67 *non-actors* (53.6%);
- 87 girls (69.6%) and 38 boys (30.4%);
- 92 aged 14-18 (73.6%) and 33 aged 19-24 (26.4%).

The questionnaire consisted of 10 mandatory items, with each allowing respondents to choose a single answer from a scale of 1 to 5:

1. I do not identify with this at all.
2. I identify with this to a small extent.
3. Sometimes I identify with this, sometimes I do not.
4. I identify with this to a great extent.
5. I fully identify with this.

The questionnaire included two types of items: Items 1-7, the Interpersonal Intelligence Test (self-profile), with two factors:

Items 1-4 – Social Skills:

1. I enjoy being around people more than being alone.
2. I have many friends.
3. I enjoy socializing in a variety of settings.
4. I learn best through group activities.

Items 5-7 – Leadership:

5. I am a good communicator.
6. I am a good organizer.
7. I have the ability to persuade others (to do what I want).

Items 8-10 aimed to investigate the importance attributed to interpersonal relationships:

1. The relationship with friends and peers is very important to me.
2. The relationship with parents and family is very important to me.
3. The relationship with the opposite sex is very important to me.

Research Results – Interpersonal Intelligence

As a result of the research, regarding interpersonal intelligence, the following findings were obtained:

- Adolescent *actors* have a higher overall interpersonal intelligence score than *non-actors*.
- Adolescent *actors* have a higher leadership skills score than *non-actors*.
- *Non-actors* have a higher social skills score than adolescent *actors*.

The analysis of these results confirms the benefits of involving adolescents in theatre workshops, but it also highlights some surprising characteristics that seem to be distinctive features of this generation of young people.

Participation in theatre workshops is clearly correlated with a higher level of interpersonal intelligence and, more importantly, with enhanced leadership skills (communication, organization, persuasion). From the perspective of social skills, adolescent actors score significantly higher in their enjoyment of being around people (sociability) and in their ease of socializing in diverse environments

(adaptability). These results are natural and were entirely predictable – dramatic games and, especially, improvisation exercises specifically train these traits, developing spontaneity and quick reaction time, while strengthening self-confidence, courage, and even boldness.

However, surprisingly (or not), participation in theatre workshops does not necessarily lead to the development of *all* social skills. Adolescent *actors* report having fewer friends and a lower preference for group learning compared to *non-actors*.

A possible explanation could be that theatre also develops self-awareness, individuality, and the sense of identity and uniqueness, leading to a greater focus on oneself and, implicitly, a more selective circle of friends. Moreover, although theatre is a group activity, it also involves a great deal of personal, individual effort (learning lines, rehearsing movements/choreography, self-discipline, introspection, self-assessment of performance, researching and embodying the era, situation, and motivations of the character, etc.).

Also, regarding interpersonal intelligence, the results were relatively similar in the gender comparative analysis, as follows:

- Boys have higher scores than girls in overall interpersonal intelligence (total score).
- Boys have higher scores than girls in leadership skills.
- Girls have higher scores than boys in social skills.

The analysis of these results confirms traditional beliefs that boys/men have superior leadership skills, while girls/women excel in social skills. However, over time, *the fairer sex* has always been attributed with greater skill in self-expression, communication, and relationship-building, thus a better interpersonal intelligence than boys. The research conducted with today's adolescents, however, contradicts this belief, as the higher overall score of boys in interpersonal intelligence may constitute a distinctive feature specific to this generation of young people.

Conclusions, Practical Suggestions, and Proposals – Interpersonal Intelligence

By overlapping the results regarding interpersonal intelligence, both in the comparison between adolescent *actors/non-actors* and girls/boys, we can conclude:

- The inclusion of Theatre Education within the ARTE curriculum in the framework plan for high school education would represent one of the most effective methods for developing the interpersonal intelligence of (all) adolescents, with immense benefits in all aspects of their lives.

- A theatre workshop grounded in the reality of these adolescents would take into account their generational profile and would have a curriculum structured in such a way that:
 - ✓ With girls, the focus should be on working with theatrical situations that encourage the development and assertion of leadership qualities. This can be achieved not only by casting girls in leading roles but, more importantly, through exercises and theatre games that involve decision-making, assuming responsibilities, and coordinating others. Additionally, girls could regularly be assigned the role of leader-organizer-responsible for various activities (e.g., leading physical or vocal warm-up exercises, organizing teams, coordinating communication within the troupe, etc.).
 - ✓ With boys, additional focus should be placed on theatrical situations that encourage group learning (cooperation) and a sense of belonging. This can be achieved by involving boys primarily in collective scenes (rather than two-person scenes), which require complex choreographies (dances, stage combat, synchronizations) that can only be learned together. Additionally, the famous interview *Robert De Niro Acting Advice* (The Actors Academy, 2019) could be used as a pretext, followed by referencing De Niro's iconic line, "the better they are, the better you are," as a prompt for reflection and for integrating the idea of the team's importance and the value of the other.
 - ✓ Although any theatre workshop includes numerous games and exercises *without words* (the nonverbal study phase), we argue that, for this particular generation of adolescents, all aspects related to nonverbal and paraverbal communication should be *quadrupled*. Today's teenagers have lived a significant portion of their lives exclusively online (during the pandemic) and communicate predominantly through devices, especially via written messages. Consequently, in the absence of daily face-to-face interaction, it is entirely natural for them to lack an intuitive sense of *proxemics*, for instance (hence the need to experience social distances through performance-based scenarios); it is also natural for them to be unaware of posture – both their own and that of others – and of the messages it conveys; to be unfamiliar with how to either send or interpret the multitude of signals embedded in body language, facial expressions, eye contact, tone of voice,

speech rhythm, and so on. Fortunately, we have at our disposal a wide array of theatre games to address these gaps - from sensory awareness games (Spolin, 2014, pp. 52–54), to the “Mirror” series (Spolin, 2014, pp. 55–57), and activities focused on listening and eye contact. (Spolin, 2014, pp. 91–92)

- ✓ To foster the expansion of adolescents’ social networks and increase their perceived number of friends, young actors can be encouraged to spend time together outside of theatre workshops. Furthermore, workshop coordinators can take the initiative to organize group activities – such as attending theatre performances, concerts, or films; going on trips; hosting parties; or engaging in volunteer work – through which troupe members can gradually become friends. These shared experiences serve to strengthen their interpersonal bonds and reinforce their sense of belonging to a community.

Research Results – The Importance of Relationships

The research revealed no significant differences between adolescent *actors* and *non-actors* regarding the importance they assign to interpersonal relationships. However, it did highlight some notable gender-based differences:

- There were no significant differences between boys and girls in the importance they placed on relationships with friends and peers.
- Boys scored significantly higher than girls in terms of the importance they placed on relationships with parents and family.
- Boys also scored significantly higher than girls regarding the importance they attributed to relationships with the opposite sex.

The analysis of these results proved to be a genuine challenge, as it revealed some novel and entirely unexpected aspects - findings that even contradict commonly held beliefs and assumptions about adolescents.

Relationship with Friends and Peers

Regarding the importance of relationships with friends and peers, the research showed no significant differences among adolescents – whether *actors* or *non-actors*, girls or boys, minors or late-stage adolescents – with all participants assigning high scores to this category (an average of 70%). This result is unsurprising, as the increasing importance of the peer group during adolescence is well-documented.

The findings thus confirm the major role that the need for affiliation plays at this stage of development. It is also worth noting that girls tend to be more selective than boys in choosing their friends. Furthermore, the perceived importance of friendships appears to be slightly higher among boys than girls, and also among late-stage adolescents compared to minors. These results are, again, predictable: boys, from an ancestral perspective, are wired to *hunt in groups*, and individuals between the ages of 19 and 24 begin to build *their own worlds*, form *their own tribes*, and create the social support networks essential for independent living.

Relationship with Parents and Family

Absolutely unexpected, however, were the responses obtained from all three respondent groups regarding the importance of the relationship with parents and family. All participants assigned this relationship very high scores (an average of 80%), significantly higher than those assigned to relationships with friends.

These results contradict the widely held belief that parents have lost their influence over their adolescent children – that their opinions no longer matter and that teenagers no longer listen to them. On the contrary, the findings clearly indicate that parents continue to exert the greatest influence in their children’s lives, surpassing even that of their peer groups – *the gang*. And this should come as encouraging news for all parents of adolescents (Chapman. 2018).

The less encouraging finding is that this generation of young people appears to be characterized by a low level of autonomy and decision-making capacity. While it is natural for adolescents to rely on their parents for housing, financial support, and emotional guidance, these results may reflect the effects of an overly protective parenting style that has become prevalent in Romania over the past two to three decades. The data suggest that these youths may have rarely, if ever, been allowed to navigate even the simplest life situations on their own or make decisions independently – or even solely in the company of other children (siblings, classmates, neighbors). This is likely due to the fact that they have constantly been in the presence and under the supervision of an adult (a nanny, after-school staff, etc.).

What is truly unexpected – perhaps even concerning – is that this dependency on parents and family (i.e., on caregiving adults) is nearly identical among late-stage adolescents (19–24 years old) and minors (14–18 years old). For high school students, such dependence – material, emotional, and legal – is to be expected; the parental bond is naturally still strong. However, for those over the age of 21 – university students or recent graduates – different scores would have been anticipated, suggesting a gradual shift toward independent living, personal

maturity, and the assumption of adult social roles. Traits traditionally associated with young adulthood appear to be weak and inconsistent within the current generation, which seems to linger more in a prolonged childhood than to firmly inhabit late adolescence.

This generational trait is even more pronounced among boys, who scored significantly higher than girls regarding the importance of their relationship with parents. In fact, this item revealed the only recorded 0% response among boys – meaning not a single male respondent rated the importance of the relationship with parents as low (scores of 1 or 2). At the same time, it produced the highest overall score in the entire questionnaire: 84.2% of boys rated this relationship with the highest scores (4 and 5), indicating a particularly strong attachment to parents and family.

There is something paradoxical in these findings, as *the same boys* scored higher than girls both in overall interpersonal intelligence and in leadership abilities. Could there be, perhaps, a correlation between the strong emphasis they place on their relationship with parents and their lower scores in social skills? Might this particularly close bond with parents affect boys – more than girls – in their willingness to seek independence, and consequently, in the extent to which they develop sociability, adaptability, and cooperation with peers?

Relationships with the Opposite Sex

Surprisingly, when it comes to the importance placed on relationships with the opposite sex, the results contradicted the commonly held belief that young people are primarily preoccupied with love and sex. In fact, the adolescent respondents from this generation assigned an unexpectedly low level of importance to such relationships (averaging around 50%) – lower than the importance placed on friendships (70%), and significantly lower than the importance attributed to relationships with parents (80%).

These surprisingly low scores contradict the developmental stage in which adolescents find themselves, as this period – adolescence – is typically when first love emerges. It is natural for an interest in romantic relationships and sexuality to arise at this stage. Former children begin to envision their future and adult life, exploring complex aspects of identity and intimacy – romantic relationships being the very context in which adolescents test their boundaries, express their authentic selves, and develop attachment and intimacy skills (Erikson, 2015).

The surprise of these results mainly stems from the very young age of the respondents, at a time when one would assume they are in the midst of exploration, development, and expansion (including in this regard). However, it

also arises from the fact that we live in an era of freedom, leading us to believe that young people today are much more open and interested in relationships with the opposite sex compared to previous generations, who were raised with far more restrictions and significantly fewer sources of information.

In addition to the generally low score given to relationships with the opposite sex, another unexpected result stands out: on average, 25% of adolescents assigned low scores (1 or 2) to the importance of such relationships. In other words, a quarter of our young people believe that relationships with the opposite sex are either not important at all or are important only to a small extent. This proportion, one in four adolescents, is found, with very small variations, across all respondent groups (*actors/non-actors*, girls/boys, minors/late-stage adolescents).

Of course, for young people at the beginning of their lives, love and sexuality are and have always been unknown areas, shrouded in mystery, and therefore major sources of embarrassment and anxiety – with the emotional intensity being amplified by a lack of experience and the vulnerability specific to their age. However, this devaluation of relationships with the opposite sex appears to be another characteristic trait of this generation of adolescents. One possible explanation is that it may be a counter-reaction to the glamorized image of the love lives of celebrities, presented as bright and perfect in the media and online, and/or a defense mechanism against their hyper-exposure to nudity, sexuality, and pornography.

Also, regarding the importance of relationships with the opposite sex, there is another result that would have been difficult to anticipate: the unusually low scores given by girls, significantly lower than those of boys. In common belief, regardless of age and generation, it was considered that girls/women value romantic relationships and intimacy more than boys/men – who, traditionally, are thought to be more interested in fame, money, career, etc. In this generation of young people, it seems to be the opposite, with boys caring more than girls about relationships with the opposite sex, although it cannot be said whether these higher scores for boys are simply a reflection of a more general, non-selective interest, explainable both physiologically and culturally.

At the same time, we cannot fail to notice the discrepancy between the real importance that girls in this generation attach to relationships with the opposite sex (very low) and the apparent importance, the one they display publicly, both online and offline (high). TV shows, the internet, all social networks, but also the streets and malls, are full of girls who expose themselves in provocative postures, through outfits, stances, or movements with erotic connotations, placing a strong emphasis on elements of physical attractiveness (breasts, lips, eyelashes, hair, etc.). However, only 39.1% of adolescent girls have given high scores (4 and 5) to the

importance of relationships with the opposite sex, which suggests that young women of this generation are much less interested in romantic relationships and/or sexuality than one might believe based on the image they project. This image, upon analyzing the results, seems to be more of a mask, a facade, or an *avatar*. Perhaps these results should also be correlated with the study conducted in Romania by Professor Elena Stănculescu, which highlighted the fact that girls/women (Romanian women) have significantly higher scores in terms of dependence on social networks compared to boys/men (Stănculescu, 2022).

It is, obviously, a characteristic specific to the present generation's adolescence. Because, in the social norms of previous generations, girls/women were almost always discouraged from showing their charms or publicly expressing interest in the opposite sex, and were rather urged to deny or hide their openness to sexuality. However, the customs of this generation seem to have reversed. The online environment, most likely, causes a self-hyperexposure of girls, encouraging them to display, exaggerate, or even mimic an interest and availability that do not seem to be entirely genuine.

Not valuing romantic relationships – in the full bloom of youth – is, in any case, a painful symptom that can reveal much about the contemporary epidemic of loneliness wreaking havoc among our children.

Conclusions, Practical Suggestions, and Proposals – The Importance of Relationships

Taking into account the characteristics of this generation of adolescents and their specific way of evaluating interpersonal relationships, we can offer the following recommendations:

- All those who accompany adolescents on their journey – parents, extended family, teachers, community members, and others – should actively encourage and promote face-to-face (offline) interactions among young people, as well as their involvement in as many diverse group-based activities as possible: theater troupes (but also dance or music ensembles, or any type of performance activity), thematic camps, clubs, trips, team sports, volunteer programs, and more.
- The implementation of interactive programs in high schools aimed at developing *independent living skills* is urgently needed (e.g., workshops on cooking, financial literacy, healthy living, etc.). These could be followed by the formation of mixed-gender teams that participate in inter-school competitions – such as debate tournaments, MasterChef-style challenges, or Asia Express-type contests – focused on achieving

objectives that require money management, time management, and social interaction.

- A theatre workshop tailored to the generational profile of today's adolescents would primarily focus on developing non-cognitive skills:
 - ✓ Autonomy, self-control, and perseverance – especially among boys;
 - ✓ Authenticity, self-esteem, and setting healthy boundaries – especially among girls;
 - ✓ Self-awareness, resilience, emotional self-regulation, motivation, and decision-making skills – for all adolescents.
- The undeniable advantage of a theater workshop lies in the fact that, in theater, there are no taboo subjects. Here, young people can speak openly, freely, and without pressure, shame, or judgment about anything related to human nature – including love and sex. Within the space of the workshop, interpersonal relationships – romantic ones included – are explored through games, roles, and staged scenarios. Students engage with scenes from plays, films, or books, stepping into the shoes of characters, immersing themselves in their emotions, thoughts, and behaviors – not their own (wink) – which they discuss, analyze, embody, and perform as if they were their own. And this is key: it's always easier to talk about someone else than about oneself. But no matter what we do, in the end, we're still expressing ourselves. Through this process, young people can more easily internalize the idea that no one is perfect, that there is no such thing as purely good or purely bad, that anyone can mess up and make poor decisions, that no one experiences only positive emotions, and that every person is made up of light and shadow. It helps them understand that all of us carry mixed feelings (love/hate), and that this complexity is not only normal – it's human.
- Exploring romantic relationships within the safe space of the stage can become a powerful tool for self-discovery, self-understanding, and self-worth. It offers adolescents the chance to first understand themselves – and then, from that grounded place, to better understand, appreciate, and connect with the person in front of them. All of this unfolds in a secure, experimental environment – a kind of *emotional laboratory* – from which young people can emerge with deeper insights and greater self-confidence. Because, as it turns out, despite having access to countless sources of information, the findings of this research reveal that today's generation of adolescents is grappling with far more internal confusion than we might have imagined.

Theater – Laboratory for Practicing Life

The theater workshop can prove to be a tremendous aid for adolescents in search of their identity and place in the world. Theater (acting) is an inherently personal endeavor, utilizing one's body, voice, face, emotions, memories, imagination, fears, frustrations, limits, desires, beliefs, options, and personal history. These elements serve as the working tools and means of experiencing, understanding, and ultimately appropriating not only a scene but also life itself. The foundation of any dramatic process is *you in the given situation* (Stanislavski, 2021) – you, with your uniqueness and distinct way of thinking, feeling, and acting.

In a theater workshop, every learning experience is lived through your own skin and receptors, which is why it is so effective – it's learning by *living it*. In school, you first learn the lesson, and then you're given the test, whereas in life, it's exactly the opposite; life gives you the test first, and then you learn the lesson. Just like on stage, where it's like life and vice versa.

However, in life, there are no rehearsals like in theater; life happens in real-time, alert, *Here and Now*, and we're not always prepared to face it with brilliance, we don't always have the best reactions, we don't always find the most appropriate words. That's why a theater workshop can be seen as *a simulator of life*, a *testing laboratory*, a training space, an experimental framework, where young people have the opportunity to practice, to repeat, to express themselves safely, where they can build *anchors* to strengthen their psychological resilience and thus prepare themselves for the multiple challenges of their lives.

Through theater, we can equip the knapsack of every young person with the *Marshal's baton*, developing skills that transcend the time and space of the theater workshop and forever remain part of the students, manifesting in all aspects of their present and future lives. Theater is truly the best school for life.

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