HEURÉKAMEN SYNCHAIROMEN!

Experiencing the Synchrony Effects in Contemporary Participant-Oriented Performances

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Abstract

Study explores the relationship between contemporary participatory performances and prosocial behaviour, focusing on the impact of shared experiences such as communal consumption, walking, dancing, and collaborative creation. Drawing on interdisciplinary insights from cognitive science, religious studies, and social psychology, the research investigates how such performances foster social cohesion and trust among participants. Through empirical observations, the study highlights the potential of synchronised group activities to increase prosocial tendencies, with lasting effects on communication and behaviour beyond the performance itself. This type of shared experience is evocative of the shared exclamation of participants in ancient mysteries, *Heurékamen synchairomen!*, literally "We have found it – together we rejoice!" – marking the ritual moment when profound sorrow transforms into communal joy (Dostálová – Hošek 1997: 170). The findings of the study suggest a link between synchrony and enhanced group unity, supported by neurochemical processes such as the release of beta-endorphins. The findings also highlight the potential of such performances to address contemporary challenges, including loneliness, digital anxiety, and declining empathy, fostering a sense of connection and community, while offering participants an experience of a certain form of transcendence.

Key words

participant-oriented performance, prosocial behaviour, synchrony effects, ancient mysteries, collective dynamics

Heurékamen synchairomen!
Zakoušení účinků synchronie v současných participativních performancích

Abstrakt

Studie zkoumá vztah mezi současnými participativními performancemi a prosociálním chováním, přičemž se zaměřuje na účinky sdílených zážitků, jakými jsou společná konzumace, chůze, tanec a tvorba. Studie čerpá z interdisciplinárních poznatků kognitivních věd, religionistiky a sociální psychologie a zkoumá, jak takové performance podporují sociální kohezi a vznik důvěry mezi účastníky. Na základě empirických pozorování ukazuje potenciál synchronizovaných skupinových aktivit posílit prosociální tendence s přetrvávajícími účinky na komunikaci a chování i po skončení samotné performance. Tento typ sdíleného prožitku evokuje společný výkřik účastníků antických mystérií *Heurékamen synchairomen!*, v překladu „Nalezli jsme, společně se radujem!", který značí rituální okamžik, v němž se hluboký smutek proměňuje v radost (Dostálová – Hošek 1997: 170). Výsledky studie naznačují souvislost mezi synchronií a zvýšenou soudržností skupiny, která je podporována neurochemickými procesy, jako je uvolňování beta-endorfinů. Výsledky také poukazují na potenciál těchto performancí čelit současným výzvám, jakými jsou osamělost, digitální úzkost a pokles empatie, právě prostřednictvím pocitu spojení a společenství, zatímco účastníkům nabízejí prožít určitou formu transcendence.

Klíčová slova

participativní performance, prosociální chování, účinky synchronie, antická mystéria, dynamika kolektivu

In the period around the COVID-19 pandemic (2019–2022), the Czech theatre landscape appeared to witness a noticeable rise in spectator-oriented projects featuring a variety of small-scale, interactive, and participatory formats that emphasised the quality of intimacy and focused on offering participants a unique personal experience. These included 1:1 projects (one participant and one performer), audiowalks, audioperformances, and other "small formats" designed for limited numbers of participants.[1] While such projects were not entirely new and had existed in smaller numbers prior to the pandemic, the crisis seems to have brought them into sharper focus and possibly contributed to their greater visibility and resonance within the local context. Though similar tendencies may have been more established or differently manifested in other cultural environments, in the Czech context, the pandemic arguably acted as a catalyst that highlighted and deepened certain already latent trends, thus providing well-observable material for analysis.

Although I refer to the "Czech theatre landscape" as my primary research framework, the projects I examine are not exclusively created by Czech artists, but also by international creators working in the Czech Republic. What links these projects is, firstly, the age of the artists (and, to a large extent, of the participants), who seem to predominantly fall within a younger age group (20–35), and, secondly, a strong association with the urban environments of major cities (including not only Prague, but also Brno, Pardubice and Jihlava). These two characteristics, together with my own participant experiences, lead me to hypothesise that participant-oriented projects represent a certain form of response to the lifestyle in contemporary globalised, secular Western society marked by increasing feelings of alienation and loneliness in urban centres and the pervasive influence of digital technologies.[2]

I have previously demonstrated that these projects have a relaxing effect, sometimes even with therapeutic potential (they promote calmness and a reflective mindset), as well as an educational effect – they teach participants how to be fully present with all the senses activated (Raiterová 2023). According to my latest observations of participant-oriented performances for smaller groups of participants, the educational impact also extends to social interaction – it fosters a more profound and humanistic way of being with others. Within the projects I attended, where synchronised group activities were at the centre of attention (shared meals, group walks, dancing, collective creation), I repeatedly observed myself acting with increased consideration toward other participants: ensuring everyone crossed safely at the pedestrian crossing, pouring tea for others while pouring for myself, including a participant in conversation who stood by isolated, or accepting an invitation for a group activity with previously unknown participants after the performance. From my observations, other participants behaved similarly – at least in terms of sharing food or drink and demonstrating mindfulness toward others. It was also noticeable that participants engaged in conversation, getting acquainted and even staying in touch after the performances – sometimes temporarily (such as walking together to the subway, which is not a common occurrence with strangers after theatre shows), and sometimes more enduringly. This also led to new bonds with the performers, some of whom I now greet on the street as familiar faces.

1 To refer to these projects, I draw on the term "spectator-oriented performance," used in the artistic practice of Finnish performer and pedagogue Eero-Tapio Vuori (2021), who applies it to various forms of participatory, interactive, immersive, and related types of theatre. However, I adapt the term by substituting "spectator" – which suggests a rather passive static act of "spectating" – with "participant," to denote someone who is an active "part", a dynamic and physical co-creator of the performance.

2 For recent research on perceived loneliness see e.g. Hammoud et al. 2021.

In the following text, I aim to use these observations as a starting point to delve deeper into the dimension of participation in dynamic, group-based experiences. I will attempt to do this by using an analogy to the experience of synchrony in a group within religious experience, which emerged to me during analysis as a surprisingly fitting reference, and drawing on cognitive-religious insights that seem to provide compelling answers to questions that until recently remained unexplored. My methodological approach is shaped organically by the material itself, allowing observations and themes to guide the theoretical framework rather than imposing a rigid structure from the outset. This intuitive and explorative way of working, while seemingly fluid at first, often reveals deeper coherence as the research unfolds – patterns emerge, leading to perspectives that might not have been initially anticipated.

Encounters in the mushroom café

In the third part of the performance Na houbách [Mushroom picking] *both groups of five participants are led back into the first room, which has since transformed into a kind of mushroom café. We sit at tables with mushroom-shaped lamps, and a performer, dressed in a whimsical costume adorned with mushrooms, hands us a menu where most items are mushroom-based. I order a "Mushroom" – Czech name for red wine mixed with cola (Spanish* calimocho*) – and soon after, dinner is served: potatoes with mushrooms, bacon, and salad. It is surprisingly good.*

We are given an unusual memory game (pairs of different mushrooms, as well as conceptual pairs such as life–death, female reproductive organs–male reproductive organs, fertilized egg–unfertilized egg, and various objects from the performance: a mushroom knife–umbilical scissors. Each participant had to cut their mycelium with one of these tools before entering the darkness).

I sit with a married couple who have three children, as I gather from the woman's comment while cutting the umbilical cord with the scissors during performance (that her husband had refused three times and now suddenly decides to take them). The woman is dominant and highly engaged – she shuffles the memory game cards, distributes them, and directs the activity at the table – while the man smiles kindly and reservedly.

As we eat, we talk. The woman had been in a different room with the second group and describes, in a clear and structured manner, what happened there (how they poured developer into a container and each participant developed a memory). She asks what we did. The man and I clumsily try to describe our experience with clay modelling (the ultimate low blow comes when all the creations are brought to the table with the words, "These were made by your colleagues" – the woman receives a beautiful, pale, speckled photograph, while we are left with two monstrous clay lumps).

I learn that the couple regularly attends all performances by the performance group Pomezí and that they go to the theatre at least once every two weeks – if they didn't have children, they would go nearly every day. The woman chooses the tickets: "It's her thing," says the man. It makes sense – she studied aesthetics at the Faculty of Arts at Charles University. Two professors from the Department of Aesthetics also taught

me at the Theatre Faculty, so we talk about them. I'm pleasantly surprised that, while they are not part of the theatre scene professionally, they have a deep relationship with theatre and attend regularly. They also go to Archa,[3] *"though sometimes things there get a little too wild," the man notes. At one performance by Pomezí, they met an actor, Adam, who is performing in tonight's show; later, he joins our table…*

The performance functions as a social gathering. I had rushed to get here, coming straight from Brno, arriving at the station thirsty and exhausted. During the performance, I felt taken care of – I was made to slow down, to once again recognise that there are people all around me, each with their own completely different lives and memories. While the initial interactions felt slightly uncomfortable, by the end, I felt refreshed and present.

People are like mushrooms – strangely interconnected. Is that what this was all about?

Fig. 1. *Na houbách* [Mushroom picking]. Participants playing a memory game in the mushroom café. © Lenka Huláková.

3 Between 1994 and 2023 – and therefore at the time of the encounter with the married couple at *Na houbách* – the Archa Theatre was Prague's contemporary performing arts scene, multicultural and progressive. In 2024, Archa was transformed into Archa+, a multifunctional cultural space focused primarily on young adults.

The above description is based on my firsthand participant experience from the performance *Na houbách*, which I documented immediately afterward. The performance premiered on December 12, 2019, in an old house in Za Poříčskou bránou Street under the umbrella of the Pomezí collective. In the creators' description, it is referred to as an "intimate interactive theatrical performance resembling a rest in the forest with friends you haven't seen in years" (*Pomezí* 2025). Its dramaturgy is intriguingly enigmatic, guiding participants through various dimly lit scenes infused with mushroom symbolism, where they are encouraged to interact with the scenography, performers, and fellow participants. It thus represents the first example of a project that strongly emphasises the moment of encounter and fosters a sense of connection through synchronised activities: creating sculptures from clay, playing a game, having dinner.

Performances that bring together multiple participants (typically in small groups of about 6–15 people) naturally vary greatly in aesthetics and poetics, depending on the themes and strategies chosen by their creators. Nevertheless, several creative approaches appeared repeatedly across different performances which I visited, and it is these that I will focus on in the following text. Due to the thematic scope of this text, there is unfortunately no space to present and discuss each selected example in detail. As well, my interest does not lie in the "intellectual content" of these projects but in the dynamics of experiencing them. This is also because these works could be largely qualified as "experiential performances," where the shared experience itself is both the primary theme and content. Of course, readers can look up specific projects if interested. In my analysis, I primarily drew upon my own experience from these performances (listed chronologically by premiere date): *Na houbách*, *Vnitroměsto* [The City Within], *The Dream in a Supermarket*, *Den mě oslepí, večer utiší, noc mě skryje* [Day Blinds Me, Evening Soothes Me, Night Hides Me], *Dreamy Walking*, *Seděť* [Seated], *Journey with the Boy to Willow Tree Land*, *If My Tongue Could Stretch into the Landscape*, and *Šlehat vítr, pražit hlínu, hníst mlhu* [Whipping the Wind, Roasting the Clay, Kneading the Mist].

Echoes of mysteries

When attending the participatory performances created for smaller groups of participants, I repeatedly observed the presence of the following elements: an initial use of a substance affecting perception (often tea, occasionally alcohol); shared consumption (dinner, feast, tea ceremony); a shared journey (pilgrimage, procession); common music listening; dancing together; a guiding figure (performer) who leads participants; and, generally, a shared dynamic experience among the participants based on overcoming of initial feelings of shame and awkwardness and forming a "secret bond" within the group. It occurred to me that artistic techniques used in the performances and leading to experiences of (among others) shame and shared secret formally resemble ritual elements – particularly the ancient rites of classical mystery cults, or at least what we know about them.

This analogy led me to the Eleusinian Mysteries, the most revered of ancient Greek mystic rites, celebrated every autumn at Eleusis in Attica for over a thousand years in honours of Goddesses Demeter and her daughter Persephone (called Kore within the Mysteries), which people entered through an initiation ritual. While limited evidence

about the actual course of the initiation ritual exists, a partial reconstruction has been made.[4] In the Eleusinian Mysteries, aspects of communal procession, dancing, and consumption (of the *kykeon*[5] drink on the night of initiation) were all present, along with the figure of the *mystagogos*, a guide who prepared and accompanied the initiate throughout the ritual and led them eventually into the sacred, enclosed space where the initiation occurred. Understandably, this part of the Mysteries is the least known, as it was strictly protected by the community and its violation was punished.[6] We know only that it comprised *ta dromena*, *ta legomena*, and *ta deiknumena* ("things done" [i.e. performed], "things said" and "things shown" – i.e. revealed through gestures, words, and direct demonstrations led by the *hierophant* (the high priest of Demeter). Importantly, "initiates were not simply meant to learn something but to experience and feel it, to undergo it in themselves if needed" (Dostálová – Hošek 1997: 73).

Perhaps one could draw an analogy with other religious ceremonies, as I consider certain archetypal aspects that have appeared across history in various forms. After all, Kazimierz Braun (1979: 113) speaks of "savage theatre" (*nieoswojony teatr*) (referring to Lévi-Strauss's work *The Savage Mind*) as a direct inspiration for the second theatre reform movement – the 1960s movement, connected to researched performances through the open structure of the production/performance, the

4 In considering ancient mysteries in the following subsection, I primarily draw on *Mystery Cults in the Ancient World* by Hugh Bowden (2023). Additionally, I have consulted *Antická mystéria* [*Ancient Mysteries*] by Růžena Dostálová and Radislav Hošek (1997) for supplementary perspectives. Given the older publication date of the latter, I have cross-verified any specific claims with more recent scholarly sources to ensure their accuracy and relevance. My sincere thanks go to colleague Eliška Kubartová from the Departement of Theatre and Film Studies at Palacký University and to colleagues Dalibor Papoušek and Iva Doležalová from the Department for the Study of Religions at Masaryk University for their kind assistance in consulting the relevant literature.

5 The base of *kykeon* was fermented grain. Some scholars believe that, along with the grain, the psychoactive ergot fungus – known as *claviceps purpurea* – was also present in the drink (Bowden 2023: 47–48; Dostálová – Hošek 1997: 303). Ergot alkaloids are precursor compounds for the production of LSD. Bowden, however, raises a practical objection: How could the hallucinogenic effects have been recreated, given that it is very difficult to achieve them under modern laboratory conditions without risking fatal poisoning? At the same time, he notes that even if it were possible, the use of drugs does not explain the meaning of the Mysteries and that there is no reason to believe the experience would lose its power in their absence (Bowden 2023: 48). Shared meals were an important part of other mystery cult practices, as Mithraea and Dionysiac *thiasoi*. Bowden states that shared meals are in general a very universal feature of the ancient world (Bowden 2012: 212). The meal sharing at ancient public feasts was a means of fostering cohesion and sacred connection between the participants (De Coulanges 2001: 131).

6 In the context of theatre studies, it may be of interest that Aeschylus, who was traditionally believed to have been initiated at Eleusis, was repeatedly lynched for allegedly revealing the secrets of the Mysteries. Dostálová and Hošek observe that the documents from the period reveal no specific information, which is characteristic of matters related to the Mysteries. The impetus for the lynch (or even possible trial) may have stemmed from an accusation or allegation that someone privately reenacted scenes from the Mysteries, disclosed their contents, addressed the Eleusinian high priest by his original civilian name, violated the secrecy rule during the rites, etc. (Dostálová – Hošek 1997: 33–34). The most informative source, the Scholium on Aristotle, states that Aeschylus revealed the secrets of the Mysteries in the five plays *Toxotides*, *Priestesses*, *Sisyphus Petrocylistes*, *Iphigeneia*, and *Oedipus* (Sutton 1983: 250). In her article "Aeschylus and the Mysteries: A Suggestion", Classical studies scholar Dana F. Sutton (1983) proposes to attribute fragment registered as "fr. 618 METTE" to Aeschylus' drama *Sisyphus Petrocylistes*, and thus offers the answer that "revealing the secrets of the mysteries" could have meant in the Aeschylus case that he represented onstage the kind of piglet-sacrifice associated with the Thesmophoria and the Eleusinian Mysteries, and probably in a highly comical way, which could have offended the audience of that time.

abandonment of traditional theatre spaces with a stage-audience arrangement, the understanding of the spectator as a participant and co-creator, and its educational impact on him. Term "savage theatre" described according to Braun religious, warrior, and other ceremonies of indigenous peoples, which share the features of blending actors and spectators and fostering collective participation in a shared ritual that holds significant meaning for all involved.[7]

However, the analogy of contemporary participatory performances to ancient mysteries seems apt for several reasons beyond simple formal resemblance. Firstly, the mysteries were voluntary and, in terms of participant preferences, personal, individual ceremonies. To experience direct, unmediated contact with the divine, mysteries imposed no moral requirements – only adherence to the rites and protecting its secret course. Individuals could freely choose which rites to engage in, obtaining a deeply personal experience with no given religious explanation or interpretation. As Clement of Alexandria, Christian author who wrote about Greek mysteries at the end of the second century AD, states, "there were no authoritative texts that explained the Mysteries, and there was no mechanism by which initiates could be effectively taught what they meant. Instead, [...], each initiate would have to think about their own experience and develop their own understanding of what they had been through" (Clement in Bowden 2023: 51). This freedom to choose a format that allows participants to immerse themselves in their own experience (together with others) without further obligations is shared by the Mysteries and the examined performances, which occur as paid service in today's market context and at the same time as artistic experience, which opens up to as many interpretations as wished.

The second connection lies in the effect on participants present in both phenomena. In earlier research, I showed that the examined performative projects often induce a calming, reassuring effect (caused by techniques very close to mindfulness or ASMR practices), and a certain reconciliation with the world, often observed from the top views to which the audiowalks led the participant, offering them a perspective of staying, so to say, "on top of things" and dissolving their ego (Raiterová 2023). Similarly, projects focusing on encounter and certain common activity showed a distinct deceleration effect, achieved by serving tea, seating participants at a communal table, or guiding them to a quiet place. The ego also appears here as subdued (as we shall see later) in the wake of increased concern for others.

Upon closer observation, this effect seems to echo that offered by the Eleusinian Mysteries: Although these rites were far from being an intimate gathering, with up to several thousand initiates participating at its height (!), the scholars still describe the experience as being for every participant deeply personal and intimate (Bowden 2023: 28) offering a space for "contemplation and consideration of nature and of realities" (Clement in Bowden 2023: 49). Dostálová – Hošek (1997) repeatedly speak about the Mysteries' ability to relieve people from the fear of the forces of fate and free them from anxiety. Such an experience is believed to hold a powerful potential to transform an individual and their perspective on the world forever (Bowden 2023: 53).

7 From today's perspective, Braun's framing can be seen as somewhat colonialist, both in the use of the term "savage", now regarded as pejorative and inappropriate, and in its generalisation of a wide range of indigenous practices without engaging with their specific meanings and cultural contexts, appropriating them from a position of power as an inspiration for contemporary Western culture. I hope that by maintaining respect for the original significance as well as context of the ancient mysteries, I have managed to avoid cultural appropriation in this text.

Fig. 2. *If My Tongue Could Stretch into the Landscape.* Participants on their way across the fields to the first picnic stop. © Vojtěch Brtnický / Bazaar Festival.

Fig. 3. *If My Tongue Could Stretch into the Landscape.* Participants sharing dinner in the house. © Vojtěch Brtnický / Bazaar Festival.

Fig. 4. *If My Tongue Could Stretch into the Landscape*. Participants gathered around the fire after sunset. © Vojtěch Brtnický / Bazaar Festival.

While modern performances do not bring participants closer to god(s) in a religious sense, they can offer – as I have observed – a certain form of transcendence. This transcendence allows participants to go beyond everyday consciousness, dissolving their ego, creating a sense of liberation or calmness and providing a fresh perspective on themselves and the world around them. I would dare to propose the thesis that in a contemporary secular context such an experience may have an analogous effect on the psyche as this is presumed by scholars of participation in ancient mysteries.

The emphasis on experience itself in the mysteries is very important. Aristotle emphasised that initiates were not meant to "'learn' (*mathein*) but to 'feel, experience' (*pathein*)" (Aristotle in Dostálová – Hošek 1997: 252). The symbolic, performative approach aimed to evoke strong emotional, or even ecstatic, direct religious experience, very different from the Greco-Roman everyday-life-religious experience, characterised by unknowability of the gods and distance towards them.

Bowden relates this fact to the anthropological distinction between two modes of religiosity: the imagistic and the doctrinal, each of which, according to the theory's originator Harvey Whitehouse (2004), activates a different type of memory. The doctrinal mode, characterised by frequent repetition, low arousal, established interpretations, and hierarchical structures (typical of most "mainstream" forms of larger religions like Christianity, Judaism, and Islam), activates semantic memory, which focuses on learning and retaining concepts, notions and facts. On the other hand, the imagistic mode, marked by infrequent repetition, high arousal, and spontaneous exegetical reflection, activates episodic memory – memory oriented toward specific events tied to a particular time and space – or what is called "flashbulb memory," a vivid and long-lasting recollection of surprising or shocking events. According to Bowden, it is the latter mode that aligns with the experiences of participants in the Mysteries.

In a similar way, experience emerges as key in examined performances, where it is prioritised over intellectual communication concentrated around the semantic memory. The focus lies in bodily experience within an interactive environment (time, space, other participants) rather than mere mental interaction. A good piece of evidence for this is the intellectual challenge of reflecting on these performances and their "content", which often leads to such performances appearing flat or banal. This is hardly surprising if we consider an idea deeply rooted in the history of human activity – the notion that rituals cannot be explained (Bowden 2023: 24).

Performance and prosociality

Considering the analogy with ancient mystery cults, I decided to explore religious studies focused on the research of religious and mystical experience and compare the findings with my own experiences of sharing and sociability, which appeared significantly heightened after performances involving elements of communal consumption, walking, dancing, or creation. I discovered that the theme of the relationship between religious experience and prosocial behaviour is widely developed in religious studies, particularly in the group dimension of religious experience. Prosocial behaviour includes behaviours performed for the benefit of others, ranging from everyday situations to exceptional ones: providing information about searched location, helping a parent with a stroller, pointing out an item dropped from someone's pocket, listening to someone's concerns, giving a ride to a hitchhiker, donating to charity, giving blood, etc. (Slaměník – Janoušek 2008).

Fig. 5. *Šlehat vítr, pražit hlínu, hníst mlhu* [Whipping the Wind, Roasting the Clay, Kneading the Mist]. Performer Heidi Hornáčková shows participants how to make dumplings from dough, vegetables, and herbs – later cooked and shared by the table. © Vojtěch Brtnický / Bazaar Festival.

Fig. 6. *Šlehat vítr, pražit hlínu, hníst mlhu* [Whipping the Wind, Roasting the Clay, Kneading the Mist]. Inside a DIY sweat lodge, participants inhale herbal infusions from steaming pots, recognising scents together. © Vojtěch Brtnický / Bazaar Festival.

The religious studies scholar Martin Lang, in his article *Náboženství a prosocialita v evoluční perspektivě: Základní mechanismy lidského sociálního chování* [Religion and Prosociality in Evolutionary Perspective: Basic Mechanisms of Human Social Behavior], notes that theorists such as Émile Durkheim, Sigmund Freud, and William James, though each understanding the function of religion in society differently, agreed that religion makes people more prosocial and promotes traits such as morality, willingness to help, self-sacrifice, etc. (Lang 2014: 167). As Lang mentions, the positive relationship between religion and prosocial behaviour became more concrete throughout the last century with increasing empirical support, as psychological and sociological research showed that religious people consider themselves more prosocial, are viewed as more trustworthy, donate more generously to charity, cooperate more, and are more often members of volunteer organizations. These findings helped formulate the hypothesis of religious prosociality, which states that religious beliefs lead to prosocial views and actions. However, the hypothesis still faced many problematic issues, most notably the question of causality (i.e., are religious people more prosocial, or do people with prosocial tendencies tend to be more religious?). According to Lang (and many other researchers), the answer to these discrepancies may be found in cognitive-oriented research, which understands religious prosociality as a multifaceted, multi-factorial phenomenon, and examines individual factors against the backdrop of evolutionarily developed mechanisms regulating human social behaviour (Lang 2014: 171). This is where the connection between religious experience and secular performances in the 21st century begins to emerge.

Émile Durkheim already considered the concept of *collective effervescence* and proposed the hypothesis that "ritual behaviour re-establishes the moral principles of the group and thus increases group cohesion" (Durkheim in Lang 2014: 179). This *collective effervescence*, an intense shared experience, builds strong bonds between individuals and increases their mutual trust. This hypothesis has been tested in several studies (e.g. Fischer et al. 2013; Reddisch et al. 2013), which have confirmed it and brought interesting findings: both intense shared experiences and synchronised movements contribute to a sense of unity with the group (Lang 2014: 180). Experimental research has shown that synchronised behaviour facilitates relationship-building and interpersonal sympathy (Hove – Risen 2009; Lang et al. 2016; Miles – Nind – Macrae 2009). Synchrony is understood as the coordination of movements or activities at the same time among individuals in a group, creating a sense of sameness and unity among participants. It need not involve perfectly synchronised movements, coordination can involve various forms of shared activities, where there is a certain alignment of movements, actions, or rhythms.[8]

In line with this research, Lang, together with an international team of researchers, later examined specific mechanisms through which behavioural synchronisation affects mutual sympathy and trust between individuals. They found that "there are multiple compatible pathways through which synchrony influences social attitudes, but endogenous opioid system activation, such as β-endorphin release, might be important in facilitating economic cooperation" (Lang 2017: 191). β-endorphin is an endogenous neuropeptide and peptide hormone produced in certain neurons of the central and peripheral nervous systems, primarily used in the body to reduce

8 See, for example, the broad definition in the introduction to the 2016 international research on the Effects of Synchrony: "Across cultures, people engage in collective activities that involve the matching of behaviour in time, such as music production and singing, dancing, and collective rituals" (Lang 2017: 191).

stress and maintain homeostasis.[9] Earlier studies had assigned an important role to the β-endorphin neurotransmitters and related μ-opioid receptors (MOR) in the bonding between mother and child, distress vocalization, and social grooming in rodents and non-human primates (Lang 2017: 191–192).

If we look at the aspects studied in performances, we can see that they involve synchronised activities – we can recall the creation of sculptures from clay, playing a game, having a dinner from the initial experience of the performance *Na houbách* to have one concrete example from the whole range of presented possibilities of shared consumption, walking and dancing together, shared creation, or cooperation. If we look at the earlier observations, I noted heightened attention to social interactions during performances. Participants, including myself, showed increased consideration – ensuring everyone was included, sharing food and drinks, and collaborating even after the events ended. Conversations and connections often extended beyond the performances, whether briefly, like heading to the public transport stop together, or in a long-term sense, fostering lasting bonds. There was also a notable sense of familiarity with the performers, transforming them from strangers to acquaintances I now greet in everyday life. When I reflect on my feelings toward the other participants, surprisingly, I cannot recall any situation where I felt particularly unsympathetic toward any participant or where anyone irritated me. On the contrary, the performance encouraged me to care more about others, and contact was established relatively smoothly after overcoming initial shyness.

According to the definition of prosocial behaviour in social psychology, it seems that the observations mentioned above clearly fulfil its definition: interest and concern for others, willingness to help, cooperation. Following the research of theatre scholar Kai van Eikels (2011; 2013), who examines the collectiveness as kind of essence of collective dynamics in contemporary performances, we can understand this prosocial behaviour as a dynamic balance of constantly adjusting rhythms, where participants pick up cues from others and respond to them (mutual tuning, self-restraint toward others). They synchronise, yet at their own pace, without losing their autonomy. And in this, we are not far from the idea of the already mentioned second theatre reform movement, for which encounter and mutuality, togetherness, were its key attributes. Kazimierz Braun speaks of the new theatre of the '60s as a "form of humanistic and anthropocentric theatre" (1979: 152), which is primarily a "social situation of relationship" (1979: 166), where we can "experience the humanity of others" (1979: 168), and this has educational effects on our character – "teaching responsibility [...] Perhaps this is the most important aspect?" (1979: 152).

The analogy to the second theatre reform is another topic that could be further explored in relation to the examined performances. However, it is a slightly different issue from the main subject of this text, so let us now return to the dimension of experienced prosociality in order to bring it to a close.

9 In human studies, direct measurement of opioid levels in the brain from cerebrospinal fluid is not feasible. Therefore, researchers use pain threshold as a proxy measure for endorphin release. Several studies examining synchronised behaviour also support this approach, showing an increase in pain threshold following group activities such as rowing, synchronised singing, drumming, and dancing (Lang 2017: 192).

Fig. 7. *Šlehat vítr, pražit hlínu, hníst mlhu* [Whipping the Wind, Roasting the Clay, Kneading the Mist]. The performer rinses participants' hands so they can wrap a potato in a leaf and soft wet clay – ready to be baked in the fire and eaten later. © Vojtěch Brtnický / Bazaar Festival.

Narcissism reconsidered: Conclusion

The study of prosocial behaviour is, of course, multifaceted, and perceived prosociality, based on existing findings, is also influenced by other factors. For example, a sense of community within a small group can enhance individual responsibility, whereas in an audience full of spectators, responsibility is diffused, leading to what is known as the "bystander effect" (Slaměník – Janoušek 2008: 291). In my observations, I encountered a socially sensitive participant – who invited me to join her in scattering seeds in a public space after one of the performances. Later, through conversation, it emerged that this participant works in the social sector. In her case, but also in the case of other visitors, we might consider the presence of an a priori "prosocial personality", even though this phenomenon remains an evolutionary puzzle (Nakonečný 2009: 249).

Further research into these factors would undoubtedly be compelling and relevant. However, my primary aim here is to highlight that the artistic approaches applied in contemporary participant-oriented performances, such as shared consumption, walking, dancing, collective creation, and collaboration, correlate with heightened prosocial behaviour among participants or with emergent prosocial tendencies – as an internal readiness to enact prosocial behaviour (*Studium Psychologie* 2024). Referring to cognitive-religious studies, I also aim to propose a possible explanation: that this correlation may be attributed to the effects of synchrony, which influence group unity and trust through the production of beta-endorphins. These effects, likely alongside other factors outlined earlier, may then carry over into everyday life, shaping participants' experiences and interactions even after the performance ends.

Such findings seem remarkable, as interactive and immersive projects focused on spectator (participant) experience have long been criticised as narcissistically self-centred. The concepts of "narcissistic participation" and "narcissistic spectatorship" were developed around the same time in the works of theatre scholars Adam Alston (2012) and Keren Zaiontz (2014). Both describe this mode of engagement as a specific way of reception in which the spectator places themselves at the centre of the artistic experience. They show how this type of spectatorship is fostered by both large-scale immersive productions and intimate interactive performances – essentially, any theatre where the spectator's experience is a constitutive element. What Alston terms *entrepreneurial participation* aligns closely with what Zaiontz calls *prosumerism* – the spectator becomes both a producer and consumer, shaping their own experience by actively engaging in the performance. This dynamic requires them to "invest" in risk-taking, much like an entrepreneur, in order to maximize their personal gain from the performance. Their experience is often marked by competition and comparison, as they seek to validate the authenticity and intensity of their engagement – perhaps even proving that theirs was more authentic or intense than that of others. Rather than reflecting on the artistic work itself or embracing a shared experience, the spectator uses the performance as a mirror to affirm their own identity and uniqueness. According to both scholars, this kind of participation – characterised by individualism, competitiveness, and entrepreneurialism – ultimately mirrors and reinforces a neoliberal ethos.

However, my discoveries contradict this critique – it is difficult to label as narcissistic projects that awaken prosocial behaviour in their participants. It is not that the traits of neoliberal entrepreneurialism and competitiveness are absent or undetectable in some of these performances (it suffices to recall my initial experience from the performance *Na houbách*, where, during the final dinner, we shared what each of us had done in different rooms, and the gentleman and I felt somewhat embarrassed

about our creations and experiences next to his more ambitious wife). The uniqueness and individuality of the spectator's experience are indeed constitutive elements, actively shaped by the participants themselves – they are prosumers. However, their experience is not exhausted by this individual agency; rather, they are guided through synchronised activities that foster connection with others, both fellow participants and performers.

Personally, I did not feel a strong need to "compete" during these performances, nor to compare my experience with others afterward. For example, when attending a performative picnic in nature called *If My Tongue Could Stretch into the Landscape* with a friend, our post-performance conversation did not revolve around measuring or evaluating our engagement. Instead, we reminisced about childhood school trips and summer camps that the experience had brought to mind. Many of the performances (such as *Na houbách*, or *Sedět,* conceived as a tea ceremony) ultimately led to fluid conversations among participants – exchanges that were not about comparison or rivalry but about sharing experiences, memories, and reflections. Similarly, the feeling of awkwardness or embarrassment – seen by Alston as a "potential risk" (Alston 2013: 12) that ultimately provides pleasure (pleasure from a thrill, a challenge, and thus a form of personal hedonistic, narcissistic pleasure) – can also be understood as something that unites rather than divides participants. The shared embarrassment has the potential to foster solidarity and connection.

My findings suggest that a primary focus on the spectator's experience does not necessarily imply narcissism. Intimacy and personal engagement can lead to an openness toward others rather than self-absorption. Rather than competitiveness and self-centeredness, I observed collaboration, collectivity, and empathy. Instead of the presumptive intimacy that Zaiontz discusses, what emerges is a mutual, shared intimacy. Rather than reinforcing individualism, these projects may in fact cultivate social cohesion.

Within the context of neoliberal capitalist secular discourse and pervasive digitality, observed performances appear to offer a healing effect for many pressing contemporary issues: the scientifically documented decline in empathy among young people, feelings of loneliness and isolation, increased self-centeredness and narcissism, FOMO, and other anxieties caused by digital technologies.[10] By fostering communal encounters that evoke prosocial behaviour, these performances provide a calming, grounding effect and counteract these challenges.

10 For all these diagnostics see e.g. Greenfield 2015; Spitzer 2015, 2019.

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