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**Where did all the
people who used to be
part of our audiences
disappear to when
they became parents?**



The question “Where did all the people who used to be part of our audiences disappear to when they became parents?” arose in 2020, when my colleague Anna Chrtková and I first engaged as curators with the work and long-term research of Marika Smreková. It sparked curiosity about a potentially significantly large group of people who might have slipped out of our attention, perhaps due to the unquestioned patterns through which we are accustomed to organise events in the arts.

What began as a kind of detective story developed further within the structure of *On Mobilisation*. As we dug into the research on like-minded initiatives in the Czech Republic and around Europe, we understood that the greatest benefit lay in the close collaboration



between an institutional framework (Studio ALTA) and the artistic approach of Marika Smreková. Based on this relationship, we started to build a platform called Parent-Friendly Culture, with the understanding that if we want to change something, we need to start with ourselves and rethink the way we operate in Studio ALTA.

The following text is a summary of our institutional tools, strategies and the findings we gathered throughout the On Mobilisation journey.

What Is Parent-Friendly Culture?

Firstly, it is Studio ALTA's process of self-transformation towards a more inclusive environment of cultural institutions for parents and children, shaped by the following questions:

- Where did all the people, who once had been an integral part of our audience, disappear after they became parents?
- Is there any way to bring them back?
- What do we need to do in order to make it possible for them to be part of our audience community again?
- What are the barriers of our institution that prevent some people from entering?
- What does this have to do with society as a whole and the general narratives that are woven into the way we organise ourselves in the arts?

- How do we not only create activities for parents, but make them meet with non-parents and make children visible in public space?

Out of these questions, we formed the Parent-Friendly Culture platform and rooted our actions in 6 pillars:

1. IT CONNECTS a group of people – artists, parents (mothers and fathers) and non-parents – via Facebook and WhatsApp channels. The aim is to share information about PFC events and create a support structure within a micro-community. Invitations to these groups have been spread over social media and by leaflets with QR codes posted around playgrounds and schools.

So far we have gathered approximately 600 people in our FB group and over 100 in our WA group. The people are active, responding to our calls and participating in the events we are sharing. The group is slowly becoming a tool for the people as they start to share their own content, and one day hopefully it will become a supportive infrastructure for self-organising. Forming these groups was the first thing we did and looking at the results of our initiative, we consider them a major reason for its success.

2. IT OFFERS accessibility tools in the form of setting earlier show-time for live performances/ events and providing parents with free babysitting by experienced kindergarten and early years educators.

Since late 2023, we have organized 15+ events with free childcare and involved 6 other cultural institutions. We took shows from our regular program, made them start earlier and arranged 2 babysitters. Result? We had a new audience! As a side benefit, we figured out that an earlier start doesn't repel the general visitors; on the contrary, many of them welcome an earlier start.

In 2025, two Prague-based independent theatres started to organise child-care on a regular basis at their own expense and several other events are appearing across the country.

3. IT DRAWS attention to the invisible and under-appreciated work of parents of young children and their exclusion from social life, and to the barriers parents have to face.

With our activities, we got significant media outreach. There are many people working there who understand that this is also their topic and are generally interested as parenthood becomes a big thing not only in culture but in society as whole. We got invited to panels and other discussions

and were asked to navigate other initiatives in becoming more parent-friendly.

We understood when talking about Parent-Friendly Culture, we are also necessarily talking about much deeper topics, such as the values that are embedded in our society, the role of the arts, capitalism, and patriarchy. These are communicating vessels, and thus striving for a parent-friendly culture can bring surprising strategies to respond to today's most urgent challenges.

4. IT INITIATES new intergenerational performative works that allow children and parents to participate. The content and form of these works are not primarily for children, but they benefit from their presence and participation.

*Our new premiere *Seeing Invisible* by the collective of Marika Smreková, Lenka Jabůrková, and Matěj Nitra premiered on September 26th, 2024. This experience also made us look more closely at the other artistic works we are presenting and think about whether they have the potential to invite children into them along with adults.*

5. IT CREATES open-source material such as: registration forms, childcare handover protocols, know-how in spatial design, a network of babysitters

and care workers, and a guide for implementing PFC into other institutions.

These materials have been proven and tested by both our positive experiences and the mistakes we made. To share the materials, we are hosting detailed guidance workshops for institutions and culture workers on how to work with accessibility for parents and how to create a new communal audience.

6. IT CULTIVATES a welcoming culture.

Parent-Friendly Culture taught us many things about our communication with the audience: not only parents but also the other people that we are making our culture work for. In the end, a welcoming culture is the most important and basic accessibility tool that costs only our empathy.

What It Takes to Make Culture Parent-Friendly

When thinking about accessibility for parents and children, there is not only one path to follow or a single manual to copy and paste. Instead, there are a multiplicity of means that help parents to attend cultural events and one has to figure out what constellation works best for a particular context and capacities.

Here is a list of a few tools that we have been working with, scaled from the least demanding to the more complex ones.

A welcoming culture: Simply find a fitting context that you want to open for the parents and say out loud that parents are welcome. Maybe it is a long-durational piece, a discussion, or any other format that allows one to enter and leave at any point or that doesn't demand absolute silence and attention, so that if there is a babbling kid around, no one would mind or the parent could easily leave and re-enter later.

When we talked to many parents in the Czech Republic, we often heard stories about how unwelcome they felt when going out with their children. To quote Marika: "It's not a given that parents and children are welcome and that their presence has been taken into account. And if it's not a given, it's necessary to state. Until such time as it becomes a given."

Time: This is one of the essential tools and criteria in parents' decision-making processes regarding whether they can come or not. Events that start later than 7:00 pm tend to be inaccessible, as they overlap with the sleep patterns of children.

In experimenting with earlier start times, we learned that it is not only parents who benefit, but also people who have to commute from different cities, people who work early morning shifts, people

who want to visit more events that evening or, surprisingly, many of our colleagues from culture sector for whom visiting events is part of their job.

Space adjustments: Including barrier-free access for strollers, changing counters, potty and baby toilet equipment, a kitchen corner, small chairs and tables. A specially designed space with carpets and sensorial objects creates a significant impact. When we were thinking about such a space, we created an outdoor zone with haptic stimulants, toys and a big chalkboard for drawing that was used by kids and parents; later in the night, it became a favourite spot for adults to have a drink. We avoided using infantile aesthetics and plastic objects so that the space was appealing to both adults and kids. Most of the things we arranged for free as we activated our networks and people donated things they were not using anymore. Even with low or no budget, you can make space more accessible. Tadeáš Polák, one of the educators who works in our childcare system, says: “What I have learned about kids is that they like 3 things: to destroy things, pastry and private ownership. If each institution possessed several bread rolls and at least a small thing that could be thrown down, tangled, covered with paint or torn apart, the world would be a slightly friendlier place.”

Childcare provided during the events: Is one of the most

effective tools to bring the parents and children in. When we were speaking out loud about the idea of providing free childcare, we often got the response that it is just too expensive. Well, it's not. Roughly calculated, every event with free childcare costs us:

- 2 x 80€ for the babysitters (they usually work for 2 hours. The average payment they get in nurseries is 10€ per hour. We try to balance the extreme underpayment of their carework)
- 1 hour of our tech team to prepare the childcare zone
- 40 minutes of our in-house staff to host, supervise, and talk to parents before and after the show
- 30 minutes of our PR team to share the information to the relevant channels
- 1-2 hours of our production team to deal with extra reservations, paperwork, and coordinate with the PR and tech crews and other team members

In our case, we provided the childcare for free with the obligation for parents to buy a ticket for the show. Our capacity for the childcare zone was about 10-14 children. Usually, there were 8-20 adults coming (parents and their friends) so 50-150% of the costs related to the babysitters returned from the extra ticket sales.

Persistence, honest interest and curiosity: I consider this the most difficult element of accessibility. Be ready to fail and make mistakes

and be open to learning from them. Be prepared for last-minute cancellations from parents whose kids suddenly got sick and surprising criticism from the public saying that if you are considering parents, why not people with dogs who also need to find someone to take care of their animal companions? (Yes, this happened.) Dedicate your mental capacities to the parents who are coming to the events and listen to their stories.

What It Brings Back

Parent-Friendly Culture brought us a new audience or an old audience with whom we had lost contact. From the on-sight conversations with parents, we learned that many hadn't been to a theatre for 2 or more years. According to audience development research, if people lose the habit of visiting cultural institutions, it is very hard to renew this connection. We welcomed couples that hadn't seen a show together since they became parents, or artistic couples for whom it was suddenly possible to see the work of their partner. The accessibility tools made our program open to people who have never been to Studio ALTA and had very little or no connection to contemporary dance and performing arts. They came only because of the possibility and some of them are becoming our regular audience members. Parent-Friendly Culture also

brought a more joyful atmosphere to the events as well as increased media coverage and a stronger negotiation position with our funders. Parent-Friendly Culture can thus be seen as a strategy for more sustainable institutions and can cause a durable impact on the relationship within the artistic community and audience.

Why It Concerns Us All

Throughout the process, I have often questioned why I spend so much energy and attention on a world that seems to be far away from me. While I live in a heteronormative long-term partnership, we do not plan to have children and I have always been accustomed to being kind of afraid of the presence of children. As I turned 30, many of my close friends went on a different trajectory and became parents. Since most of my social life takes place within cultural events, I started to lose contact with them. This made me very upset, as I thought that the fact that my friends are having kids shouldn't be a reason to throw away the years of work we put into our friendship. Parent-Friendly Culture turned into an environment where we can reestablish these relations and where I can face my fear of children. I slowly learn how to interact with them and how I, even though childfree, can participate and contribute to the carework of others.



