

A Discussion with Ivan Vyskočil about (Inter)acting with the Inner Partner

Translated from the Czech by Alexander Komlosi

The following text is an edited transcript of a class Professor Vyskočil held with students at The Janáček Academy of Music and Performing Arts in Brno at the start of an (Inter)acting with the Inner Partner course taught there in 2004.

Ivan Vyskočil:

(Inter)acting with the Inner Partner is nothing fixed or finished. It is not a method, nor is it, in the least, a technique. If anything, it's a certain kind of inspiration, an open question. If anything, it's an instance of investigating and studying open acting.ⁱ The discipline is the primary foundation of the study program at the Department of Authorial Creativity and Pedagogy and its affiliated institution, the Institute for the Research and Study of Authorial Acting. It is, for me, its creator, a kind of backlog and legacy from the 1960s, and not just in terms of the Czech Republic.

I developed (Inter)acting with the Inner Partner based on my ingenuity and erudition as a theatre practitioner, psychologist, and teacher; and thanks to many discussions, and much collaboration, with my teachers and friends. Allow me to at least name professors Josef Stavěla and Jan Patočka, and my friends Emanuel Frynta, Hugo Široký and Otakar Roubínek. But above all, I developed (Inter)acting with the Inner Partner from my experiences with text-appeals in Reduta; my experiments with and about theatre at the Theatre on the Balustrade; and, most of all, while experimenting with Non-theatre and open dramatic play at many different venues. My professional experience in psychotherapy and work with delinquent youth also significantly contributed to (Inter)acting with the Inner Partner's development. The discipline has been crystallizing for almost fifty years.

Interest in the work I was pursuing began to burgeon about forty years ago, and not just in our country. It expanded during our so-called revival process. Normalization and consolidation then logically and necessarily steamrolled it.ⁱⁱ During that time, there was no way the discipline could exist and develop properly, which is why I speak of it as a kind of backlog and legacy from the 1960s. I soon understood that good theatre and good literature can be done with a minimum, almost without anything, if need be, but quality, solid research, which is what the discipline is about, cannot. That sort of research requires proper, professional working conditions.

But let's move on to (Inter)acting with the Inner Partner. Almost everyone knows about it, or at least is familiar with it, from their own experience. If

that were not the case, or where that is not the case, our efforts would be, or are, in vain. Do you ever talk or interact with yourself? Generally speaking, in private? When you're alone? At times, mainly so you wouldn't be quite so alone? Because you need someone, a partner in that particular situation. Since there isn't a real, visible partner readily at hand, an *inner partner* turns up, shows himself, appears. Sometimes it's called an inner voice, but it's usually not just a voice. It's also a gesture, a kind of corporeal tension. Sometimes it's also referred to as an alter ego, another, better "self" - although it can also be a self that discourages or makes insinuations.

So let's evoke, recall when such events - better yet, let's spoil ourselves with the term *phenomenon* - when such phenomena usually happen...somehow spontaneously. It just *happens* to us. It happens to us often, sometimes outloud, through a gesture or gestures, voices. Sometimes it intrigues and captivates us - and not just when we're alone - so much so that we even forget, and don't even notice, that there are other people around who can hear us, are listening to us, are watching us quite curiously. And suddenly we're in an awkward situation...so how do we get out of it? (Well, that's how it was before the invasion of cell phones.) In what kind of situations is this behavior "typical"?

The group discusses the question, recalling different situations when such self-interaction tends to happen: Preparing for important meetings or recapping, reconstructing or assessing such encounters - their successes and, more often, failures. Vyskočil then mentions the "bathroom situation": When, all alone in the bathroom, a favorite scene from a film, play, novel or even episode from our own lives, emerges and plays out through us, so that we have the opportunity to experience it again and again. These kinds of situations are bursting with playfulness, foolishness, and clownery. Often they are a reaction to our own embarrassment; they release tension; and are a way of dealing with stress or anxiety. Sometimes this can happen to us when we are feeling bored or lonely. That is when the principles of play come to the fore most clearly.

Vyskočil also discusses a number of (Inter)acting with the Inner Partner's inspirational sources: Eugen Fink's Oasis of Happiness; Eric Berne's Games People Play; Roger Caillois's Man, Play and Games; Johan Huizinga's Homo Ludens; Jiří Černý's Football Is Play; Karel Vrána's Dialogical Personalism; Martin Buber's I and Thou; as well as various anthologies from conferences conducted by the Department of Authorial Creativity and Pedagogy like: Studying and Investigating the Psychosomatic Foundation of Performing in Public (2000), and Hic Sunt Leones (Authorial Acting) (2003). Vyskočil then continues:

Yes, there are situations in which we interact with our inner partners spontaneously. They are wonderfully polarized, full of contrast - a play of opposites. There are a number of other situations in which this happens

too, but the ones we have mentioned are the principal ones. It usually happens to us in secret, when we're alone, but in public too, sometimes. But it's not as if we *wanted* it to happen in public. It's just that we forgot ourselves. We didn't notice. And then how awkward it is! We must save face! We'd rather disappear. Or perhaps we act as if nothing really happened and ham it up even more, drive it up to the level of clownery. It all depends on your disposition.

The central and decisive aspect of (Inter)acting with the Inner Partner, of all this of experimenting, learning and studying, is to *learn* how to do what happens to us *naturally* when we're alone *in front of other people*; to be *able* to do that. The other people, their presence and involvement, are exceedingly important. Their attention, the fact that they're observing, seeing and listening, experiencing what you're doing, what's happening to you in the space with you, *objectivizes* you.ⁱⁱⁱ It is a collective experience, a collective *living through*.^{iv}

What do we need to make this learning process possible? What kind of working conditions?

First of all, we need *space*. And time. A space that prompts you to enter into it, be in it and go out of, and beyond, yourself. A space that inspires, doesn't restrict, discourage, or inhibit.

The optimal working group consists of something like seven to ten students, plus one or two leaders, or one leader with an assistant. The leaders usually sit on the left end of the row. Everyone sits in a row next to each other facing front like spectators; so *not* in a circle or semi-circle, as many of you wanted to arrange yourself. That kind of a seating arrangement would be about, and for, something completely different.

One person goes up in front of the other people, into the space, on stage, into the center of attention – *wishful* attention, as we often say and emphasize. And then he experiments, gives it a try.

Now pay close attention! He makes his attempt, experiments in a situation of *public solitude*. Do you know what that is? Any idea? It's a term and a concept created and discovered by Stanislavsky. Basically, it means the whoever is in the space, in the center of everyone else's attention, tries to and learns to behave, interact and experience as if the others weren't there and weren't watching him, as if he were alone, that is, alone with himself. So first you need to establish public solitude, create it, and then gradually make yourself at home in it. This is evidently perhaps the most elementary kind of situation, which is essential for further imagination, play situations, and ultimately, (psychosomatic) fitness.

Another prerequisite for rehearsing is *time*. One experimentation session should last at least an hour and half or two hours. In some cases, it can

consist of two ninety-minute sessions with an appropriate break in the middle. In order for it to be fruitful and constructive, you shouldn't work longer than that. Wishful attention requires a great expense of energy.

In order for the learning process to be as compact and productive as possible, this collective learning should take place at least twice a week. But when and where can we afford ourselves that? Yet that is exactly the amount of time and kind of continuity that is essential, as with any kind of demanding learning process. It becomes even more important if we are to awaken and activate corporeality, a corporeal sensitivity, emotional intelligence, and to reflect on experiencing, interacting, and behavior. That's why it's important for you to make a point of experimenting alone too, and so that you reflect upon, verbalize and articulate your experimenting, your experiences through writing as well. Write for yourself by keeping a journal, and write as a contribution to our collective studies. Without that we wouldn't arrive at a collective learning process, common themes, mutuality and reciprocity. There's no way we would arrive at the necessary psychosomatic fitness. There's no way we would benefit from this experience - and benefiting from the experience is what it is about; and being aware of what we have gained.

Ideally, everyone gets to go at least three times during an hour-and-half, two-hour session.

When considering time and working conditions, the following question arises: How long does the foundational learning period take at rate of three tries per one session per week during the regular academic year, if we work irregularly on our own and write few written reflections? In other words, how long does it take before (Inter)acting with the Inner Partner becomes simply "normal," "second nature"? About three, four years. And that's for those with an aptitude for it. Those people tend to be the ones who want to and who do continue. You need to maintain and perfect your fitness.

When I sometimes imagine, fantasize about ideal working conditions, I have visions of at least two bright rooms with high ceilings measuring seven by four by four meters. Apart from appropriate seating and some curtains, and maybe a piano, the space would be empty. Additionally, there would be two small workrooms, labs equipped with the necessary technology for processing our findings, documenting, and archiving. And then having the means to put all of that together, to develop our research and collective studies with at least six co-workers and with at least six working groups. At least two of these six groups would meet at least twice a week for at least three years. Only, I see myself less and less often in these visions. It's as if I'm disappearing.

But let's return to the beginning of our experimenting and investigating. Let's keep in mind that it all takes place in a situation of public solitude.

And the task for the person who goes into the space is rather simple and always the same: Try to interact dialogically with yourself, with your self as a partner, with your selves as partners. As we have already said, all of us have had some experience, some inkling of what and how that could be like. So that means it's about evoking, recalling, reminding yourself.

Since there are so many of us today and we have so little time, I'll say a little more about (Inter)acting with the Inner Partner, which I usually don't do, because I don't want to confuse or mislead, but I've already indicated why I'm going to risk that today. I'm going to give you some hints, instructions, helpful advice. Of course, even if I explain it all superbly, you'll hardly be able to understand it and barely be able to begin to do anything sensible with what I've told you now. The truth is that it's too early for that. With that in mind:

1. Don't try to think up anything in advance. Don't prepare something to perform in the space. Let and trust whatever first comes to or happens to you, what you *first* notice there – that is, there in the “here and now.” Whatever you do and say, do it and say it clearly enough so that you hear and understand it (and yourself). And keep that in mind for at least a little while, so that you can respond (react) to it immediately or recall it in a little while, to return to it.

2. Don't try to sketch out, prepare - in your head - what you're going to say or do; rather, notice what you're doing, what's going on. Interact with and speak to that, according to that.

3. As soon as possible, with the first impulse you feel, *go out of yourself*. Express yourself – vocally, even if you don't know what to say. You do not have to know what to do with the voice (whistling, shrieking, laughing, scating, humming, mumbling). But if you perceive, listen, and follow it carefully, you'll probably respond to – or from – what you've said, or done. Only from that will you learn something.

4. If you insist on pursuing the urge to think and make things up, don't do it surreptitiously inside, without using your voice. Instead, think and make things up out loud. Try to make it public and listen to it, perceive it; try to understand it. Avoid wanting or trying to know and “approve” what you're going to say ahead of time. Let yourself talk, don't censor yourself. Pay attention and listen to what is being said with understanding and sympathy, even if they are expressions of disagreement, or reservations. Take and give time - and voice - to a reply. Take and give time - and voice - to the “other,” the double, partner or opponent so that he can express himself, express himself completely, so that a dialogue, dialogical interaction, a polemic, a discussion can emerge.

5. *Don't rush!* That doesn't mean “be slow,” although that doesn't mean “being slow” should be jettisoned either. Don't rush so that you can

perceive and become conscious of what you're saying, doing, and what's going on. Don't rush so that you can perceive and grow aware of it, and how, the "other" (partner, opponent, someone) is already speaking or acting, and whether it wouldn't perhaps be appropriate to attempt a larger, more distinct differentiation (in terms of corporeal tension, voice, gesture, speech, in how you are "holding your body"), to designate each pole more precisely as two complete opposites. Then the structure of the events will be able to reveal itself more clearly and distinctly.

6. As we've stated, it's important to *perceive and become aware* of what is happening in the space, "who" is saying and doing what, or perhaps what it is or could be about, and *take notice* of what is significant, what matters: the offers and new opportunities we present to ourselves. That is why your *expression* needs to be *comprehensible and intelligible*. It needs to *go out* at the appropriate intensity and *go beyond the fourth wall* (we all have our own inner fourth wall), so you can get a response, and so that that response, or challenge, can return to you. It's important to learn, and gradually know how to perceive your self, voice, speech, movement, and gestures as your own *and* as someone else's, so that you are able to leave yourself, go out of yourself, and then return to yourself. And you can only really return from that space outside yourself through your voice.

Your body becomes "dualized," or better said, transforms. You accept and come to know the other through changes in corporeal tone and rhythm. In order for that to happen, you need to search for and find, to know and always re-tune, an optimal intensity of expression, one that goes through the "fourth wall" and comes back.

7. The level of *intensity* of expression (voice, speech, gestures, action) that calls forth *feedback* is evidently one of the most significant aspects of our research and studies. This is organically related to another factor: *conductive tension*. The idea here is that in order for psychosomatic (some prefer to say somato-physical) processes to run propitiously, our organism needs to be in a state of excitement, "commotion," tension. This tension facilitates and guides these processes. Hence, the term "conductive tension."

It seems that intensity, as well as our conductive tension, have to do with vitality, vital energy, *elán*. And we are usually not so familiar with nor understand that experience. We don't know how to be "in" that experience, how to deal with it. In other words, we aren't familiar with it, nor do we understand it enough *anymore*. We don't know how to be in it and with that it enough anymore basically because it isn't in our spiritual tradition. Most of us haven't been guided toward that, raised that way anymore. We could say that in most cases we are little aware of these aspects of our existence; we are underdeveloped in this way. In most cases, we are either slack or weakened, which corresponds to the demands of "proper behavior," "not disturbing," and "acting normal"; or we are, on the

contrary, “unrestrained,” prim, and tense. Whether the former or the latter, we lack the capacity to “go out of ourselves” and thus to “come back to ourselves.” We lack the capacity to communicate creatively, and thus lack creative, productive empathy. And, if you will, we are not involved in the flowing of our spirit.

I hope that all this premature information hasn’t confused you too much. But at the very beginning I did say that (Inter)acting with the Inner Partner isn’t anything fixed or finished, or a method, let alone a technique. It is, it should be, a research process, collaborative study. The points I introduced, or more or less enumerated, are - or rather let’s hope, will soon become - questions in an empirical research process.

But now I’ll ask for your involvement and assistance with gathering and preparing more material in the form of written reports - reflections of our experimenting and inquiry. Let’s take a short break after which we will spend some time with questions, then we’ll try going on “the floorboards.”

After the break a number of students have questions. Vyskočil takes some time to reply to them before the students try the discipline.

Question: I’d be interested in knowing if you’ve ever met, either in the theatre or elsewhere, anybody for whom (Inter)acting with the Inner Partner happened totally spontaneously in their creative work, if you’ve ever met anybody with such a natural gift?

Ivan Vyskočil: Yes, I have. Although I’m not sure if it was totally spontaneous (Inter)acting with the Inner Partner happening, if it was, as you say, a natural gift, but I have met and do meet with it. For example, at one time Boleslav Polívka. His “Trošečník” was an exemplary instance of the principles of (Inter)acting with the Inner Partner. Also some scenes from “The Clown and the Queen” Jaroslav Dušek’s work, especially with Alan Vitouš, and some of Petr Nikl’s presentations; and Dario Fo, whose work I have seen on video recordings, unfortunately, only on video recordings. Then a prime example is Chaplin’s and Frigo’s acting as well as Tati and Werich. We could name quite a few more people, especially in scenes where they are as if alone. There is no dearth of instances and examples. What is also interesting about these, is that you can see that (Inter)acting with the Inner Partner is not, does not pretend to be, nor can even become a method, a technique, or even a style. You can see how it is a vital presence of certain principles, life principles - not just artistic ones - certain life stances. You can see how it is a certain view and philosophy of the human being and his world, which I’ve already mentioned. As a matter of fact, we are searching for, investigating how to approach those principles more directly and, of course, principles of play in particular.

When Jan Werich says that the basis of the entire art - meaning the art of acting and playing as he understood and practiced it - was *hearing your*

partner and responding to him, he very succinctly expresses one of the principles of (Inter)acting with the Inner Partner and of authorial acting. It's essential that this be understood not as Werich quipping, but seen as a challenge to study and education.

The study and research of (Inter)acting with the Inner Partner can also be understood as the study and research of open acting, but we're not going to discuss that any further right now.

Question: What is your own greatest question?

Ivan Vyskočil: In terms of (Inter)acting with the Inner Partner with the Inner partner, it's a question of the voice, as I've already mentioned. It's a significant and difficult issue and question. After all, the voice is truly the only means and the only way of going out of yourself, let alone arriving at or going back to yourself. I once wrote a rather lengthy essay about the necessity of educating toward vocality and being voice. It's similar to educating toward language and speech. Nowadays, this - a feeling for speech and for the quality of speaking as an oral gesture and as essential interaction - has noticeably deteriorated and is deteriorating. At our department, we understand voice, language, speech and movement as psychosomatic disciplines. These have much in common with (Inter)acting with the Inner Partner. As a matter of fact, (Inter)acting with the Inner Partner is the integrative discipline in our program. Studying (Inter)acting with the Inner Partner remains incomplete if it is not studied with these other disciplines. All these disciplines supplement and complete one another. We, thanks to my colleague and long-time collaborator Docent Válková, have probably gone the furthest in terms of questions concerning voice.

Question: Is your (Inter)acting with the Inner Partner is a kind of technique through which you teach someone to liberate themselves, find themselves, find a better person inside themselves, so that your student then becomes a better person?

Ivan Vyskočil: It's not exactly the way you put it, the way you ask. Just a little while ago I said, or tried to say, that (Inter)acting with the Inner Partner is *not* a technique. I was trying to say what it most probably *is*. Also, I don't teach anybody how to liberate themselves or how to find themselves, or find some better person within themselves. I don't teach that or even with that as a goal, but sometimes that does happen. Or what happens is that there is a feeling that this is happening. You're correct that some people do discover a certain ethos or pathos, but we don't teach anyone that. That's something some people experience and discover. Sometimes that's connected to meeting yourself in a genuine way, and with self-understanding and, especially, self-acceptance. We also never say, nor promise, what studying (Inter)acting with the Inner Partner is for, or what someone can get out of it. Those who are imaginative and have

some conceptual ability will surely find a number of possibilities and reasons for applying it, as well as various overlaps. But in all honesty we say that, generally speaking, (Inter)acting with the Inner Partner is for nothing. In other words, it is for that which someone can take from and make of it based on his own resources, abilities, and potential. Self-discovery and self-acceptance play a significant role in that.

Question: You have children. You've applied your experience and wisdom to bringing up your children for many years. What kind of techniques do you use in raising your own children? What's that experience been like for you?

Ivan Vyskočil: I see that techniques are all the craze right now. So let's stick with experience rather than technique. My experience as a parent and child-rearer consists of a good number of blunders and failures. And it was also thanks to those that I made my way to (Inter)acting with the Inner Partner. It took a damn long time and it was sometimes very difficult. But experiences from life and family connect with experiences from the stage and stages. This has been an important source. I'd rather not discuss it in more detail now. Let me just emphasize what is most important: That raising children be good, creative, be for something. You need to be in a good relationship. You need to like, or as they say, to love.

Question: How do you relate to the human ego?

Ivan Vyskočil: Rather well. I'd say rather understandingly. I relate less positively to an ego out of control or running amok, to egoism and egotism.

Question: When you spoke of inspirational literature, would you include Martin Buber among those inspirational authors?

Ivan Vyskočil: Certainly. And Franz Rosenzweig and Gabriel Marcel and Emanuel Lévinas and Josef Čapek and his *Limping Pilgrim* and Romano Guardini. There are more. Many.

Question: May I ask whether (Inter)acting with the Inner Partner can lead to discovering one's own techniques of coming to know one self?

Ivan Vyskočil: We can assume that it can lead and leads one to coming know oneself and how we can meet and contact our selves. But let's leave techniques to the assembly line.

Question: Isn't (Inter)acting with the Inner Partner dangerous to a certain degree because, I'd say, not everyone is capable of accepting themselves as they are, of facing themselves and their own real image. Isn't that dangerous?

Ivan Vyskočil: It is dangerous. It can be dangerous, which is why I say that it isn't for everyone. It's important for people to find out what they can do, to find out what they are capable of. Whether someone is or is not going to do *that*, well that's a whole other story. That's a question of her own freedom. I don't want to, nor am I going to, interfere in that.

It is dangerous. You're right. It's risky to do anything concerning self-understanding, coming to know yourself, self-realization. Anything that leads to changing the status quo is risky. It can lead to insecurity, to freedom.

Let's start, shall we?

Question: Can I just ask if the individual who goes up there should start making things up when he has an idea?

Ivan Vyskočil: If he sticks to the given task and the rules, then he can do whatever he wants. Or better said, experiment with whatever he likes. Would you like to start? Well then, let's go.

After a number of students have tried it out ...

Ivan Vyskočil: I'm glad we were able to experiment at least a little, to try out the not knowing, confusion, insecurity, fumbling about, awkwardness. We took one little step. Being at the center of the attention of so many other people, not knowing what to do and how to deal with that, and yourself, requires a lot of effort. It's an enormous blast of energy. And we don't know how to deal that yet. It paralyzes us or drives us forward at breakneck speed. We want to get it over with, run away from it. It bothers us. (Inter)acting with the Inner Partner is also about having that not bother us; rather, about that helping us. It's about learning to receive the audience's attention as energetic assistance and learning how to transform that energy and direct it towards creating, and for the benefit of, a common work. If you learn these aspects of (Inter)acting with the Inner Partner, you will be able to do much more with the energy you receive from onlookers, and in a more profound and elevated way than you would be able to with just your own energy.

Once you've gone through this kind of an experience, you'll likely arrive at the capability to manage your life energy more consciously, to achieve a certain efficiency in this regard. You'll arrive at the understanding that neither too little, nor too much, is beneficial; and how important it is for your welfare to allocate it precisely. These are very interesting and vital questions that have, however, until now, been known and investigated little.

To conclude our first meeting I would like to once again emphasize that (Inter)acting with the Inner Partner is about experimenting, trying out and

becoming aware of, coming to know, and not about competing to see who's doing it better or more successfully. I know it's pointless telling that to those who have certain predispositions, talents and ambitions, to those who have been, and are led toward that kind of competition. That's even more reason to try to approach the discipline keeping in mind that that is not what it's about; rather, that it's truly about experimenting, perceiving, noticing and realizing what is happening and what *is* – and responding to that. That way you'll arrive at what is probably the most significant – concentration and relaxation; relaxing into an active, conductive tension, not into a slackness or idleness. And those are the preconditions for creativity and productivity. And for the ear to be astonished by what the mouth says, so that the body is astonished and is inspired to transform. You have to learn that kind of experimentation and discovery. Few know how to experiment.

Of course it feel goods when you are able to show that you know how to do something well, and it's pleasant when the onlookers' reactions confirm that. Some of you are good at being good like that. You know how to approach it, how to improvise, as they say. You just need to catch on to something, get an impulse. Then you do what works, what's already been proven to work. And most of the time it does work. But those folks usually don't notice, or realize, how conventional, even cliché, what they are doing is. It tends to turn out well, reminding us of how it turns out well particularly on television. But (Inter)acting with the Inner Partner is about something else in spite of the fact that many people would like to perform, to know how to do precisely that, to study something like that. That's why they want instructions. That's why they want to know what they should do. That's why they want to be given a topic. Or even just some words, a cue. Most likely, they are not mistaken: In that way, or perhaps accompanied by music, things would work better, easier, faster. But that is not what we want, and that is not how we experiment.

We don't give anyone any subjects or topics and, if possible, we don't work with imitation or suggestion because what we are after is independent, distinctive, authentic, authorial, original and creative.

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This text will appear in *(Inter)acting with the Inner Partner – Principles and Practice*, eds. Michal Čunderle & Alexander Komlosi (in press).

Bibliography

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ⁱ Trans. note: “Open acting” (also known as zero-point acting) from the Czech, *nepředmětné herectví*. The idea here is that open acting is acting (improvising) without a theme or subject (topic) given to the improviser in advance. In other words, the actor discovers themes, subjects, topics as they emerge from his/her interacting.

ⁱⁱ Trans. note: The “revival process” was a period of economic, political and social liberalization which took place the 1960s and ended when Czechoslovakia was invaded by Warsaw pact forces in August of 1968. After this, Normalization, a period of totalitarian rule and severe repression, dug in its heels for the following forty years.

ⁱⁱⁱ Trans. note: *Objectivize* and not *objectify*. The former means making one’s doing, behavior and action, less subjective, less dependent on how we perceive it, creating distance from it. This idea resonates with Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation or distancing effect).

^{iv} Trans. note: “Live through” is one possible translation of the Czech “prožívat,” a term which has a wider range of meaning than the English “experience”. In her discussion of Stanislavsky’s use of the analogous term in Russian, “perezhivanie,” which could be translated in the same ways. Carnicke (1998:173) writes: “The Russian root of ‘experiencing’ conveys many different nuances: ‘to experience,’ ‘to feel,’ ‘to live through,’ ‘to survive.’”