

„For me the professional transmitting of culture means successful creative countertrade“

Uta Plate, educational theatre practitioner, Schaubühne Berlin

Uta Plate is one of very few educational theatre practitioners in Germany who are firmly integrated in the Artistic management of their theatre. When the New Schaubühne was established in 2000 she had been entrusted with the Participation and Education department as part of the theatres initiative of constant communication with its audience. Therefore she is not only responsible for communication with schools and the youth theatre but for the entire spectrum of possible encounter of inside and outside. She procures for the audience topical, content-based access into the laboratory Schaubühne. In this context she offers Workshops and post show discussions, cooperates with schools, leads the acquisition of new audience and directs the Youth theatre group „Die Zwiefachen“.

What is your day-to-day work like at the Schaubühne?

When the artistic team around Thomas Ostermeier started out in 1999 it was essential for them to stand in vivid exchange with the audience to avoid rotting away in the pretty cell of architecture in the farthest corner of the Ku'damm. We have always wanted to be an open laboratory, to which as many people as possible should be given access to. It is my job to create and manage this access from the outside in.

In this context I offer practical theatre workshops, theoretical introductions and post show discussions in connection with all our individual productions, I cooperate with schools and am director of the Youth theatre group DIE ZWIEFACHEN. All these activities are aimed at enabling everyone to experience the opportunities theatre has to offer. It is my goal to enable people to express themselves through the medium theatre and to appreciate someone else's work when going to the theatre, seeing how they feel about the world, how they analyse and represent it on stage.

The transmitting of culture can take place in a short-term fragmentary process such as practical theatre workshops, which I offer to groups, school classes, seminars and, once a month, to the general public. These 4-hour sessions deal in depth with one in-house production and act as preparation for seeing the play. These sessions are very popular and very often participants are much more active in post show discussions as a result. In store for the participants is an opportunity to experience practically the topic and specific aesthetics of one particular in-house production by tracing the aesthetic principles, which the director had developed when creating the production. Together with me the participants develop the tools of the theatrical language employed in the production and with it a more general ability to reflect theatre and especially a modern theatre aesthetic.

In addition the transmitting of culture takes place in long-term initiatives. In the context of the TUSCH-Project (Theatre and School) I develop one production every year with the same partner school which is the players' own creation inspired by contemporary plays.

What is the difference to the work in a classroom?

Within this cooperation with schools, in the context of theatre, the students open up to topics that in the classroom they would never want to touch on. They enter into a different space, into the care of a person with a legitimacy that is completely different from that of their teacher whom they see every day. In this context the students experience their own personality as more experimental and their peers as potentially different than in everyday situations. They discover that they're in a position to change the nature of their interaction and work together. The realisation that they can create a whole new way of communicating is a liberating and lasting experience.

Another long-term project, the in-house Youth theatre group DIE ZWIEFACHEN produces one show every season under my supervision. This project is aimed at young people who can be described as socially disadvantaged. Since 1999 I recruit them for this project from care homes and assisted living houses. It is not a casting that determines participation but the individual's biographical background – a growing up with many obstacles and little support. As all participants have this in common they can offer each other support. Thus the group is made up of young people who have run away from home, who have a history of addiction, have just been released from prison or have come to Germany as refugees. The young people can enter into a professional context at the Schaubühne within which they are given the chance of expressing themselves creatively and artistically. They gain many skills and ways of expression such as role-play, dance, singing, creative writing, devising of scenes, improvisation, develop into co-directors. They also gain the ability of dealing with the media.

Instead of producing existing plays the group devises a new piece every year within which all participants stage their ideas and what is important to them. This way they discover stories that could not be told elsewhere. Novels, films and their own texts provide impulses for the work in the theatre. One thing all of these pieces have in common - the life situation of the individual young people constantly influences the creative process and therefore the theme and result of the project.

When I devise new plays with young people in this way the group dynamic, commitment and responsibility for each other are essential parts of the work. Here the goal is to provide access to theatre as a multifaceted means of expression for the players so that they can stage their own stories and enter into a public discourse.

For example when I combined work with inmates of the Young Offenders Institution Berlin and the Youth theatre group of the Caroussel Theatre/ASFH Berlin (*„Schicksal/Destiny“* 2005) we started with the question of *Why am I who I am?* The piece was very biographical looking at chance versus destiny.

A production with a larger fictitious context was the Dance Marathon *„Einer kommt durch“/“Only one will make it“* with *Die Zwiefachen* in 2006. Starting point for this piece of work was the question – *For which dream would you go beyond your own limits?* Utilising the answers to this question and the results of improvisations we developed characters who do reach and surpass their limits.

Over the years *Die Zwiefachen* have been involved in numerous International collaborations, so for example with Youth theatre groups from England, Brazil and Hungary. The Hungarian group came to Berlin in June 2007 for the production of

„Nichts hält mich davon ab“/“Nothing can stop me“. The two groups examined obvious and subtle differences as well as universal similarities in their biographies and circumstances and discovered one thing they all have in common: Nothing can stop them from fighting for their rights and changing their lives.

Most recently the group collaborated with a Nepalese theatre group – Aarohan theatre in Kathmandu – over 8 months for a combined performance presentation at the biannual *Contacting the World Festival*, this year held in Liverpool.

More generally speaking there are three levels in all educational theatre work – in the youth theatre project, the school partnership and the workshops:

- Social level – being able to rely on each other, always to look out for each other and work together. Theatre is team work –team spirit
- Aesthetical level – sensitivisation of perception, development of ways of expression, imagination and reflection
- Open public level – when the group steps onto the stage and presents itself to the audience it takes a definite standpoint. This is a public artistic statement for which they are responsible.

In turn, when on stage, the participants and groups receive affirmation, respect and appreciation from the audience for their skills and courage.

How does the transmitting of culture sit in your working context at the Schaubühne?

It is the main responsibility of an educational theatre practitioner to enable everyone to experience the opportunities theatre has to offer. It is my goal to create opportunities for people to express themselves through the medium theatre and to appreciate someone else's work when going to the theatre, seeing how they feel about the world, how they analyse and represent it on stage. At the heart of this work lies the endeavour to establish art as a discipline that is free of a purely pragmatic or profit orientated context and permits the discussion of fundamental questions concerning the individual's feelings about the world and social issues. On the one hand this experience will increase participants' ability of perceiving and reflecting art in a more differentiated manner. On the other hand, when practised over a long period of time, the work can lead to the participants' own aesthetical activity, to their own creation, to an altered or more acute sense of self and to public statements.

What is it like to work with people who have no previous experience of theatre?

Theatre in its basic elements as well as its actual forms of appearance is best comprehended by way of practical experience in scenic creative play within a group. It lies in my responsibility as the educational theatre practitioner to create this space for interested players without any previous experience. This refers to an opening of doors by way of exercises, games and the direct reaction to blockades.

Here it is important on the one hand to be an expert of the theatre's repertoire and on the other to react extremely sensitively when any one player encounters problems or stagnates. The next step is to enable participants to make precise experiences. The work with non-professionals in workshops and long term project should not only

entail a bit of skipping and bouncing, but it is important to examine assiduously what works on stage and what does not. After a scene has been played I give very detailed feedback. If it has not worked I involve all participants in the discussion of what did not work, what could be improved and ask the players to repeat the scene. You cannot let anyone leave the stage with a feeling of vagueness. I want everyone to leave the stage with the feeling that they have understood or developed something. I take every participant very seriously in what they attempt and in turn they take me seriously.

It is my goal to convey to the workshop participants a personal connection to the topic in hand, in that I ask them to improvise on the theme. That might be, for example, the greed for advancement in *Macbeth* or the themes of breaking taboos and puberty in *Feuergesicht*. However, these improvisations have to be carefully prepared. Preparatory exercises are necessary so that participants can develop elements, which they can then employ in the actual scene. I offer various aesthetic arrangements that are related to the specific nature of the direction and acting style of the production we are looking at. After the workshop participants have worked through a topic in this way, the experience of the actual production as an audience member is much more intense, because they are now well acquainted with the aesthetic principles and main topic through their own creative work on it.

They can compare what they see on stage with their own ideas and form a clear, lasting relationship. For me its always fascinating for example to see what utopias emerge with regard to a play like *Merlin* and in relation to that what utopias young people have today. From this work I take away a lot that I can feed back into the theatre.

In what way is the transmitting of culture a creative countertrade?

I offer the boat and the paddle – where participants paddle to is their individual choice. Whatever participants develop on the basis of my impulses with the freedom of being able to paddle now is a profit for me as conveyer and a profit for the theatre which can now encounter a productive audience who feel associated with it, an audience which has a better understanding of the work, which accompanies it, reflects on it and is willing to break new ground alongside it.

What is the significance of theatre education at the Schaubühne?

As I said before, for the new artistic team around Thomas Ostermeier it was essential right from the start to stand in vivid exchange with the audience. We do not want to present a pearl of art now and then that was produced in a closed oyster, but we want to be an open laboratory. Contemporary drama is the attempt to bring onto a stage all that is virulent and problematic, to raise current questions that debate how the world is being perceived and analyse human relations. A part of that is the effort to bring into the theatre people who would not otherwise come and the exchange with the people for whom the theatre is being produced. In our understanding of theatre those aspects are inseparable.

Every cultural institution must choose to be a laboratory to which as many people as possible should be given access to. As an educational theatre practitioner, who manages their access from the outside in, I am constantly in direct contact with the audience and get a feeling for the current Zeitgeist, both with young audiences and older people, and can thus report back to the theatre about what it is that people are

concerned with. It is essential that we, who are transmitting culture, should be a part of the management board of their institution in order to participate in important decisions and to involve their experiences in this process.

I am in a privileged position among educational theatre practitioners in Berlin in that I am involved in the regular conferences of the artistic management, the most important committee in the house. Here I join the artistic directors, the dramaturges, the department of public relations, the producers and the designers all sitting in one room to discuss the choices for the coming season. My opinion is valued highly for example when we discuss which productions to keep on for the next season. It is absolutely essential that the person who is most in touch with the audience take part in these discussions. However, this does not mean that we only produce theatre that is instantly liked by audiences. Even if a production is not commercially successful we sometimes decide to keep it in the repertoire, because we are convinced of its aesthetic value. Then the task is to make a particular effort to convey these values to audiences. As a transmitter of culture I introduce a piece of reality and public opinion into the decision processes of the theatre, I give a voice to the anonymous audience and give feedback on people's, especially young people's concerns. The feedback I give provides the dramaturges and directors with fundamental impulses and therefore they are always very curious to hear what I have to say.

When dealing with the various audience groups the cultural institution gains important impulses, which help it to evolve, renew itself, grow and stay lively. Thus the conveyers of culture ease the opening of the institution from the inside out.

To what extent does the work of the educational theatre practitioner involve public relations?

I understand my work as the point of contact between the public and the theatre. I sit on the membrane and transmit ideas in both directions. This means that I am part of public relations, also of the actual department. Being a member of the team who does not carry the aesthetics outside but the actual contents of the theatre's work, I get in touch with schools, universities and other groups in order to divulge this work.

Teachers are regularly invited to take part in a monthly workshop in which they are given new didactic tools to improve their abilities for theatre work in their schools. In addition I offer specific conceptual introductions in which the designers and dramaturges of an upcoming production present their ideas and working process. When professors are leading a seminar the content of which bears a connection with one of our productions I approach them and organise internal post show discussions. In the context of the Festival of New Drama, F.I.N.D., I organise activities, approach political groups and attempt to involve them. I present and lead the post show discussions myself and organise special events regarding specific aspects of our productions, as for example an open discussion with the members of „Attac“.

It is an important part of my work to find new ways to reach our potential audiences, to present what we have to offer them and to make our contact with them a constant fixture in their lives. It lies in my hands as educational theatre practitioner to connect people with the theatre by way of positive experiences and to be a competent point of contact for those who will convey the message to groups they are in touch with. This is a tightrope walk. People should not get the feeling that they are connected with a

purely commercial institution but with someone who will advise them individually and responsibly and who might also advise against a certain production. It would not feel productive to me if the artistic director called me to say that the show is empty and that we should organise a few school classes to fill it. Simply as fillers of the room people would not feel that we take them seriously. In contrast to this the producers and artistic directors perceive my work as an offer of education, as an essential and independent part of the public representation of our theatre.

How can the place value of the transmitting of culture be increased in traditional cultural institutions?

It is necessary to think of the transmitting of culture as indispensable and present it as such. For example our actors experience the effects of my preliminary work in the post show discussions because an audience who is really interested in the specific aspects of their work gives them detailed feedback. On top of their everyday work in the theatre this demonstrates to them that they can really have an effect on people who are grateful for it, and that gives the actors a sense of fulfilment. Our actors face an audience with a real interest in their work. When the audience feel that the active interaction with art enriches their lives and when the actors, on the other hand, feel that the contact with an informed public enriches their work then the conveying of culture has contributed an original and vital element to a theatre that is also a social institution.

The transmitting of culture does not only offer an uplifting experience to the actors and the public but also to the people implementing it, when they see that they can create a mutual understanding. When I enable my colleagues in the creative teams to have these experiences, often despite initial hesitation, they understand how rewarding it is to convey culture and create a connection between them and the audience. Because they are given a good idea of the audiences' perspective on their work, they value the person who has made that possible for them.

The self-perception of the educational theatre practitioner is crucial. One has to be courageous in introducing one's work into all areas of the theatre by way of new activities and projects and by force, if necessary. In this job one must not get comfortable and satisfied in one's little niche but one constantly has to challenge habits and patterns of thought, not only those of the audience but those of one's institution as well. Interference from the outside is often initially perceived as a disturbance. In order to assert myself my own attitude is very important; my unwavering conviction of the value of my work, my continuing enthusiasm and my ability to spread enthusiasm for our work in the theatre. Another crucial condition for success is the consistency of the work, since any fruit is born really only after two to three years of working.

First and foremost it is essential that the transmitting of culture be rooted deeply in the structures and financial plans of the institution. Cultural politics in Germany should take after Great Britain in this aspect and support institutions on the basis of that. Those institutions should be seen as most worthy of support, which do not only include one person as a conveyer of culture in their concept and budget. All collaborators of a cultural institution should allow space for the principle of the conveying of culture in their respective department and practice it actively.

In addition to its status as an art-producing space every cultural institution should also perceive itself as a social institution in the most basic sense: a space for all members of a society to come together and to experience, reflect on and debate its work. Looking at it this way it is genuinely in the interest of the institution to be accessible for as many people as possible. The transmitting of culture is successful when it dispels inhibition – on both sides – between potential as well as existing audiences and the cultural institution. In addition the transmitting of culture reduces boundaries that prevent people from realising their own creative potential. As a place of learning and playing it creates opportunities that are missing or being ignored in other contexts such as work and family life.

To sum up I would like to say that in my opinion cultural education and the transmitting of culture is successful when people, regardless of their social circumstances and qualifications, start to feel that access to art and culture is possible and will enrich and even improve their lives.