

Close-ups instead of strange impressions: Theatre in prison

Uta Plate worked as a theatre pedagogue at the borstal Ichtershausen near the city of Erfurt from November 1996 until May 1999. The project came to life due to an initiative of the Theatre Nordhausen under the artistic direction of Christoph Nix. The Ministry of Justice funded 75% of the costs of the project. The boys and men (aged between 14 and 24 years) were offered to participate in the theatre project once or twice a week during their leisure time between working and confinement in their cells. Each time a group of about 15 boys and young men developed several pieces on the bases of their life stories, which were then performed for the public and for the other inmates. The following report shows how strange it is to make art and to socialise behind prison bars.

“We have already enough drama in here” (a guard)

“We have made up a list of con men for your theatre project, they are usually the best actors” (two social workers).

“Surely I will be part of your theatre, below your belt.” (Björn, a prisoner)

Situation

When the prisoners enter a penal institution or a prison they are forced to adopt to their new environment and they experience a process of depersonalisation.

Their freedom to move around and their social contacts are drastically restricted reducing their autonomy in a way that prisoners are almost incapacitated. Their everyday-life is completely determined by others. The lack of freedom is reflected in the living situation in their cells. 1, 2 or 4 beds are cramped into a small space and each person has his own pin board seized 30 to 40 cm (30 cm is not quite 1 foot!), which is the officially granted private zone. Besides of that, the walls have to remain empty. They are allowed to have 10 music cassettes, to keep 20 letters and only 5 books. These restrictions are imposed due to security reasons, because otherwise it would be impossible to check a prison cell quickly, however, they do have an effect on the personality of the inmates. Detention centres are marked by a certain hierarchy: on the one hand is the relation between the guards and the inmates and on the other hand the hierarchy among the prisoners themselves. Adolescent offenders are placed in an environment of power and authority when they are at an age, where it is important for their development to try out and learn new things. Behind prison walls not only justice reigns, but also a merciless system of oppressing, where the strongest rules according to the law of the jungle. Within the prison system the individual is what he pretends to be or what he is able to show off. Everyone is graded according to muscle power and crime. There are the “Kings”, the friends of the “Kings”, those who are tolerated and the “Cracks”. “Cracks” are treated like scum of the earth and are forced to render every imaginable service. And if they dare to defend themselves, they will be bruised or their jaw will be fractured. The “Kings” cannot risk to lose face and have to prove their power constantly, a “Crack” gets an enema with the shower. The prisoner wage a constant war for influence and their position within the group. A fight in a most confined space, where attempted rapes and suicides are not unusual.

The Beginning

The extreme living situation of the inmates has a constant influence on the artistic process, the subject and the final result of a theatre project within the prison. There was only a rough framework for the various phases of the development of the piece: improvisation, search for

material (their own stories, quotes taken from films and books), structuring of the material and the final rehearsal phase of the play which was created during the working process. However, the situation could change from one rehearsal to another: members of the group came or left, their motivation, moods and power structures would change. The one thing you could rely on was, that you could not rely on anything.

Improvisation

Various impulses were given to stimulate scenic improvisations: for instance with photos, which became the basis for our work, or costumes, or certain conflicts (for example “You are in the car with your friend. He tells you a terrible secret”). Sometimes they had to take on a certain character and use it in small scenes (for instance, everybody is on a luxury cruise ship. The gambler meets somebody who has won the pools, the drug dealer meets a police man dressed in civilian clothes), sometimes music and rhythm were given to them.

I consider improvisation as an integral part of my work with non-professional actors for various reasons. Improvisations offer an interplay of the personality (fantasy, reflection, observation, sensation, emotion, will and value) and gesticulatory and facial expressions (sensuous and practical action) and even analysing a text. Therefore the actors mutually experience their imagination, their spontaneous reactions and they learn about their ability to experience things at all.

Difficulties in the beginning

Björn, one of the prisoners, describes how hard it is for the young people to find a creative way to free improvisations: “Theatre is helpful, but it also means stress. Stress, because you cannot leave the daily conflicts or the extreme psychological stress outside.” Somebody has been given a black-eye, another one did not get mail from his girl-friend, again, a third person is not able to pay his debts. And all that amounts to an atmosphere of aggression and apathy, which makes it a lot harder to be creative. The young offenders do not have buffer zones or a space for freedom, which are taken for granted by people outside. This means to always give new impulses and to keep on making the effort to transform one situation into another.

Once they were supposed to portray a story in five scenes, in which the actors had to stay frozen in order to depict a situation. Björn was sitting there and did not know what to do: “Ok, we are doing it like this, somebody needs to pay back money and is beaten up. Oh no, that is boring. Somebody is on parole for the weekend, comes out and meets somebody who has grassed on him and he beats him up, oh shit...” I asked him to tell me his favourite movie. “Dirty Dancing.” “And which scene did you like best?” “The one, when he teaches her how to dance, and she keeps on stepping on his feet.” The next time I brought a red dress and a dancer with me to the rehearsal.

Another consequence of the situation behind bars is the so called prison quirk. When somebody is reduced to the status of a prisoner and defines himself exclusively as a criminal, he starts to see himself only one-dimensional. After Björn had come to the rehearsal several times, he stayed away. I had a guard lock me into the hall where he lived and asked him, why he did not come anymore. “I am too stupid for something like that. I cannot act. I cannot memorise a text. The only thing I can still do, is sit in here.

Role Shield

The young men had great difficulties in playing a character, that did not correspond with the role they once ascribed to themselves. A “King” does not allow a “Crack” to be superior in a scene. It is certainly a part of the normal learning process, that you can become somebody completely different on stage while you are acting. But the role shield of the offenders is more solid than anywhere else. The position you take within the prison hierarchy, is crucial for the fate behind bars.

It was the main task for several weeks to offer a new solution to the inflexible role-structure with its one-way solution of the “survival of the fittest”. To catch the ball, no matter from which corner it came flying. To be aware of each other, to remain open for the partner and to the actual reaction to him. When another scene would drift into a violent fight for power, I explained to them, that the scenes become really boring when the only answer to every conflict is “to smash somebody’s face.” (A well rehearsed fight on stage can be interesting, but only one and not always.) But the role shield of the young men was sometimes so strong, that acting sometimes became a challenge that took them to their limits. Over the course of several weeks they managed to free themselves more and more, characters were developed, that were filled with their own and new material. Some of them already really enjoyed to step out of their own role and to show how they could act and portray things.

“It is fun for me, when others can laugh about me while I am acting:” (a “King”). The various theatrical exercises opened up spaces for freedom, a game with an uncertain ending. Working on the aesthetic level interacted strongly with the social level. The possibility to encounter someone in a different way on stage, had its effect on their daily life with each other.

A Sense of We

After a first working phase with improvisations it became possible to try out simple, universal games with each other. “Somebody can propose a children’s game for the next rehearsal.” On my way to the borstal I already thought of some exercises, because I did neither expect that anybody thought of something nor did I believe that anybody was ready to play a children’s game. I started the rehearsal: “Which game do you want to play?” Björn answered: “Duck-Duck-Goose.” A moment later 14 anabolic strengthened boys and a confused theatre pedagogue were sitting on the floor, sang the song – only slightly wrong – and somebody was running around us in a circle.

An experiences that is especially touching in the given situation: the experience to have shared something, even only for a short moment. This can happen during a game, a concentration exercise or an informal gathering. The participants share a common experience, that can touch your feelings deeply, especially in contrast to the usual reality of their lives.

The search for material

Another approach on the social as well as on the aesthetic level is the development of the character. When the actors create their roles, they do so by using their subjective stories and experiences. I had made the story-telling method an integral part of the rehearsals. Somebody tells one story of his life. While creating the play we dealt with the search for the kick and the search for luck. There stories were like snapshots offering short glimpses of their biographies. They became the material, we would work on in order to bring them in a theatrical form. Rocco’s escape story played a central role in “Let’s go buddy”. The intensity of the scene was based on the personal and intimate experience and its exaggeration during the rehearsing process. Rocco had been chased, sat behind a chipboard, his knees were trembling, a cop put a gun into his mouth, he said he was scared. At the same time a video of the escape scene of

“Thelma and Louise” was shown. It is the final scene of the movie in which the two women drive their car into a ravine while the police is watching. This additional level helps to protect the person who tells his story in this emotional situation. Moreover the scene with its multiple levels becomes an interesting theatrical moment for the audience. By collecting and sorting out the biographical material which is then consciously altered through the use of theatre techniques, the various scenes come to life due to the simultaneous identification and distancing of the actors.

The performance

The next step would have been the preparation for a performance. Theatre does only exist with the presence of an audience. Although it was by now possible to show a part of oneself within the group and to act with an increasing commitment, a performance remained unthinkable. “Uta you can leave, we have to stay.”

Therefore Peter Brook describes the performance as one of the most essential elements of theatre. “The need for an audience is the sole common ground for all types of theatre. This is more than a mere truism: In theatre the audience makes the various steps of the creation complete (...) as long as there is no audience, the piece is not finished.”

Three different things were to be reached with the completion of the work, which were: the members of the drama group should gain the experience of a performance, to prove to all prisoners of the borstal, that theatre can be at least as exciting as going to the movies, and finally to make a public statement to an audience from the outside world, which adds a political dimension to theatre.

The play “Let’s go buddy” is staged on four platforms and deals with adventures and depression in the East-German province. Somebody breaks into a car, somebody else persuades another person to rob a bank, and boredom prevails everywhere. In between a kind of fairy of fortune is dancing, symbolising money and promising luck. One after another is taken to prison. In the end all four platforms change into floats gliding in wild water, the police-men and the fairy become figureheads on the journey into the unknown.

Björn refused to go on stage, on the day of the opening night. “I am not going to do this scene. I will not be able to hang out with the others after this. I will not make a fool out of myself!” I knew right away, which scene he was talking about. Björn, who is dressed up in a snake-leather jacket sings a love song to his fairy of fortune: “Love me tender”. I said, that it he was wonderful in this particular scene. He remained stubborn, the time of the opening came closer. The ice finally melted, when one boy after another came up to him and promised to support him during the scene. It is more then threatening to expose oneself to a situation, which makes you vulnerable and gives room for an attack. Therefore it is even more touching, when somebody dares to do it. The experience, that I can be somebody else, too. To reveal other facets, which are not determined by the prevailing image of masculinity. Finally. “This is my snake-leather jacket. It is an expression of my personal freedom and individuality.” Then he took the microphone and he whispered the first words. A scream in the audience: “Let’s go buddy!”. The other boys of the drama group gathered behind him with lighters. When the song was over, the audience went crazy. A barrier had been broken collectively, because the audience welcomed this situation enthusiastically. The usually imposed role models, “mean face, cool look, strong muscles, total man” were dismissed and something new was acknowledged.

“Theatre made me see, that I can do other things than only sit here in prison.” This was reached through the enthusiasm for the power on stage, the cohesion of the group, the applause, the contact to the audience from outside and also through discussions afterwards.

Prisoners were confronted with unusual ways of playing, surreal moments, which were new to their usual way of seeing things and they had to deal with the reflection of their own history and different role models. In contrast to that, the audience was confronted with the world of the young offenders and impressions of the prison. The actors described their view of life in various self-written scenes and monologues and used them to take a public stand. Scenes which portrayed the brutality of prison have always been a part of the performance. It was a matter of concern to us, to show this to the audience.

The audience has seen close-ups instead of receiving strange impressions. The reality of life in prison as well as the frequently mentioned lack of perspective for the young offenders were the bases for the panel discussion. Participants were the young prisoners, the minister of justice and the audience.