

Evelyn Deutsch-Schreiner: Intercultural Theatre Acting with drama students

Intercultural Theateracting means: drama students from different countries with different languages and different acting traditions are brought together in one single production. The idea for intercultural theatre work starts from common attitudes that are shared by drama students in different European countries. That is their love for the theatre, their talent and joy at role playing as well as their experiences from four years of education on the way to a professional actor/actress.

They are all carriers of a joint European tradition: the tradition of European theatre, which exists for two-and-a-half-thousand years and which is one of the oldest communication media. Theatre has the potential to be a model for societal debates. On stage any kind of utopias, wishes and dreams, fears and threats becomes possible. Theatre doesn't know barriers but it also conserves the collective histories of people. The European theatre is the form of art, the aesthetic place of testing new ways of thinking, behaving and understanding the world. The future of the European theatre is in the hands of the young theatre students. They are all familiar with that unique cultural heritage and its potentials. On stage, the same rules are valid!

But the drama students of the European countries are not only characterized by commonalities: They are influenced by different political and economic environments, by different languages and by country-specific theatre traditions. The traditional European theatre is focused on speech and dialogue, dominated by the writings of the poets and foremost by domestic languages. This seems hard to overcome. Even the traditional theatre audience doesn't show much interest usually for theatre productions in a foreign language – except for drama festivals. Drama is traditionally much more bound to the linguistic groundfloor than is music or music theatre. City-tourists go to the opera, to musicales and concerts, but usually they do not watch a play. So we do not know much about the drama of other European nations, especially from Eastern and Southeastern Europe. Who except the Polish audience knows Stanislaw Vispianski?

Intercultural theatre work attempts to build on the commonalities while using the other/the foreign as triggers for tension. All that creates impetus for the artistic work. The joint theatre work is an artistic research, which serves the development of arts. An intercultural theatre production doesn't settle unless there is communication beyond language. To play theatre without words is possible since its origins. Body language expressiveness is, next to language, the most important communication tool of an actor. Intercultural acting tries to go beyond

pantomime and dance and searches for new forms of linguistic understanding. The huge number of different languages (23 official EU languages with 3 alphabets) is exactly one of the invaluable possessions of Europe. Its languages stand for the cultural diversity and create identity.

It forms part of the intercultural competence of modern people to recognize and accept the cultural identity of others which manifests itself through behavioural codes and different communication styles. Theatre students are particularly endowed to show up with such codes, since their profession demands a special sensibility for body language expression. In rehearsals students learn to understand, beyond to the written text, the embodied life of their character and to develop behavioural codes. Only with the right body language, the real characters and plots on stage develop. That means that the stage language as a means of artistic expression doesn't only contain the speech but also the style of agitation and the behavioural codes of the character. The rich European theatre landscape presents different stage languages: the Italian theatre, the Greek theatre are different from the Scandinavian theatre traditions. This is motivated through the different theatre – along with political – development. In intercultural theatre work it is exactly the sensibility for different perceptions of performing arts that is needed and so we are speaking about an intensive cultural awareness of the participants which will be further conveyed to the audience.

Although intercultural theatre acting exists since the 1980s, when Peter Brook and Ariane Mnouchkine placed the collaboration of actors from different cultures into the centre of their work, it is still an experiment until today, when actors/actresses educated in classical drama schools, who don't use neither the same everyday language nor the same stage language, act together on stage.

The Iron Curtain was one of the causes why theatre education developed differently in Europe. In the Central Eastern European countries acting education follows therefore much more the system of the Russian theatre pedagogue Konstantin Stanislavski, in contrast to the rest of Europe. So geopolitics even determined the performance methodology!. One should add that the southeastern European drama schools are characterised by a vivid awareness of classical theatrical forms, but less by knowledge about modern methods of acting, such as performance styles or “non acting” - that English tradition of understatement and underplaying situations.

The intercultural and bilingual cooperation Graz – Skopje,

In August 2007, 6 students from the Faculty of Dramatic Arts Skopje came to Graz to develop a bilingual production, together with 6 students from the Institute of Dramatic Arts (University of Music and Dramatic Arts) in Graz. The play was directed by Aleksandar Popovski, a stage director from Skopje, who is working on international stages. The executive team was supported by a dramaturge from Austria, a choreographer from Maribor and an Austrian stage design student.

The cooperation was established at the international student festival Skomrahi which takes place in Skopje, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) in April for 20 years. It is a platform where students from renowned film and drama academies in Central and South Eastern Europe get the opportunity to present performances, to get in touch with each other and to enter into a critical dialogue during the seven day festival. Especially since the end of the wars in the Former Yugoslav Countries it became an important event in the culture policy. Three times already drama students from the University of Music and Dramatic Arts, Graz joined the festival already. Austria is actively involved as the festival was supported 2001 by KulturKontakt Austria. WUS Austria (World University Service) is implementing the whole project. In 2002 the Austrian Development Agency (ADA) became the main donor.

The intercultural sphere of theatre work was the main focus in the cooperation between Graz and Skopje, starting with a selected play: the Latin epos “Metamorphoses” by Ovid was an ideal choice to address the commonalities of the cultures and to start from an equitable base. From the epos source director Aleksandar Popovski has dramatized a variety of episodes. His version appeared in Macedonian and was then translated into German. The students received the text both in German and Macedonian while the working language was English. The scenes were on purpose filled bilingually – for example, of two lovers, the boy was Macedonian and the girl German speaking. All students used their mother tongue on stage. During the performance the audience almost forgot that they didn’t understand the foreign language, because the situations were fully clear. Macedonian as stage language was particularly touching, since Macedonian so far is known only as the language of immigrant workers in Graz. The students got used to each other fast and profited a lot from the other. The opening performance took place on September 20th, 2007. In total, the performance was staged three times, and the acceptance by audience and critics was very high. In summer 2008 students

from Graz travel to work with their colleagues in Skopje. An Austrian director Hans Escher¹ is very used to intercultural theatrework. And he works with two young playwrights – a girl from Skopje and a young author from Germany.

To conclude, intercultural theatre acting makes a contribution to enhance the intercultural competence of the students for their up-coming professional work. To meet each other personally, to accept each other's cultural identities and artistic ways of expressions and to approve of each other's methods of work – these are the conditions of mutual artistic inspirations and crossfertilisation. The young artists' intercultural experiences will also influence their later works. It will encourage openness to cultural diversity, hence the project can be considered under the aspects of long-term effects an overall contribution to the continuity and advancement of European theatre in general. To overcome cultural prejudices constitutes indeed a central pillar of the project. A wider audience in Austria and Germany would experience that in Slovenia, Macedonia and other South Eastern European countries does exist a highly active theatre scene and a vivid new drama. In this context the project invites for artistic contributions from SEE countries to be appreciated and their theatre work to be perceived as part of the European theatre tradition.

I think, this is an important step towards intercultural communication and towards international theatre work in Europe.

¹ Hans Escher is one of the founder of „wiener wortstaetten“, see the lecture of Berhard Studlar in this book