

Theatre at School

“The Festival of Love” by Prince Kum’a Ndumbe III (originally written in German: “Das Fest der Liebe. Die Chance der Jugend”) was performed at the BRG 6 Marchettigasse in Vienna (upper secondary school/science branch) in cooperation with the Austrian Ministry of Education, Art and Culture and the Austrian Commission for UNESCO.

Background

The constructive cooperation between the Austrian Ministry of Education and Prince – and/or Professor – Kum’a Ndumbe III is of long standing. He was born in Cameroon; he studied in Europe, mostly in France and Germany; a Germanist, historian and politologist, he lectured at the Universities of Lyon II/France, FU Berlin/Germany and Yaoundé I/Cameroon. In his capacity as President of AfricAvenir International, an Organisation for African Renaissance, Development, International Cooperation and Peace, he managed several intercultural sub-projects, with the focus on the promotion of minority languages in Africa, under the international project “Linguistic Diversity and Literacy in a Global Perspective – An Intercultural Exchange with African Countries”. The Austrian Ministry of Education, Art and Culture sponsored, inter alia, the publication of books of fairy-tales in local African languages, for example “Masomandala”, tome I and II. Prince Kum’a Ndumbe III also contributed in a major way to the success of the International Year of Languages 2008 in Europe and Africa. A publicist and writer, he has authored poems, novels, essays, and non-fiction as well as theatre plays – frequently in German.

There is a special link between *BRG 6 Marchettigasse* and Cameroon and Prince Kum’a Ndumbe III; one of the teachers launched an exchange with Cameroon already several years ago. Throughout one year she took an active part in the AfricAvenir International Foundation and currently she is preparing a seminar for the University College of Teacher Education in Austria under the heading of “The Self and the Other”, into which she is going to incorporate her Cameroon experience and inviting Prince Kum’a Ndumbe III to present his books written in German.

This is how the notion of staging “The Festival of Love” in cooperation with *BRG 6 Marchettigasse* came into being. The idea to produce the piece with the students was submitted by M. Niederhuber and S. Bruckmeier, both with a background in stage work and experience in Africa. Fortunately, the head of school and the teaching staff enthusiastically supported the project from its very inception; thanks to the cooperation between the Ministry of Education and the Commission for UNESCO it was given the green light.

The Festival of Love – A theatre project based on the play of the same name by Prince Kum’a Ndumbe III on love, responsibility and commitment in the interplay between the self and society

The students of classes 7A and 7B of *BRG 6 Marchettigasse* in Vienna have diverse cultural and biographical backgrounds. What unites them for a given time is their school attendance. In the autumn of 2010, **courage and in particular moral courage as well as social and personal responsibility** figured not only in the curriculum of their class community but was also translated into a theatre project.

The school project, run under the heading of “The Festival of Love”, was an interdisciplinary, multi-branch undertaking. The gripping and cogent source material apart, it was the declared objective to come up with a version that would match the interests and capabilities of the young people and to involve teachers of diverse subjects. With a view to establishing a link to the radical social change in Africa, the dialogue scenes were interlaced with reflective texts, choruses, poems, slides, video sequences, political statements, and historical material. Theatre is a multi-active genre which defies theoretical definition whilst inviting live experience. In view of the diverse contributing factors that ranged from students with different social and cultural backgrounds and totally different interests via teachers of diverse subjects to a theatre play, historical material and references to current political events – just to mention a few – students, teachers and project managers had to get to know each other properly, before opting for a commonly agreed aim. Who can do what; how can cooperation work under the prevailing conditions? How can a theatre project be put into practice in a school? Those were some of the ticklish questions that had to be solved before embarking on the project proper.

Moulding this heterogeneous group of people into an ensemble for a stage production was an absolutely exciting, not always easy and at times risky undertaking, which called for a high degree of improvisation and empathy on everybody’s part. Since lessons, exams and tests would not permit of a fixed time schedule for the project, a flexible *modus operandi* was clearly called for.

The work stages

Exploratory work

During the first work stage the “theatre practitioners” presented themselves as well as the project envisaged in different subject classes, engaging in discussions on revolution, love,

togetherness, responsibility, and moral courage. In parallel, students were asked about their likes and dislikes and their interests, and working groups were set up.

Project work

In the second stage, the project was divided into two branches: on the one hand, the individual scenes were designed and crafted; on the other hand the overall theme had to be integrated into and dealt with in the different teaching units.

As the ensemble was composed of 6 girls and 6 boys, it was possible to subdivide the piece into pair scenes, and the original scenes were arranged accordingly. Basic acting skills were trained and implementation modules tested by way of improvisation. The students put their expressive range to the test and the director accordingly put them in pairs and prepared the scenes. Improvising helped them to get rid of their self-consciousness, to delve into this novel activity and to become increasingly aware of themselves and their skills. Every unit brought to light new, previously unknown forms of expression. Acting in a group generated a lot of momentum, which motivated the young actors to venture into forms of expression each one of them would probably have discarded as ridiculous or embarrassing. This helped to strengthen their self-confidence, which in turn engendered welcome changes in the classroom atmosphere. Stressed and at the same time pugnacious and nervous students were transformed into cheerful, committed youngsters with a new approach to discussing and reflecting on politics, social behaviour and problems in their classes. The discussions that went on during rehearsals were input into the individual scenes of the play. One of the side-effects of this process was that a number of students, who had been slouching on their benches, demonstrably bored and obviously considering theatre, politics and society sheer baloney, wanted to join in. While rehearsals were in progress, topics germane to Africa's political history and current affairs as well as to the links between Africa and Europe were discussed and processed into project elements together with the teachers in charge of the various units. We have singled out the following presentations, discussions and material suggested from the wide range that was translated into scenes:

- a video-discussion on girls versus boys;
- the position of young women and men among the ethnic groups and religions represented in the class;
- a letter project marking the anniversary of the political independence of the majority of African states;
- two song projects on the subjects "I love you, because –" and "I hate you because –"

Finalisation

After the Christmas holidays work on the libretto started in good earnest and the scenes, the video material and the music as well as stage and costume design were finalised.

The individual scenes were rehearsed with special attention to the capacities of the different performers. The almost automatic outcome was a highly varied bouquet of dramatic formats: movement and dance alternating with powerful epic and naturalistic expression. The accompanying texts, which were to be read out, were selected; the two songs were rehearsed; costumes and video material sifted and selected. Run-throughs with the full cast started one week in advance of the premiere, and step by step the mosaic was formed into a convincing whole.

Work at and with the school was complemented by video material provided by Margit Niederhuber, who also contributed most of the costumes and the stage design; not to forget the musicians Geri Schuller (percussion) and Gilbert Handler (composition and sound).

Postscript:

There had been no indication whatsoever that at the time of the final run-throughs social revolutions would sweep the northern part of the African continent, so that after their rehearsals, which were all about an atmosphere of awakening, about moral courage, personal attitudes and responsibility within the social context, students were able to watch developments in Egypt on the news. The information broadcast undoubtedly found its way into the scenes rehearsed for the play. This temporal coincidence added a highly charged dimension to the run-throughs and to the performance, demonstrating to the students that what they were engaged in at their school in Vienna was of immediate concern to people in other regions.

“The Festival of Love” at *BRG 6 Marchettigasse* in January 2011 was more than an “enjoyable” school theatre project; it enabled students to engage intensely with their political environment and their personal everyday life. The fact that everybody involved was intuitively aware of this turned the performance into a touching event. The teachers involved and the project team take it for granted that the personal experience gained in the course of the project as well as its political aspects have left their mark on the students.

The two theatre practitioners, Margit Niederhuber and director Stephan Bruckmeier, rate their work on this project and, most of all, the very successful outcome as a great experience;

without their all-out commitment, which by far outmatched their financial compensation, there would have been no chance of bringing it off in this exemplary manner.

In the words of an enthusiastic member of the audience: “This shows you the **full** potential of our schools!”

Owing to the premiere’s great success with the audience, but also to the enthusiasm of students and teachers, a second performance was soon being planned, and thanks to the commitment of all those involved, put on soon afterwards. Both performances were given at “real” theatres in Vienna and in Bad Ischl/ Austria.

Project report based on an account by Stephan Bruckmeier (art director), supplemented and revised by Christine Stromberger (BMUKK) and Inge Mautner (BRG 6 Marchettigasse, Vienna)