



Theatre and Social Environment

Theatre as a public and social art form

by Anna Eitzeroth

Theatre for young audiences deals with the realities of life and themes which concern children and young people. It sets great value on reaching young people independent of their social or cultural origins, and allowing them to partake in culture. However there are visible and invisible hurdles such as representative buildings which can give people the feeling that they are in the wrong place or wearing the wrong clothes. Young people may also have the impression that theatre has nothing to do with their lives; or quite simply that they don't know anyone with whom they can go to the theatre.

Theatre artists are increasingly going out into social spaces inhabited by children and young people precisely to be able to reach them more effectively. They are leaving their theatre buildings in order to perform in other places, do theatre-in-education or research work, and get in closer touch with their surroundings and the people who live there in order to be able to deal with their lives in a more authentic manner.

But what precisely do we mean by a social space? Social spaces can mean geographically definable urban or suburban places whose data on population and infrastructure can be objectively collected. How many libraries, playgrounds and sporting facilities are there? What is the age structure of the population? How high is the proportion of qualified school students, unemployed persons or single parents? On the basis of such statistical assessments judgements are often made as to whether an area is a "social hotspot" or a "problem district".

If we put the individual at the centre of our considerations "social space" can be understood as a space for people's actions and experiences with differing local and social reference points and relationships. Which of the things we are offering can be

actively used by individuals in a particular area? What interests are already there and where do people meet their friends?

Whereas concepts like "social hotspot" are assessments from an external perspective and primarily used when people speak about a particular place, working in a social space enables us to gain concrete insights into young people's lives by talking to them directly.

The example of Hellersdorf: Looking beyond the boundaries.

The "Theater o.N." is based in Berlin; to be precise in the inner-city district of Prenzlauer Berg, an area whose social structure is defined by a high level of education and many young and prosperous families. Here there are few encounters with people affected by poverty who are shut off from participation in society. In order to look beyond the immediate boundaries in 2010 "Theater o.N." began to work with children and young people in Hellersdorf, a Berlin suburban district which is heavily affected by poverty and unemployment. Not many of the children and young people in Hellersdorf have access to leisure facilities and they very rarely leave their own suburb. The distance to theatres in the city and their lack of the necessary cash, for example, for transport and theatre tickets are very practical reasons why the children and young people in Hellersdorf often have no contact with the theatre whatsoever. Poverty and unemployment can be seen in the fact that the children are not woken by their parents in the morning, that they come to school hungry and that they lack many of the basic necessities of life. It is a particular challenge to theatre makers to work with children and young people who are not accustomed to building up trust and keeping to agreements. Whereas other projects start with selective casting, "Theater o.N." makes an effort for every single participant in Hellersdorf. The theatre's regular presence in a young people's centre, (including discussions and open workshops) results in some of the young people agreeing to take part in the production process.

The work in Hellersdorf has also had repercussions for "Theater o.N." After a project with primary school students in Hellersdorf the theatre used the material they had gathered to develop a production for the same age group, i.e. they drew on the

content and experiences from their theatre-in-education work and included it in their artistic work. In addition the theatre projects have also created a bridge between Hellersdorf and the “Theater o.N.” in that productions are shown in both places and the company visits theatre shows with the young people.

By working in Hellersdorf “Theater o.N.” is dealing with social differences. The aim is not so much to turn young people in Hellersdorf into potential audiences but much more to enable them to get to know theatre as a form of art and expression, and also as a space which opens up opportunities for them to take part in social and creative activities. The theatre makers are committed to exploring the lives and experiences of young people in their day-to-day work.

Research in the neighbourhood

Once a season the “Junges Schauspielhaus Düsseldorf“ (Young Düsseldorf Playhouse) puts on a show with young actors in which the production process begins in a social space. The first so-called “Theatre Mobile production” in 2011 dealt with life in the Düsseldorf suburb of Rath where the young people’s theatre is located. A team of artists and theatre workers drove around the suburb in a camper van with the aim of getting into contact with young people on the street. The artists wanted to find out who makes the rules in which part of the suburb and discover what parts of Rath should be avoided if possible. Such discussions began with tea, music and a few questions which they had prepared for the young people. After two months’ research and exploration in various places in the suburb the artists invited the young people into the theatre to begin rehearsals on a production called “Claims”, dealing with the relationships between different cultural groups in Rath.

At the premiere the theatre was full of people who had clearly had no previous experience of theatre whatsoever. Many of them all came much too late for the performance, continued chatting with friends and family when the performance began and sometimes reacted in a very loud manner to the events on stage. Such spectators have no relationship to the theatre as a venue. They arrive, sit down and

take up residence in the space. On such an evening the Young Düsseldorf Playhouse is a part of Rath and Rath is a part of the Young Playhouse.

The "Theatre Mobile" productions presented by the Young Playhouse all begin in the young people's social spaces. But what sort of social spaces are they? The Düsseldorf team parked on housing estates and asked local people where they could get electricity for their camper van. They stopped near a factory building which is a meeting place for the graffiti scene. When they were looking for young men for their production "Almost Lovers" the artists went into football stadiums and boxing clubs in order to make contact. These are places in which young people feel at home, where they hang around in their free time and, for example, involve themselves in sporting activities, can decide things for themselves and keep up their social contacts. The young people come to the theatre because they have developed a relationship to the artists, are interested in continuing the dialogue and trying out something new together.

The theatre makers in turn are venturing into a strange territory in a social space. They know very little about the unwritten rules and social codes which govern life there. In return they communicate the rules of theatre to the young people, and in the theatre itself they create a space where the new joint production can take place and a venue which the young people can take over for a time. Thus the project makes the theatre a temporary part of the young people's social space. The social space dissolves once more at the end of the project when the young people have no more specific tasks. What remains is the theatre as a place in which new spaces can be continually created for young people to take part in shaping and participating in shows.

By undertaking theatre projects in social spaces theatre can also be present in other urban locations, come into contact with people who do not go to the theatre, develop ideas for new dramatic themes and attract new partners into the theatre for a productive dialogue. Here the decisive factor is not only the artistic interest but also the thematic interests of the theatre in undertaking projects in a social space. What impact do the experiences from such projects have on the theatre? Such projects can help the art of theatre to become part of the day-to-day life of children and young

people with no previous relationship to theatrical activities. In return the theatre company has the opportunity to take up external themes and impulses and integrate them into its artistic repertoire, maintain a dialogue with local partners and open up areas in the theatre where these partners can influence and shape events. Theatre can only have a very limited influence on local conditions and the lack of participatory opportunities in social spaces. But it can, change its perspectives and change itself by looking beyond its own immediate boundaries.

Anna Eitzeroth is a cultural scholar. She works in the Children's and Young People's Theatre Centre (KJTZ) with special responsibility on "theatre in arts education". She is project manager of ASSITEJ's funding scheme "Pathways to theatre" (www.wegeinstheater.de).



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