



Let´s talk to each other

Authors and their audience

by Henning Fangauf and Lorenz Hippe

Every place is a stage

“Art is in the eye of the observer”: this saying attributed to Pablo Picasso can be transferred almost in its entirety to the performing arts and theatrical texts. There would be no literature were it not for readers, no theatre were it not for audiences. Nowhere is the dialogue between artists and the general public conducted more intensively than in the theatre, especially in theatre for young audiences. Here there is a tradition of participation. In the 1970s the theatre group “Rote Grütze” as part of the “emancipatory” TYA was creating plays for children based on experiences in theatre with children. Forty years later theatre for children and young people is now a fixed part of public culture in towns and cities, either in the form of independent fringe groups or as a department of municipal theatres.

Three roads lead to the audience

At the moment texts and shows of the contemporary TYA are created in various contexts. On the one hand are the authors, experts in aesthetics and storytelling. They use their research to get a stronger hold on the real life situations of young people, and try to meet them close-up long before they start work on writing their plays. On the other hand there are the ensembles and teams within a theatre, consisting of dramaturgs, directors and actors. These make up a so-called “authors’ collective” for an “ensemble project”, whereby dialogue as the basic means of communication tends to take a back seat in favour of other performative elements like, for example, dance. In these projects young people often take the stage alongside professional actors. Then there is a third approach taken by theatre-in-education workers contracted to a theatre. These experts in direct contact with the

audience are able to stimulate artistic activities amongst the audience. All three approaches lead to a huge number of different results which are then fed into the repertoire.

All three approaches also use very different structures of dialogue to create a closer contact with their audience, and all three give theatre-makers insights into the real lives of the young people and their aesthetic expectations. Self-created shows are increasingly being produced to the disadvantage of texts written by playwrights and offered to theatres by publishers. The current situation is regarded with great concern by publishers because it is moving away from previous procedures whereby an author's play is polished up in collaboration with a reader from the agency and the end product then offered to a theatre.

Who is really the author?

The 25th Frankfurt Authors' Forum for Children and Young People's Theatre took place in December 2013. The main question on the programme was "How does text come into being in theatre?" The meetings and discussions showed that there are a huge number of different answers to this question. As described above, in the age of post-dramatic theatre, authors are no longer at the centre of affairs as the sole creators, copyright holders and inventors of stage stories. Instead, their dramaturgic and linguistic competence should be merely part of a more comprehensive theatre concept. That said many stage artists distrust pre-written texts and the stories playwrights have invented. They therefore prefer to investigate other ways to create the event we call theatre. These include collective improvisations, introducing amateurs into the production process, adapting novels or films for the stage, and creating texts based on documents, files and newspaper articles. At the authors' forum the dramaturg and author John von Düffel made a special plea for writers' plays and the independence of the author. He emphasised the challenge which texts offer actors and argued that authors as experts in linguistic compression are still needed. His views were confirmed by other participants at the congress. Without professional dramatists, many of whom have gained qualifications as a result of attending playwriting courses, there can be no future for children's and young

people's theatre. This opinion was strongly backed up by Marion Victor, the head of the renowned publisher and playwright's agency, the "Verlag der Autoren" in Frankfurt am Main. She argued passionately in favour of one single premise behind theatre for children and young people: it should be art for children. Other topics that were thrown up in the many discussions and lectures at the authors' forum included current ideas of art and theatre that are opening out in all directions and resulting in a diversity of forms. The results however often lack clarity especially in comparison with commercial culture which today's children as "digital natives" encounter at a much earlier age than previous generations.

Authors face-to-face

As early as 2009 the Children's and Young People's Theatre Centre began a project entitled "Authors – Theatre – School". The challenge was to put the art of theatre in the foreground and mediate this in educational processes. The project consists of two concrete measures: the grant programme "Nah dran" (Near by) allows dramatists to write a new play and bring it to production in collaboration with theatres. Such commissions help authors to get insights into theatre-in-education processes and the everyday world of children and young people. The second programme is entitled "TAtSch – Theatre Authors take to Schools". Here dramatists and schools agree on a one-year sponsorship. The authors come into the schools, work with students in writing workshops, do play readings and jointly create a play.

When the audience is (also) the writer

That children and young people can not only be players but also work as directors and authors in their own plays is a long established tradition in most young people's drama clubs attached to theatres. The productions are a welcome addition to the professional repertoire. The development of the young people's own shows is also a response to the lack of plays with large casts and equal roles. Whereas in this case writing a play is still an integrated part of a theatre-in-education production, another project initiated by the Children's and Young People's Theatre Centre and entitled "Dialogue. Scenic Writing with Young People", concentrates entirely on young people

who want to write for the theatre, and brings them into contact with professional authors. For six months in 2013 experienced authors conducted writers' workshops with young people in eleven different places in Germany before publicly presenting the results in the form of readings and productions. It is noteworthy that time and time again the young participants gave positive feedback with regard to the tensions which arose between group and individual experiences. In the "Dialogue" project childhood experiences, personal and everyday occurrences often provided the starting points for writing. Turning these into texts which transcended individual points of view needed the inspirational input from the dramatists who were able to encourage the writing process and promote an intensive dialogue between themselves and the young people. When participants state that: "Thanks to the writing workshop I could get to know myself and other people better", the aim of using arts education to help people grow has clearly been achieved. By contrast with teachers whose job is guide their students through a given set curriculum, the dramatists stand side by side with their younger "colleagues" in an open experimental process in which the young people have the freedom to determine their own authorship, i.e. at least for a moment to become theatre authors. There are a lot of good arguments in favour of the fact that such initiatives can make a long-term contribution to establishing regular writing workshops for schools and theatres. Thus, as a result of the "Dialogue" project, the GRIPS Theatre in Berlin set up its own "Young Writers' Workshop".

And what comes next?

There are many open questions: How can schools and colleges set up sustainable structures to promote young people's writing? What sort of theatre topography do we need in order to open up further dialogues with the audience? What kind of support for authors does the theatre need? How can collaborative projects be promoted on a long-term basis and made a basic part of a theatre's repertoire? Can authors be more strongly tied in to the production processes in a theatre without losing their independence? How can the audience influence the repertoire of "its" theatre? Are theatre companies and directors willing to invite authors and pay for them to attend

rehearsals on a regular basis and to engage in a reciprocal learning process – as f.e. it is common in Great Britain. All these are aimed at ensuring that shows for current and future generations of children and young people remain lively and up-to-date. For this is what links all contributors to the Authors' Forum despite their different aesthetic roots and approaches.

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