



## Updating a legend

How does the audience influence the artistic work

Questions to Stefan Fischer-Fels, artistic director of GRIPS Theater Berlin, Vice-President of ASSITEJ International and member of the board of ASSITEJ Germany.

*After 10 years as a dramaturg at the GRIPS Theater Berlin you spent eight years building up the “Junges Schauspielhaus Düsseldorf”. Since 2011 you have been the artistic director of the GRIPS Theater. Can you describe the differences between the audiences in Düsseldorf and Berlin?*

During the first premiere at the Düsseldorf Theatre – “Scratch” by Lutz Hübner – there was almost no reaction from the audience. It was ghostly, dead quiet. During the show we thought “Aha, they don't like it”. But at the end there was an overwhelmingly long round of applause. The Düsseldorf audience preferred to wait and see. They watched the whole show before they gave us their opinion. It was quite a time until we got used to audiences in Düsseldorf but after that we fell in love with one another. Adults in the city were often quite surprised at our direct and emotional approach.

In Düsseldorf we experimented more with dance as an additional stage language. At GRIPS the focus is always on the link between acting and music. GRIPS audiences love that and also expect it. The experiences I had in Düsseldorf are often integrated into the productions in Berlin when they are appropriate to the show. Here the focus is on a comic reaction to real life, that does not preclude a poetic approach. The plays are also committed to asking social questions.

*Do the different theatre spaces in the two cities play a role in influencing the reaction of the audiences?*

In Düsseldorf we played in an old factory hall with a wide stage, and a very small studio theatre. The space in Berlin is much more suitable to an audience. 400 children can sit very closely to the actors on three sides of the stage. None of the

actors nor the audience can escape this atmosphere! The upshot is a unique communication because the audience is not only face-to-face with the actors BUT ALSO with other children in the audience! Sometimes an audience reaction will begin on one side of the auditorium, will be picked up on the other side and flow through the room like a wave. Our second venue in a baroque palace not far from Alexanderplatz, is smaller and more like a classical proscenium stage. It also has a representative foyer which has been redesigned into a lounge by art students. Here we do guest shows with more mobile or participatory productions like in the “Wild Palace” series. Thus in Berlin we have more spaces for a greater number of different formats.

*There has been a change in generations in the leadership of GRIPS. To what extent is the audience aware of this?*

GRIPS is a projection screen where everyone is the national team coach no matter whether they live in Berlin or not. Everyone knows what GRIPS should be. Either “just as it always was” or “utterly different”. These are the two irreconcilable expectations we have to face. There is scarcely any one who has no opinion on the matter. This can at times be somewhat back-breaking. On the other hand it is great to be able to work in a theatre which has captured the hearts and minds of so many people! It is the job of the new artistic director and his team to develop GRIPS Theatre to meet the future whilst preserving the achievements of the past. But how are we going to do that? I am working at GRIPS because I love this form of theatre, this desire to be close to reality, this emancipatory policy. In Berlin GRIPS is incredibly popular – and has been so for more than 40 years, thanks to Volker Ludwig’s magnificent life achievement. Artists who have grown up with GRIPS have been working here for many years alongside those who invented it. Thus styles change but not the basic attitude; a sensitivity to children's serious questions about fairness, justice and their future. GRIPS was always a platform for themes and debates outside the mainstream – and was always famous for great entertainment! Today there are still productions which have been in the GRIPS repertoire for years, like “Linie 1” and “Ab heute heißt du Sara”. Because the audience’s reality is continually changing we are presenting new shows on an equal foothold with new

themes and ways of performance like “Die besseren Wälder”, “Durst” or “Der Gast ist Gott”. We are systematically extending the pool of GRIPS writers, and working regularly with Lutz Hübner, Thilo Reffert and Volker Ludwig. We continue working with well-known GRIPS directors like Frank Panhans and we experience that a new generation of directors is particularly interested in GRIPS work. They want to challenge our audiences with new impulses, like Grete Pagan who directed the premiere of “Die Prinzessin und der Pjör”, the winning play in the “Berlin Children's Theatre Prize 2013” a competition to promote young authors. There again there is Robert Neumann, a hugely talented member of the ensemble who has just completed his second production “Die besseren Wälder” and is now directing at the State Theatre in Stuttgart. Or Mina Salehpour who directed “Über Jungs” for our theatre in 2012, and has just been awarded the “FAUST” German Theatre Prize 2013 as the best director of a show in TYA!

*How does the new aesthetic approach affect the audience? In which ways does it refer to the audience? How does the audience react?*

Ways of seeing change over generations, as do attitudes. Today children and young people are growing up in a sphere of tension between huge individual freedom and the pressure to invent and stage their own personalities at a much earlier age. Our shows reflect this. In our evening productions like “Kebab Connection” or “Die letzte Kommune” different generations confront one another. Thanks to the joint theatre experience young spectators are able to see themselves through the eyes of the others and this gives rise to discussions and exchanges of opinions.

Our young audiences perceive that we are confronting them with new, contemporary forms of storytelling. And that we are also continuing to tell them well-researched themes and stories connected to their own lives. They are able to experience an excellent ensemble which has grown up together over the years. The great majority of our audience simply visits us because it is curious about the “new GRIPS”.

*Does the audience have an influence on your artistic work? If so, what?*

Because children and young people's audiences are basically open and react spontaneously they have an influence on every single performance. We are so close

to each other, there are only a few centimetres between the stage and the auditorium, and the audience is seated like in a football stadium looking down on three sides from above. Thus the actors are sensitive to the smallest reaction and react to it. It is a great art to be able to maintain a fine line between keeping to what has been worked out and reacting to the moment. But these are important “research moments”. They influence productions even after the premiere and can offer us ideas for new approaches to story-telling.

Alongside this our work needs even more intensive access points which can be created by educational workers and dramaturgs in workshops and laboratories with children and young people. In 2011 we initiated the “Berlin Children's Congress”. Once a year theatre pedagogues, actors, dramaturgs, authors, other artists and academics meet up with 100 children from very different backgrounds. In mixed groups we work for four days together on a single theme like “poverty and neglect despite prosperity”, or “water as a resource for the common good”, the themes of the first two congresses. The third Berlin Children's Congress at the end of June 2014 will investigate how children determine their own lives. The title is “Who rules whom here?” In the congress format we can learn and research with children together. We are well prepared for the theme and have worked out initial artistic ideas. The children will be a source of inspiration with their direct, solution-orientated attitudes to their own reality.

Once a month we stage an event with people of different generations over 15 called “Gegenbilder” in which we investigate political alternatives beyond the mainstream. After an impulse from a show or a documentary film we meet up to talk with activists, NGOs and artists. Here every member of the audience is a stakeholder and there is no hierarchy between invited guests, artists and the audience. Everybody's contribution to the discussion is of equal value. Recently a young farmer called Oli who works near Berlin came here to analyse the relationship between urban dwellers and country folk. On another occasion the architect Van-Bo Le Mentzel asked why there had to be a parking place for every car, but no place for refugees in need. These are encounters with social realities from which we in the theatre can draw our inspiration.

*Are today's young audiences therefore political? If so, in what way?*

There is no such thing as THE young audience. Individualisation and pluralisation are increasing all the time. It is important for us to be able to cater for all generations, social classes and cultures. I am particularly interested in the 8 to 12 age group. I have noticed that the focus of this age range strongly moves away from the family to a view of the world at large. Questions on justice become central, and they are curious to find out more about global connections. It is a particular pleasure to work in an artistic and social manner for this age group. For example one of our plays, "Durst" (Thirst) is a very complex piece about water as a sales product in the global economic system. A team of dramaturgs, actors, authors and directors researched the theme for two years, gave the story specific contours, and invented characters and a storyline. In the rehearsals we decided to open ourselves up to the audience in a radical manner: The story is not played to an end on the stage because there is no single credible solution. Some of the actors express their solidarity with the opponents of powerful business interests in the play. They go out amongst the audience and ask them for their ideas on how to mitigate the effects of global trade in water and what to do to ensure that everyone has a right to good drinking water. When things go well children, young people and actors get into a lively discussion. Thus the complex story has no closed ending but becomes a forum for a joint debate.

*Theatre as a impulse generator? Or as a stirrer?*

Yes – Theatre can give people impulses to consider alternatives over and above the current political system which is always telling us there are no alternatives. We are currently rehearsing our latest play "1848" by Thilo Reffert based on the book by Klaus Kordon. On the surface it's about the first revolution in Germany in 1848. But deep down it asks another very contemporary question: "What would make you go to the barricades today?" We are so used to political failure and global injustice that even our feelings of helplessness have become a habit. It is time to think about theatre as a forum for anger, outrage and the multifaceted ways of life. The way I see it is that young people are less interested in universal visions than in implementing concrete practical solutions to the everyday problems facing them in their lives. Our young people's club, the "Banda Agita", is currently working on a play about dying. This was

sparked off by a meeting rebellious old people who caused a furore all over Germany when they occupied the Senior Citizens Centre to prevent it being closed. It worked, by the way! That is politically relevant!

The debate on the role of different cultures has been receiving fresh attention thanks to the work of young artists at the Ballhaus Naunynstraße here in Berlin. And this debate is also being passionately discussed by us. The question about what stories we want to tell can be extended to include the question of whose perspective we want to take seriously and who is to represent this on stage.

All in all this is about whether we want theatre for young people to repeat old wisdoms or whether we want to be part of a young, critical public movement in search of new solutions. In brief: about what sort of society we want to live in, now and in the future.

Recorded by Kirstin Hess, dramaturg at the GRIPS Theatre.



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