



Playing with the audience

Participation in TYA in Germany

by Tabea Hörnlein

“In our present climate, it is more useful to look for participants rather than spectators. We live in a culture that encourages passive spectatorship, and there is certainly enough spectatorship to go around. The nightmare of our society right now is submissive consumption: people watching their lives go by, watching the government drift by with the assumption that a citizen's only job is to be a good audience. The theater can offer an alternative to passive spectatorship. It excels in qualities that make for real democracy.“ (Bogart 2007, p. 75)

Even when the American theatre-maker Anne Bogart concludes by defining participation as getting involved, she is describing the potential power inherent in the participatory turn in the German theatre, not only in theatre for children and young people.

Getting involved

There is a new citizen's movement in municipal and state theatres, manifested in the foundation of “Bürgerbühnen” (citizens' stages) at Staatsschauspiel Dresden or Nationaltheater Mannheim and “Volkstheater” (people's theatre) like at Staatstheater Karlsruhe. Every person should be enabled to take part in theatre. And this means, above all, playing theatre instead of “just” watching it.

Different regional concepts are arising and artistic policies are being defined. Whereas the Dresden State Theatre is putting an increasing focus on working with authors who wish to convert specific Dresden biographies into theatre texts (cf. Fischer-Fels and Kaluza 2012, p. 14) the Mannheim National Theatre is mainly focussing on themes. Whilst next season's motto for its young people's theatre

company “Schnawwl“ is “Co-Decision-Maker”, the theatre’s other “Young Citizens’ Stage” is making a corresponding appeal with the slogan “Become a Co-Decision-Maker!” – and this describes the impetus behind the movement. Citizens should be activated to participate in the theatre as a mirror of society. Everyday themes can be shaped in an artistic manner along with them, the experts in everyday life, and another artistic language – that of citizens, that of the “not perfect” – can be further developed. These scenic experiments will in turn drive forward the discourse on ways of performance and presentation. But above all this is about allowing theatre to offer spaces for communication which reduce the distance between art and life.

And this describes where this citizen’s movement has its origins: in a participatory art practice which became known mainly in the 1980s and 1990s under the name “New Genre Public Art”. Here the focus of artistic production moved from working with objects to working with subjects and developing opportunities for people to take part in artistic processes. Thus the borders were shifted between producers and recipients, for the general public was often included in the conception of the product or contributed in great measure to its implementation (cf. Kravagna 1998). That said, projects created by citizen’s stages have hitherto involved the participants more in predetermined artistic processes rather than allowing them to determine them themselves.

Partaking

If we focus on theatre for children and young people from this angle we see that the participatory turn described here has never happened because this form of theatre looks back on a tradition of participation anyway. Productions with young people for young people are essential to many repertoires and a fixed part of the artistic work. Theatre companies and groups like “Moks” in Bremen or the “tjg. young generation theatre“ in Dresden set up their own departments for this type of theatre work years ago (“young actors” and the “tjg. theatre academy”). Others like the fringe “Theater Marabu” in Bonn annually produce a play for young people with the “Young People’s Ensemble” and the result is presented up to twenty times in the theatre’s repertoire. What are the particular features of the participatory format?

At the “tjg. theater junge generation“ five of the 18 premieres in the season are presented by the tjg. theatre academy, about the same as the number of premieres presented by the puppet theatre attached to the main house. The themes for three of these, in turn, are decided on in the “tjg. tak-ticker” series by young people themselves, who also stage them. During the last season the then 16 year old Lena Höhlich staged a biographical show entitled “Till One Goes”, on children of divorced parents. Being a child of divorced parents herself she collected an ensemble of similarly aged children of divorced parents who translated their experiences into clearly focused texts. In formal and aesthetic terms the production switched back and forth between contemporary biographic theatre procedures and performative elements using physical images which reflected the theatre experience and the philosophical capabilities of the young theatre-makers. The added value for the young actors is obvious:

“Whilst the youthful actors are dedicating their energies to the process of performance which throws the spotlight on themselves, they are in a non-stop active process of reinventing their “selves”.” (Lange 2002, p. 476)

Even more exciting is the examination of the show situation and the confrontation with the audience which, in children’s and young people’s theatre, consists of children of the same age, rather than friends and family: and this is often a central feature of audiences in shows presented by “Bürgerbühnen” (“citizens’ stages”). The feedback from the performances shows that young audience feel they are being taken seriously in a different manner since they are being told stories about their own experiences by people of the same age with the aesthetics of people of the same age. In this way theatre for children and young people becomes a mouthpiece for young people, a place which they can also participate in decision-making, a place where they can negotiate the things which are currently affecting them. For the young theatre-makers it is also a place where they can reflect on their own lives and get a feeling of what it is like to be able to participate in shaping public life

“When art is seen as a form of communication it does not have to exhaust itself in the communicative relationship between the artists and their audience, but can be invested in existing social spaces and their relationships.” (Kravagna 1998, p. 9)

In this sense the projects described are a form of active play with theatre audiences, but strictly seen they are all oriented on participation. So what do participatory artistic practices look like in contemporary children's theatre when they conform with Christian Kravagna's demands for a participatory model?

"Participation starts ... from the standpoint of a differentiation between producers and recipients, is interested in involving the latter to whom it hands over a considerable portion of responsibility in deciding on the conception and/or the further processes in the work." (Kravagna 1998, p. 2)

Participation

The "Spook Insurance" project created by the Forschungstheater (Theatre of Research) at the Fundus Theatre in Hamburg (www.fundus-theater.de/forschungstheater/projekte/spukversicherung/) implements participation in this very sense. Children, artists and academics meet up in an exemplary manner in this open project to dedicate themselves jointly to looking for ghosts and, where necessary, fighting them.

In the first phase of the project the Spook Insurance team is called to the school so that someone can report a case of damage caused by the appearance of ghosts. The team examines the "school atmosphere" along with the school students and tries to track down the spirits. In the next phase the school students are invited to take part in a séance where their ghosts take on a shape and confront them. At the end the schools students can decide which ghost are allowed to return to the school to take an official part in school life.

Thus the project not only includes research areas and an individual staging phase but also a return to the school. This tripartite feature is necessary to ensure parity in communication – without the children there would be no communication and vice versa – and to close the performative act which is carried out in this part of the project. For the return of the (tamed) ghosts to the school goes hand in hand with a change in the behaviour of the students, or alternatively the changed spirits only return to the school because the students have changed their attitudes.

In this project, too, the claims of participatory practice are manifested in the fact that art is near to life and can even change life. Indeed social interaction spaces are targeted here by an artistic process, which re-evaluates and changes them. A search takes place for an artistic form for and with children which will promote their social interaction, in this sense almost to encourage them to be active on an artistic level.

Getting involved – Partaking – Participation

As described above, getting involved, partaking and participation are three different forms in the participatory turn, which reflect the different intentions of project and theatre makers. That said, they have two tendencies in common.

One is about methods of presentation in (children's and young people's) theatre. Most professional houses and groups work with professional actors and puppeteers who are trained to work in a very specific theatrical convention. Contemporary forms of performance and biographical features are only possible to a limited extent. The integration of participatory projects can broaden the artistic profile of a theatre. The potential seems immense, especially in young peoples' theatre. Anyone who has seen a young performer fighting to get out of a shrunken tee-shirt, standing, looking around, and displaying his adolescent body will learn more about what it is like to be a teenager than any actor ever could tell.

The second point is relevant to everybody and refers to the challenge of opening up theatre as a communication space and making it accessible to those for whom it is made. Theatre would like to be a venue for, and co-shaper of social processes, and the very first place where people can discover these opportunities at first hand. In this sense at its best it can become a platform enabling regionally-based generations – everywhere – to engage in exchanges of opinions and attitudes.

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This text is published in: IXYPSILONZETT Magazine for Children's and Young People's Theatre, volume 1, 2014. IXYPSILONZETT is a publication of ASSITEJ Germany published by Theater der Zeit.

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