

Theatre – conflict and self-discovery

Who am I? Who would I like to be? What kind of a picture do I present in everyday life? And finally – how great is the inner tension between these self-images? Everyone is preoccupied by these questions their whole life long, but there is doubtless no other phase in life in which they play a greater role than the period of youth and one's time at school. These are the years in which, for the first and perhaps most genuine time, one is searching for oneself, and exploring one's limits and one's effect on others, struggling to find one's own, authentic personality. And so one sees again and again how truly Friedrich Schiller's wonderful realization "**Man only plays when in the full meaning of the word he is a man, and he is only completely a man when he plays**" is conveyed in the theatre context.

It is the double meaning of the word "play" by means of which Schiller's fundamental and idealistic avowal of the beauty and dignity of man is explained – and, on top of this, Schiller's love of the dramatic form: for no other form of art addresses the conflict between man and his environment more unconditionally and more effectively than the theatre. Even the ancient Greeks were firmly convinced that the public portrayal of the tragedy of an individual had a healing and inspiring effect on the entire community of the Athenian polis. It is, however, a relatively new discovery that preparing and performing plays has a lasting positive influence on the development of young people and on their interaction with their environment and their inner personality.

In daily life it is usually only the outer shell of young people that is noticed. In their phase of self-discovery, young people want to dissociate themselves from their parents and other adults. They do not want to be an open book for adults, who know everything better anyway and who do not understand them. Young people are constantly preoccupied with testing how they come across to others, and, in doing so, they sometimes pay so much attention to their outer shell that their core cannot be recognized any more – and this is true not just of those around them but also of themselves. Life, when one is young, seems to consist of one big play, and precisely what they actually feel themselves and what their true convictions are – when they are being true to themselves – this is something that young people are frequently no longer able to assess or to recognize.

It is precisely this, however, that they paradoxically experience in the context of the theatre, that place that is only seemingly a place of disguise and pretending to be something else. Here in the theatre, young people are forced to genuinely come to grips with the character they are portraying and its needs and fears. And, in doing so, they cannot avoid returning again and again to their own position. Here, in the theatre, young people really do live, listening to their own inner voices, finding their heart.

For only when he is authentic, can an actor play at a theatre in an effective way. Young people, for this reason, see themselves compelled to be themselves (at last!) – in a protected atmosphere, of course, for everything is "just" theatre. However, it is precisely here that the opportunity arises of testing oneself, perceiving oneself and revealing oneself, of getting to know oneself and learning to assess oneself.

At the same time, theatre is – in contrast to many other forms of art – never a one-man show: the young person must become involved with the other actors and the stage director. This requires a high degree of discipline and readiness – texts must be prepared and rehearsed again and again and often enough one must wait patiently until it is one's turn. Respect, consideration and, above all, mutual motivation are called for and are indispensable for the overall success of a group performance. Everything depends on the cooperation of the participants. Here in the theatre young people authentically learn at first hand how it feels to work together with others towards a common goal.

The theatre project does not, however, only strengthen the sense of community of the group, it always also builds up the self-confidence of each individual young person. It requires courage and forthrightness to stand up on a stage and speak in front of other people, to be able to take criticism and to assume the personality of another role. The reward, however, is always a broadening of one's own perspective: one

learns to understand other ways of looking at things, ways with which one would otherwise never have busied oneself or perhaps even rejected. Acceptance and tolerance of one's own fellow human beings can be trained. Young people learn that there is never just right and wrong, but many different possibilities.

The diagram below illustrates the positive coherencies of the apparent contradictions involved in stage acting – between the dramatic arts and reality, the community and individuality, and between young people and their environment:

Developmental process experienced by a young person in the course of theatrical work

Initial situation:

CONFLICT between the inner world and the environment

Internal experience:

Involvement with the role

External experience:

Involvement with the group

Experiencing one's own strengths and weaknesses in terms of:

Gestures, Mime, Language
⇒ Body-consciousness

Reliability, Motivation, Commitment
⇒ Trust, Openness

Concentration, Courage, Curiosity
⇒ Spiritual consciousness

Responsibility, Tolerance, Creativity
⇒ Empathy, Harmony

Self-confidence

(e.g. overcoming shyness, stage fright)

Community awareness

(e.g. overcoming egoism, vanity)

Joint effort ⇒ SUCCESS
in both individual and group terms



Result:

Self-serving

and

social

thinking and acting



CONFLICT leads to SUCCESS
and therefore exists only seemingly
⇒ Confirmation, Solution and Overcoming of the initial situation

Provided the rehearsal process has proved a success, the theatre fulfils a promise in relation to the contradictory form of perception of young adults in their world described at the outset, a world that is often enough, and rightly so, felt to be dull, boring or even threatening. It opens up perspectives and promotes understanding for the others involved, who, in return, can strengthen the development of their own personality. Theatre, therefore, is not just theatre, but "life in itself" and, for young people, a form of preparation for adulthood.

Today it fills me with great happiness that the theatre at our school has over all these years opened up a protected and protecting place of refuge and place of longing for so many different young personalities. And I am thankful for a time in which I had the possibility of telling unique stories with unique young people. It is a wonderful task in the course of which I have won friends who still accompany me up to this very day, and who have given my life so much purpose and a perfect sense of joy and lightness, more than anyone could ever ask for.

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