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**CHANGE OF PERSPECTIVE: BIOGRAPHICAL THEATRE AND
INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION**

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Abstract

Today, more than ever before, intercultural competence should be one of the key competencies of each person. In this sense, it is the task of the school to set the prerequisites for this. The paper entitled “Change of Perspective: Biographical Theatre and Intercultural Education” is an attempt to propose an aesthetic way for promoting intercultural learning. The principal aim of the paper is to suggest using drama methods in the field of intercultural education, in order to both prevent the occurring of prejudices and to avoid the arising cultural conflicts. Acting enables intercultural encounters, dialogue, and exchange. During the acting the players are confronted both with their own feelings and ideas and with that of the others. The focus of the paper lies on the biographical theatre for intercultural learning. We firmly believe that the biographical theatre can play an important role for a better understanding of the other and creating thus an intercultural world.

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1. Introduction

We are living now more than ever in a multicultural world, where boundaries are for many of us just a line on a map. Our societies are shaped by cultural diversity, which in its turn shapes our behaviour and our identity. In this constantly changing world the question arises how we can create for everybody spaces of freedom and experience for coexistence based on cultural diversity. When we talk about a multicultural society, we do not mean only living next to each other, but with each other. This implies that everybody - regardless of their origin, culture, religion, age, skin colour, gender – is part of the society and has the same rights. Therefore, the aim of interculturality would be to promote coexistence to avoid parallel societies with their complex consequences in the future.

2. Problem Statement

Globalization contributes to the fact that the networking between different cultures increases more and more and therefore intercultural competence is required. Theatre education could be one of the many possibilities to create a world without racism, xenophobia, rejection, intolerance, marginalisation, and abuse, because it can actively promote intercultural dialogue and exchange.

3. Research Questions

Drama is a very effective tool for sensing and making sense of the world. In this paper we asked to what extent theatre education in general and biographical theatre in particular might build intercultural communication and understanding for students. At the beginning we will examine the concepts of intercultural education and of biographical theatre. Furthermore, we will present the importance of theatre education in an intercultural context. Also, we investigate the role of biographical theatre for intercultural learning and understanding.

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to investigate in detail the advantages of drama for the intercultural education in general and of the biographical theatre in particular.

5. Research Methods

We studied both articles from different journals and chapter in books specializing in drama and intercultural learning. We focused on the literature in the German space because the definition of the concept of biographical theatre corresponds to our concept.

6. Findings

6.1. Intercultural education

Having in view that the requirements of a multicultural society are social recognition and respect for all cultures we propose a basic building block for creating a world in which people live in peaceful coexistence, and this is the intercultural education in schools from an early age. Intercultural education describes all pedagogical approaches that are intended to familiarize students with the values of acceptance, openness, and respect as much as possible. It is particularly about finding a way to deal with foreignness and reduce prejudice. With the help of pedagogical methods, one strives to prevent prejudices from arising and to rebut arising cultural conflicts about the work of individuals on themselves and on their attitudes (Diehm & Radtke, 1999, p. 143). So intercultural education should be a matter of course in every society and in every educational system.

According to Böhm et al. (1999, p. 33) intercultural education is “to meet the unfamiliar with curiosity, to perceive and experience the foreign as an enrichment of one's own culture and as a natural part of everyday life.” Intercultural education pursues the important goals of conveying the multicultural situation and the cultural diversity associated with it as a normal and positive state and enabling fruitful intercultural contacts. According to Hohmann (1987), there are two different approaches: the pedagogical encounter and the conflict pedagogical approaches.

The pedagogical encounter approaches focus on intercultural encounters and the necessary communicative skills and are based on the “far-reaching, if not utopian claim to cultural exchange and cultural enrichment in the relationship between culturally different groups” (Hohmann, 1987, p. 103). Getting to know foreign cultural societies and dealing with alienation are the focus of interest in pedagogical encounters. The intercultural contacts could make people aware of their own culturality and broaden their cultural horizons. Cultural diversity is seen as an educational opportunity and enrichment of one's own view of the world. However, as long as the encounter does nothing more than cultural enrichment, this approach runs the risk to not make possible any real cultural exchange (Hohmann, 1987, p. 103).

Conflict education approaches, on the other hand, intend to remove barriers and to accept the differences, its aim being “the fight against xenophobia, discrimination and racism, the elimination of ethnocentrism and prejudices, but also the creation of equal opportunities as a prerequisite for the desired encounter between cultures” (Hohmann, 1987, p. 103). Xenophobia can be a possible consequence of subjectively perceived competition or a threat to one's own group from another one. Conflict education measures are primarily about counteracting this feeling of competition and therefore reducing (institutional) disadvantages, i.e., creating equal opportunities and combating prejudice and racism. It is also about equality of all cultural ways of life because all cultures should be understood and accepted in their diversity.

The goals of intercultural education are the awareness and learning of attitudes, knowledge, and skills in how to deal with the others, but also the ability to change perspective. Within the intercultural work, the foreign and the other are a central theme. The stranger, the other, is primarily used to denote another person, another culture, another religion. The intercultural pedagogy targets the commitment to

equality, the acceptance of differences, the ability to intercultural understanding and the building up dialogue. This requires critical reflection on other people's images and one's own cultural self-evidence, the ability to empathize and deal with conflict. According to Leiprecht and Lang, the goal of intercultural pedagogy is to be trained in dealing with otherness (Leiprecht & Lang, 2001). As stated by Johann (1998) the goal of the intercultural education is the training in tolerance and empathy and the combat of xenophobia, discrimination, and racism. Czock (1993) sees the goals of intercultural education in the practice of tolerance towards a foreign culture and as an exchange process in the sense of cultural enrichment.

6.2. Theatre education in an intercultural context

In order to achieve the goal of an intercultural society, one must first create intercultural encounters. Acting together can make such encounters possible and this is where today's theatre in education can begin. Theatre can bring all participants together as equal members of the same group. As they act, they transform everyday realities in their own stories. Acting is by itself is a collective process and a social art form that stands for dialogical relationships. By cooperating with each other the students “develop their communication and cooperation skills, help increase children’s responsibility towards their own learning, but also towards the group” (Chiș et al., 2018, p. 568)

Theatre in education can be understood as a process that moves between a form of art and education, that includes both pedagogical concepts and the artistic aspects of theatre and focuses on the initiation of learning and experience processes through theatre and acting (Stănescu & Andronache, 2020). Theatre in education can be understood as a cultural transfer in the sense of an intercultural dialogue and exchange, which can be actively promoted through joint acting (Keuchel, 2011). By its very nature, acting is always a social art form that implies working with each other, pursuing the same goal, accepting the ideas of others, and helping to deal with norms and values that represent moral standards of behaviour in a community. Acting can take up questions and approach topics that are often difficult to access otherwise and creates the opportunity to make everyday situations visible in a concentrated manner, to process and shape them, since space and time are limited, and one is limited to the essentials. Therefore, it can play a key role for intercultural education. In the intercultural context theatre pedagogy creates a common level, a mutual social togetherness, where differences are not only welcome but also beneficial for the process. In the theatrical area there is great potential for playful initiatives, by means of which feelings of foreignness can be flattened and 'we-feelings' can be built up and explored in a playful way in order to create a new awareness of interculturality. During acting the participants can experiment with symbols from different cultures and deal with them in a playful way. Also, one's own and other people's role models can be questioned through the intensive examination of a foreign role. During acting intensive group processes can result, that can lead in approaching the alien in a much better way and take a look behind it. The players are confronted not only with different cultures, but also, they become aware of their own identities and cultures, and of how they are perceived by others, and also develop an understanding of the identities and cultures of those with whom they are interacting with.

Playing together requires not only cooperation but also careful consideration. Acting can grow and develop lively interaction only in coordination with the other players. At the same time, learning

processes are set in motion that can lead to a confrontation with oneself, one's own feelings and one's own behaviour through reliving the feelings and dealing with the behaviour of a character. This enables an intuitive understanding of the biography, behaviours and feelings of a persona who was previously classified as unacceptable, perhaps even terrible.

'Strangeness' and 'foreignness' are the essential categories in dealing with interculturality. According to Münkler and Ladwig (1997), foreignness can be divided into a social and a cultural dimension: the social dimension means group membership, the cultural dimension means familiarity with an environment and certain processes. By using theatre methods both dimensions are addressed, because on one hand acting assume teamwork and on the other hand one actively and consciously deals with the other and the otherness. In theatre pedagogy, experiences of foreignness and strangeness can be actively worked out and flattened in a playful way.

6.3. Biographical theatre

Drama is being used at all fields of education due to its capacity to promote social and aesthetical education. An appropriate form for intercultural education is the biographical theatre.

Life and biography are mutually dependent but at the same time they have to be viewed fundamentally differently, because while life happens in the now and appears real to us, biography is the life story narration of the already experienced. The compound word *Biography* comes from the Greek noun βίος (bíos) - «life» and the verb γράφειν (gráphein) - «write» - emphasizes this representational character of the word. People tell in their biography their own life, they discover, construct, and develop retrospectively, but always from the perspective of a present point of view. How we see our biography has a concrete impact on our future, because how we live our lives, also determines our view of our life that lies ahead of us.

Biography work in connection with theatre education become more and more popular from the 1970s onwards, because it incorporates one's own experiences into an artistic work, dealing with them in an aesthetic way. According to Köhler (2009) the biographical theatre can use one's biography in three ways: as a process, as a product and as a potential.

The life story appears *as a process* when own's biography is seen as the reflection on one's own growth and development processes. This process is yet incomplete and is open for change.

One own's biography can be showable and at least provisional complete when it finally manifests itself in an aesthetic product on the stage. In this case we speak about the biographical theatre *as a product*.

Biography can be seen also *as a potential* because it can be understood as a reservoir of forces and impulses, which bring specific changes regarding to one's own self-concept or life plan. The players deal in an artistic form with their own origin, their present state of mind but they also deal with their future. Köhler (2009) stresses out that this personal and procedural examination and reflection is what makes the essence of biographical theatre.

According to Maïke Plath (2014) biographical theatre can be divided into two different forms:

- *free biographical in-house production*: All contents of the play are based on the thoughts, feelings, and life experiences of the players.

- *text-based biographical in-house production*: The biographical content of the players is related to a topic, a literary or dramatic model, a poem, or another foreign text.

Regardless the form of the biographical theatre the central subject of it is the authentic experiences of the players, and the declared aim is to identify these experiences and to aestheticize them into an artistic form and theatrical expression for a performance. The players work on subjects and matters from their life and on what they take interest in, translating their personal stories into a pictorial and metaphorical language. The biographical material is not brought to the stage as it is, but it is artistically designed, accentuated, and condensed into a staging. The biographical source material becomes scenic material when it is implemented artistically and theatrically and is transformed from a purely private context into one aesthetic context (Plath, 2014).

The artistic framing creates a distance to the content and the performers and generates thus a protective space for free material extraction and testing of ideas. The biographies of the players form the concept, the content and the goal of the joint theatre production and become a common construction through the ensemble form of the play. The individual biographies are brought into an interplay between the I-perspective and we-perspectives and together they become a collective biography (Köhler, 2009) Biographical theatre is mostly about putting one's own in connection with the collective and thereby arises a distance to one's own and the players gain knowledge about it in order to achieve connections between the world and reality.

The design task lies with the participants. The biographical material comes from them, and they decide which material is processed and designed and which statements are to be conveyed with it. For the theatrical design of the material in a form that conveys their thoughts, the participants have to take a closer look at the content and break it down in its facets and structures. The biographical reference of a project requires and enables a self-reflective examination of one's own past, the current state of mind and personal future prospects (Köhler, 2009).

Köhler (2009) describes the production paths from material to play and from person to character into three stages:

- 1) *material collection*: in this phase, the first texts and scenic ideas are developed and explored improvisationally. The so-called "starting points" contain memories, feelings, opinions, concerns, thoughts, anecdotes, stories, and self-images of the players, which are used as a basis for work. Specific tasks such as research, collecting old photos or reading newspaper articles, listening to pieces of music, can be used.
- 2) *the design of the characters*: in this segment, forms of representation for the biographical material are sought and tested. In this rehearsal or process phase, the players play different games and use playful methods to lead you to something bigger on their own (the private) in order to become more general.
- 3) *development of the play*: now the created scenes are brought into a dramaturgical context and condensed and finally assembled into a staging.

For the biographical theatre the authentic experiences and understandings of the players are a central subject, and the stated goal is to aestheticize them in a new and artistic form.

According to Plath (2014) the audience is an important part of the biographical theatre, and they should be surprised and provoked through the biographies of the players. This will avoid that, banal 'stories from everyday life are told on stage.

6.4. Biographical theatre and intercultural learning

Biographical theatre can be used both as a method for teaching different subjects with focus on intercultural learning and as a collection of ideas for an intercultural theatre project. In this paper the emphasis falls on the latter.

The use of biographical theatre is versatile and can be used for many purposes. For a biographic theatre project, the main idea could be interculturality and migration, dealing with the perception of others and everyday confrontations as well as social issues and their challenges. The group playfully approaches the structures, reflects on them, and develops a common attitude or question towards the social phenomenon, which is then jointly represented in the performance.

The importance of biographical theatre for intercultural learning is that personal experiences are often also related to social phenomena. A biographical theatre project requires and enables a self-reflective examination of one's own past, the current state of mind and personal future prospects. At the same time, the players are confronted not only with their own perspective but also with the perspective of the others. This ability to see things from another's point of view and to change perspective is an important aspect for intercultural learning.

During the game, the actors always fall back on their everyday experiences and patterns. These are evaluated and reflected repeatedly during the game. Reflection and confrontation with other perspectives bring about new ideas for everyday actions, forming eventually new patterns for thinking and acting. The biographies of the players form the material for the play. During the rehearsals these are accentuated, selected, brought into new references and thus new patterns of meaning are developed (Plath, 2014). The aesthetic processing of the material leads to a detached attitude towards the content, which allows a new perspective on the material. This can provide impulses for revising one's own life plan and one's own attitudes towards others.

The character is an important part of the theatre, and the embodiment of a character is a central element of the theatre work. The development of a character in the biographical theatre is worked out based on a self-developed and elaborated material. But even if authentic material is used in biographical theatre, it would make sense to work with characters and not play one own's self. The performer as an actor should not be confused with their private person. On stage they should never play themselves. Within the protective space created by the figure, the participants can freely deal with their experiences and find their personal form of expression. On the stage it is important to no longer be in the private I-state because one becomes exposed and vulnerable.

The character is not to be understood as an ontological unit, but as a construct. This construct is made up of the relationship between the character and the actor and this is only synthesized through the perception of the audience. The characters, who are both the carriers of the plot and those who establish relationships with other characters, are given liveliness by the players, because the player gives the character an individual expression, lends it his body, his voice, his own self. According to Henschel

(2000) a character does not exist as a <model>, but rather arises only when the player comes to terms with their own self and as a consciously designed part of this self. In this process the subject gives the game of imagination an objectified expression. The character builds on the actors' potential for experience, expression, and movement. The actors and their characters stand in an interplay of involvement and distance (Köhler, 2009). Only through the played character the necessary distance to one's own can arise, and this can lead to reflection on one's own feelings and one's own behaviour.

In the biographical theatre with emphasis on intercultural aspects students play with stories from their own life and from their own experiences. Dealing with them takes courage to reveal their personal stories, but also courage to bring their own ideas and thoughts into the group in order to look for forms of representation for scenes. When looking for biographical material for the stage, a distinction must be made between “private” and “personal”. Only personal stories should be used as biographical material for a project, while private stories should not be made public. Each student can decide which of their story is private, and which is personal.

In the dispute with stories of interculturality and other life stories using biographical aspects is a matter of fact because acting lives from personal and biographical parts of the players themselves. The biographical theatre can consciously assume playful forms as a design method and makes a lot of difference in the context of interculturality.

7. Conclusion

The approach of biographical theatre is particularly suitable for intercultural work because it is no longer primarily about the perfection of the style of play, but also about what the actor has to say. In the biographical theatre, the students deal with their life stories, experiences, opinions, and memories in an aesthetic and creative way. By dealing with one's own biography reflecting processes are stimulated. Maike Plath (2014) and Norma Köhler (2009) underline the importance of the biographical theatre for a more intensive examination of a topic, because the contents can be reflected on better than it would be possible in everyday life. In a joint search for material, biographical material is generated, which becomes the basis for the further project and is condensed into a theatrical performance as well. Dealing and reflecting about one own's biography enables a distance between the participants and the content. This allows the players to take on new perspectives, creating thus new impulses for revising the concept of life and self.

When different cultures come into contact, ignorance and misunderstandings can lead to a certain potential for conflict. This is exactly where biographical theatre tries to take preventive action and to raise awareness. The goal of biographical theatre can be set to encourage people from different cultures to exchange ideas move or create intercultural encounters and dialogues, by expressing their own experiences and feelings.

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