

The Askov Model I Theatre in Intercultural Education

Henning Dochweiler (Askov Højskole, Denmark)

Aims

From November, 1, 2000 through May, 15, 2001 (26 weeks + Christmas break), the theatre line of Askov Højskole (Denmark) consisted of 12 students from Denmark (4), Spain (2), France (2), Germany (3) and Italy (1). It was instructed at least 14 lessons a week, including a two week introduction to the Danish language and society. The main teacher of the group was Anna Himmelstrup, herself a graduate from Glasgow Royal Academy of Drama and Music. She was assisted part time by drama teacher and actor Jesper H. Larsen and by mr Allan Agerbo from our partner organisation AOF.

The aim of the course was to form a group of young Europeans to learn about drama and theatre and to produce a play completely on their own on adolescence and the problems of getting a grip of identity, group belonging and cultural background in modern society.

The process of learning dramatical means of expression and simultaneously refining the only common language – English – provoked many confrontations in the group building and discussions on the process. Instruction included improvisation, stunt, Mike Leigh's play method, work on monologues, building up a character and text analysis.

Contents and Methods

From January 2001, the work concentrated on the main purpose, writing and rehearsing a performance under the guidelines of the Grundtvig programme, refining the pronunciation and planning the tour at the same time.

To help build up the dialogues, the students went through a number of exercises, reading of youth literature and producing sketches relating to their own experiences with adolescence and building up relationships. A special note was of course the emphasis on the confrontation of own identity with that of other cultures. In this respect the teacher Anna Himmelstrup succeeded in creating a number of challenging scenarios that really set off discussions – and sometimes confrontations and even crises.

A special opportunity of making observations was the group of young foreigners simultaneously studying Danish language and culture at the school. The group consisted of students from the Czech Republic, Lithuania, Albania, Bosnia/Hercegovina, Russia, Japan and Venezuela. These students contributed to the making of the play both by offering their own observations on the behaviour and attitudes of the young Danes (certainly not only flattering to these) and by their own group building – of which they were only conscious, it seemed, through the dialogue with the theatre students. The importance of this dialogue to the school as an entity – reaching from the seating order at table via eating and not least drinking habits to religious discussions (Catholics vs Muslims especially) should not be underestimated.

Gradually, a number of dialogues were created and tried on stage. The task of refining the English wording and combining them into a meaningful play was undertaken by Anna Himmelstrup. After a number of discussions and changes after criticism, the play had a name "WHO IS AFRAID OF THE WOLF?" and the final intensive rehearsing including the making of sets and costumes could start.

Simultaneously one of the German students in conjunction with the principal and his class, "the cultural mediation line" started planning the tour in details. The idea was to present the English spoken play to young Danes and foreigners at other Folk High Schools and then embark on a bus tour through Central Europe, again with young English speaking people as the target group. The reason for this geographical decision was that the principal, Henning Dochweiler, for 13 years had been director of the Danish Cultural Institute in Vienna, covering all Central Europe, and consequently had many good contacts.

Best Practices

The play premiered in Askov on April, 25, 2001, before our own students and was a massive success. There is a recording of the play (duration 55 minutes) and a brief description in English in the programme (enclosed). Of course, the play itself was followed up by a discussion of the contents among all students at the school. The problem of group belonging or not and mobbing again proved crucial to young people. After Askov, the play was performed in Austria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, Czech Republic, Slovak Republic, and Hungary until it was shown a last time in Askov before a new group of students on May, 14. All in all 11 performances in 6 countries, including all 6 capitals, more than 1,200 persons, in less than 3 weeks. Each performance was followed by a discussion in English with the group of students watching. All the audiences were English speaking students assembled in cultural centres or gymnasias, altogether an estimated 1,200 persons. In fact, the success criterion was the willingness of the audience to embark on discussions – the greatest ones occurring in Budapest and in Bratislava, where there was also a remarkable interest from the media, including TV.

Evaluation

The difficulties of this project were observed especially in the beginning, due to the different backgrounds and attitudes to the learning situation in a liberal, non-formal residential school, where you stay rather closely together for half a year. But exactly these initial difficulties proved to be of great importance to the final outcome, being part of the process and thus of the result. In our experience, however, there can be no doubt that a project of this kind requires a strong teacher, who does not only have a professional background as a drama teacher and who also commands English very well – but most important: who can mediate, obtain the confidence of the young people and create a positive allround environment.

Services

There are videotapes available of the theatre performance and the film: please contact Askov Højskole, Maltvej 1, DK-6600 Vejen, or e-mail askov@grundtvig.dk.