

## **“Free Mind - Forum Theatre with Underaged Unaccompanied Asylum Seekers“**

### **Objectives**

“Free Mind“ was designed to contribute to a group and community building process as a basis for cultural expression and identity development, using theatre as a tool for empowerment and medium for the public voicing of personal concerns and interests. The joy of acting, combined with creativity, were intended to translate into a change in perspective; theatre performance and role development were to facilitate the expansion of psycho-social abilities. By trying out courses of action on stage, the participants were enabled to develop new options for resolving everyday problems and conflicts. Moreover, they were induced to develop responses to xenophobic and racist acts encountered in everyday life, whether as victims or witnesses.

### **Content**

Racial discrimination and exclusion from (or within) the labour market, including job search problems, emerged as the key themes for juvenile immigrants. Another area addressed concerned xenophobic excesses in everyday life and in public (football, shopping, disco, tram). Language problems and communication difficulties were other important issues to these youths.

### ***Target group***

The “Free Mind“ forum theatre project was aimed at asylum seekers below legal age (male and female) from African and Asian countries who were supported by the "Caritas" organization.

### ***Process***

From October 2000 until May 2001, the group members met once a week to develop the creative shape of their everyday experiences as immigrants in Austria. In addition, three public Forum Theatre performances were produced.

“Free Mind“ covered the following phases:

#### ***Group building and play***

Here the focus was placed on trust and confidence building, body perception and expression exercises and rhythm/improvisation training.

#### ***Scenic exploration of everyday experience***

The participants' own everyday experiences as young immigrants in Austria were transformed using the scenic methods of theatre pedagogy. Problems, conflicts and discrimination situations were staged in the form of images and scenes.

### *Development of Forum Theatre scenes*

Key themes and problems encountered by immigrants on a day-to-day basis were processed into Forum Theatre scenes. The rehearsal work gave rise to an in-depth exploration and development of the characters involved and their behaviour.

### *Performances and dialogue*

Interactive Forum Theatre performances were used to try out and reflect upon alternatives to the characters' on-stage behaviour. This approach stimulated public dialogue and discourse.

### *Reflection and implementation of findings*

Both individual and collective reflection processes were initiated to determine how the findings from the play-acting experience and baseline dramatic situations might be useful in the everyday world and could be translated into real-life behaviour.

## **Methods**

### **Forum Theatre**

See above.

### **Methodical elements**

#### *Physical and expression exercises based on theatre pedagogy*

Trust-building games, physical and emotional expression training and exercises aimed at improving motion and spontaneity which enabled the young participants to have fun, come out of their shell, forget everyday concerns and develop an enhanced sense of their body and gestures.

#### *Live statue and improvisation theatre*

Experiences gathered in the host country are depicted as postures and live statues which are then refined and correlated. Brief extemporized scenes make these postures and images come alive. These methods give room for a scenic exploration of, and a process of "coming to terms" with, various everyday issues and problems that are difficult to put into words. Key experiences expressed in stage images were those of helplessness, oppression and discrimination. The subject was thus presented in a form permitting it to be sensually experienced, graphically witnessed and re-lived.

#### *Role work*

Theatre work comprises a variety of methods and techniques for deepening prior experience and translating it into characters for the plot. This enabled the young participants to adopt roles hitherto alien to them, and to try out what it feels like to be on the other, powerful side for once. The role-study process also prompted participants to project themselves into, and critically examine, specific situations emotionally and cognitively.

### **Effects and benefits / Best Practice**

#### *Offering a positive counter-reality*

Play-based and dramatic physical and expression exercises enabled the young participants to come out of their shell, have fun, forget their day-to-day worries, and improve their sense of body and gestures. In the difficult life situation in which these juveniles find themselves, this positive counter-reality is of great importance. The work provided them with meaning and a goal, as one participant phrased it: "Before theatre we were lazy, didn't have so much to do ... It was an opportunity for me to shed all that weight, to clear my mind."

### *Experiencing a sense of unity*

The Forum Theatre project became a fixture for these juveniles, allowing them to build a group awareness, make new contacts while strengthening existing ones. "We came from many countries, but we were only a single country."

### *Experiencing power and self-determination*

The juveniles were enabled to adopt roles hitherto alien to them, and to try out what it feels like to be on the other, powerful side for once. The role-study process also prompted participants to project themselves into, and critically examine, specific situations at both the emotional and cognitive level. One participant put it thus: "I liked the role-playing, even acting the part of the racist. I really felt touched by this, because there are many problems here." The performances also helped strengthen the young people's self-esteem, encouraging them to speak up and make their point even in the face of a crowd. "Before, like when there was a problem, I got really withdrawn. Now I am able to really say what I think, and to say what matters at that moment".

### *Speaking out in public*

Ultimately, the chance for the juveniles to make their issues public via the medium of the performances was highly important. Metaphorically speaking, they were provided with a mouthpiece they otherwise lacked. As a result, most of them felt they were helping to make their situation better understood - a conclusion borne out by the audience's active participation. An exchange of views took place in which the spectators gained insights into the situation of these youths while the latter were able to discover uncertainty and ignorance on the part of the 'locals'. "If we stage this play with all the parts in it, people can understand it well, better than if we just say it ... I hope that people will think differently about us after seeing the play, that the negative image will go away."

### *Expanding the potential for action in discriminatory situations*

From interviews conducted with the young migrants one year later it emerged that some of them have indeed expanded their range of responses to xenophobic or conflict-based situations. Their ability to understand or assess social situations on the whole had improved. "Yes, I've had one such experience where I wanted to get into a disco with a friend and they refused to let us in. I explained to the man that this was racism and he wasn't doing the right thing, and I started to discuss this with him".

## **Evaluation**

The objectives of the project - group and community building, positive cultural identity development, empowerment, expanded situation handling competence, ability to speak out in public - were achieved to a very great extent. This was confirmed by research conducted as part of a thesis (cf. Nussold 2002). In retrospect it would have been desirable to carry on with this type of work, making it a permanent feature in the psycho-social care of unaccompanied underaged refugees. Apart from the above effects and benefits for participants, the following boundary conditions were identified as essential for a project of this nature:

The theatre work must be carried out continuously over a period of at least half a year. The project process should be communicated to the caregiving teams, who should be able to provide feedback,

Participation in the project must be absolutely voluntary.

During rehearsals and performances, the group must be supported by people they know.

For their rehearsal and performance work, participants should receive a nominal fee "to cover expenses". The amount of that fee should be contractually defined and made contingent on actual participation. The binding nature of the commitment will thus be underscored, and a visible token of appreciation is created.

### ***Participant and spectator comments***

#### Young refugees and support team members:

"Well, the strongest scene of them all, the one that hurt real deep, was the one with the tramway passengers where they called me a drug dealer. And then there was the situation where a passenger said he wasn't going to sit down beside that negro, it's the lack of respect you get."

"In the job search scene, or in the tram where they called this person a drug dealer, you got interventions which were very good and which made me feel I'd learnt a lesson."

"We have learnt very many things. I think much of it will stay in our lives."

"Sure I found wishes expressed here, namely that everybody is respected, that regardless of colour, everybody is equal before the law, especially in Austria. If the Austrians show some respect too, then I won't have any problems here either."

"The most important thing in my view, really, is that they were able to convey something here, that they are not victims but people with abilities." (Support team member).

#### Performance spectators:

"And I was rather amazed how good these youths were, how accurately they depicted some details. Despite the serious subject, I enjoyed this evening enormously ... Incredible how positions can change unintentionally. Each intervention develops its own dynamics that you cannot escape."

"I find this form of theatre really fascinating, and the scenes keep coming back to me. Today I often wonder how I would respond in specific situations. What would I do? Would I keep my mouth shut, or would I get involved?"

## **Service**

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