

Theatre of the Oppressed

Enhancing cultural awareness and empowerment in multicultural life

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Overview

Idea

Two separate projects, "ÖNORM" and "Free Mind", were designed to examine our awareness of our own and other cultures and to address the issues of racism and xenophobia in everyday life. The projects aimed at allowing people develop new forms of coexistence while becoming more sensitive to problems which arise when different cultures meet.

Objectives

Both "ÖNORM" and "Free Mind" aimed at discovering and trying out new perspectives and options for ways of tackling "everyday racism" in a confident and constructive manner. The projects were designed to sensitize people to encounters between different cultures, to help them identify suitable modes of approaching people from other backgrounds and to develop possible ways of intervening and showing civil courage in everyday situations of racism.

Target groups

"ÖNORM" was aimed mainly at Austrians – both the actors and spectators were mainly "indigenous". The participants in "Free Mind" were predominantly unaccompanied children who were asylum seekers from African and Asian countries. Their everyday lives in Austria are rife with discriminatory experiences. The performances were attended by Austrians and immigrants.

Process and method

Methodologically, the two projects relied chiefly on "Theatre of the Oppressed" as developed by Augusto Boal, specifically in his "Forum Theater" concept. Forum Theatre is a form of politically educative participative improvisation theatre in which the spectators can try out plot alternatives to a given scene of conflict or oppression. The methods of "Theatre of the Oppressed" start out from personal experiences, which are then processed and transformed in a creative and action-oriented manner. Due to this close-to-life approach, the experiences and insights gained in the exploration process become available for use in everyday (intercultural) life. Work on the "ÖNORM" project extended over the period from October 2000 until November 2001. The "Free Mind" project was implemented from October 2001 until May 2002.

Contents

Both projects addressed discrimination and racism, starting from the participants' personal experience. Criteria deemed important for our understanding of these phenomena included both the emotional circumstances of individuals and existing

social structures. Another key aspect was the development of new, satisfactory alternatives for action in an intercultural context.

“ÖNORM“ additionally dealt with the question of how a witness to discrimination and racism can become involved and show civil courage. In the “Free Mind” project the process of coming to terms with personal experiences of discrimination and racism was a priority subject. In addition it emphasised the building of the community and positive, trusting relationships.

Success

“ÖNORM“ proved successful in identifying diverse forms of racism. The audience discussed personal experiences as well as their own discriminatory behaviour, fears and uncertainties. The methods of Forum Theatre provide ample identification opportunities, but also sufficient distance to permit deep emotional involvement and a high degree of openness on the spectators’ part. Based on these experiences, it was possible to develop civil courage in a variety of discriminatory and racist situations. In addition various action models were developed, tried out, and integrated into the personal behaviour pattern. The form of work used during the “Free Mind” project yielded a high degree of direct support for people exposed to massive discrimination and racism.

Project implementation

The “ÖNORM“ and “Free Mind“ projects were carried out by InterACT – Werkstatt für Theater und Soziokultur.

“ÖNORM – Forum Theatre on Everyday Racism“

Objectives

“ÖNORM“ was designed to render diverse, even subtle forms of everyday racism and xenophobia visible and comprehensible. The project aimed at stimulating a process of “coming to terms” with the participants’ fear of what is different or strange and with their inherent xenophobic traits and prejudices. The underlying idea was to expose the potentials for conflict in intercultural coexistence. In addition a space was to be provided in which various forms of civil courage could be creatively developed: participants were able to “try out” responses to everyday xenophobic or racist acts and attitudes. Furthermore they were able to explore ways of actively defusing escalating processes that would result in exclusion and violence towards “foreigners”. Moreover, “ÖNORM” was intended to help develop new constructive models of how people from different cultures can live together.

Contents

The scene was set in a supermarket in late afternoon. People were doing their shopping. The normal course of events was disrupted when a woman of very different appearance, wearing a yashmak, entered the scene. The ensuing encounters revealed the uncertainties, fears, ideologies, hidden desires and longings.

Target groups

ÖNORM was aimed chiefly at Austrians of both sexes. The underlying idea was that “normal people” shape our normal everyday lives and therefore bear considerable responsibility for the changes taking place in society.

Process

The ÖNORM production was developed from October 2000 to May 2001 by Austrian actors in co-operation with immigrants, immigrant counsellors and antiracism workers. "ÖNORM" was performed eight times between May 2001 and November 2002. A half-day workshop following one of the performances provided an opportunity for further exploration of the subject. "ÖNORM" comprised several sections, built one upon the other:

Scenic transformation of experiences

Individual experiences of alienness, prejudices and xenophobia - both as victims and "perpetrators" - were expressed, scenically transformed, explored and reflected.

Exploration of the phenomena of everyday racism

Building on previous work, diverse forms and attitudes of racism and xenophobia were examined in detail, distilled into stock characters and presented on stage in focused form.

Scenic development

From the interplay of roles, a Forum Theatre scene was developed which summarised the aspects and elements of everyday racism explored so far. Rehearsals provided an opportunity for an in-depth analysis and discussion of the roles, which are then refined into "authentic characters".

Performances and dialogue

During performances, diverse options for handling racism and xenophobia were tried out; the consequences of each course of action were perceived and witnessed directly. Experiences were reflected upon and processed through discussion. New perspectives were developed, and the content viewed was transferred to the level of everyday life.

Further development

The experience gained in the context of the performances, plus current political events, provided an impetus to refine the play for further productions.

Methods

Forum Theatre

Forum Theatre is a form of political and educational participative theatre. It provides a framework for exploring different behaviours, alternative courses of action and strategies in a stage-performed sequence of scenes. Oppression, power and violence are key themes in Forum Theatre work.

A scene is presented to illustrate how social reality is perceived. It has an unsatisfactory, unresolved ending. The audience is invited to substitute roles which appear particularly powerless, perplexed or oppressed. During successive performances of the scene, members of the audience come on stage and try out the proposed solutions to the problem or conflict on stage. The effects of their actions are rendered transparent in the process as action and cognition are jointly developed and reflected upon in this "dramatic laboratory". Forum Theatre eliminates the boundary lines between the actors and audience; spectators become participants who bear responsibility for the dramatic events on stage. All participants are free to comment on the presented scenes, and may avail themselves of the power of the word and/or plot to demonstrate what they would want to see changed.

Developed by Brazilian Augusto Boal Forum Theatre is one of the methods and forms referred to as "Theatre of the Oppressed".

Methodological elements

Living statues and improvisation theatre

Personal experiences of foreignness and prejudice are expressed in the form of physical postures and statues, which are then processed and placed into context. Brief extemporized passages make these postures and images come alive. The actors thus develop an emotional and physical relation to the subject, simultaneously tapping a source for the further development of the play. This approach provides an excellent peg for the exploration of the subject, expanding angles while helping identify a diversity of connecting links. Living statue theatre and improvisation theatre are highly suited for addressing the present themes, even within constrained time frames.

Systemic (stage) arrangements

Individual characters representing attitudes and aspects relevant to the subject are arranged according to people's own internal image. From the different spatial positions and experiences of the characters it is possible to develop and illustrate relationships, effects of actions, event flows and dynamics in a sensually perceivable and visible form.

Such systemic arrangements add to our understanding of overall causal relationships; the interrelatedness of individual positions or elements begins to make sense in a manner not previously perceived. Working with this method thus enables the participants to process the previously developed aspects and attitudes of racism (and their interconnections) into a coherent sequence of scenes.

Development of attitudes and roles

Theatre production offers numerous methods and techniques for deepening and transforming prior experience with given attitudes into characters for the play. Work on the characters proceeds in the "field of tension" between one's experience of identity and foreignness. The actors thus gain a wealth of experience and insight into their self in the "foreign" role and, at times, into the "foreign" aspects of what used to be familiar. Moreover, the role development process leads to more detailed research, exploration and discourse.

Research, external consulting and scenic coaching

Immigrants, immigrant counsellors and antiracism activists were involved in the development and rehearsals. They participated by taking the stage, provided feedback on the effects of material developed so far, contributed information and suggestions for content and clarified and deepened the links to social reality. The role work induces the actors to engage in more detailed research and heightens their everyday sensibility and readiness for exploration and discourse.

Effects and benefits

Illustrating the dynamics of exclusion and escalation

Forum Theatre is very successful in illustrating and recreating, in an emotionally accessible manner, the interaction between individuals and the group and the inherent dynamics of events. The power embedded in the system never ceases to amaze, but neither does the ability of the individual to change the system's workings so that events will take an altogether unexpected, unplanned course.

Explaining the complexity and contradictory nature of attitudes, views and behaviour

The many-faceted nature of the subject, the intention and effects of human behaviour and the gap between expectation and reality are rendered highly evident to both the actors and the audience. Views and attitudes are often ambiguous or inherently contradictory for example the "curious onlooker" is torn between her fear of foreigners and an exotically inspired, instrumentalizing curiosity. A similar effect emerges in the role of the "saviour", who basically views foreigners as victims who deserve our help

because they are oppressed. For all that, he defines himself via his helping role, needs his counterpart to bolster his self-esteem, thus becoming an agent of escalation himself. And indeed, it has been found time and again that basically "anti-racist" or "xenophile" behaviour can aggravate conflict situations.

Expanding perspectives and enlarging scope for action

The development of strategies for changing the scene and solving the conflict opens up previously unknown views and perspectives of intercultural coexistence. This gives rise to a rich array of alternatives for action in those roles which appear powerless, perplex or oppressed during the scene. Interestingly, young people in particular find it easy to take up a part and defend themselves against discriminatory and racial words and deeds, exhibiting a lot of power and commitment as they do so.

Developing civil courage and promoting involvement

Successful action rehearsals in near-real-life situations stimulate courage, create self-confidence that can be applied in reality, and thereby increase the individual's willingness to take a stand. Thus, Forum Theatre work promotes a "sustainable" form of civil courage.

Enabling high emotional involvement

Coming to terms with the subject through action rather than words is a process that remains close to life and authentic experience. Problems are handled against their actual emotional background. At the same time, the spectators involvement is intense, if only because the audience thinks and feels with the protagonists. In addition, Forum Theatre offers very different possibilities for participation - from discussing what one has seen and witnessed to actually taking the stage in a production. Each of these modes of participation provides an opportunity for thorough exploration of the subject. Regardless of the chosen role, new perspectives will be developed and new options for behaving in accordance with one's own values will emerge. The result is an improved understanding of others.

Evaluation

The stated objectives - enhanced sensitivity for different cultures, development of new perspectives and options for taking action, promotion of civil courage, identification of suitable modes to encounter people from other cultures - were attained to a high degree. It deserves to be noted that the amount of time and resources which went into the project was fairly high. On the other hand, the integration of public authorities and other, similar institutions was not given adequate attention at the designing stages. To implement a project such as ÖNORM, the following boundary conditions are important:

The time requirement for play development and rehearsals amounts to about 120 - 150 hours. Time and funding on this scale must be available.

From the actors, a project of this type requires open-mindedness, curiosity, and the personal willingness to tackle a broad range of aspects and contradictions.

The play and project management should have ample experience with Forum Theatre methodology. We recommend that the leading individuals should initially attend a number of workshops as participants and work on other projects before embarking on the managing their own project.

Immigrant support workers and immigrant associations should be integrated at the earliest possible stage. Performance contexts and areas to be addressed ought to be considered and defined in advance, as early as during project development.

Comments on “ÖNORM“

Comments from actors:

"Acting in this play has also changed my personal attitude towards Islam and veiled women. For one thing, you simply learn so much more about this religion and the tradition of the chador. This new knowledge makes you take a more differentiated view on the subject ... The incredible Western arrogance of assuming to know best what is good for "women" (both Muslim and in general) was brought home to me by this play and by my acting in it. Western behaviour is deemed "normal" and desirable, the ultimate yardstick by which anything different is measured. I have remained critical of the chador, but I've also learnt that I see the subject through Western eyes and don't really have an insight ..."

"My image of (a) different culture(s) has shifted, it has become broader and multi-faceted, especially with regard to Islam".

"There was an enormous amount of audience input when it came to searching for solutions, and a deep sense of gratitude for being provided with this 'experimental space'."

"It's fairly easy to be tolerant when I'm not concerned myself, or when tolerance becomes mere indifference."

"There has been a change in my perception, brought about specifically by talking to self-confident Muslim women who did a great job defending their views. Other cultures have really different standards, one shouldn't approach them with a simplistic 1:1 attitude."

"My awareness of the problem has risen as we developed and rehearsed the play, even with regard to our own cultural rules and standards."

Comments from spectators:

"I was anxious to see whether anybody would show the courage to take a part that would turn the scene around. People were timid at first, but their fear eventually subsided and many new aspects emerged".

"Amazing to see how the spectators courageously took part in the scene and co-determined its course. Some stuff was really funny, some of it was harsh criticism, mostly it made you pause and ponder."

"Of course there are films and other plays dealing with this issue. The difference is that here you walk away wondering how you can help. You don't have a guilty conscience, don't go home depressed. I was just full of this urge to get involved."

"I had a good time, I examined much of this in my mind, and quite a few things became suddenly clear to me. How many misunderstandings actually shape our daily lives, and how difficult it is to change an ongoing process even if you know exactly what your views are."

"Proving myself and finding out that there's nothing really to fear, and sensing the resignation that often attaches to the subject and the theme of this play - these were the key points for me."

"What fascinated me was the openness of the audience, their willingness to get up and join the action. Also, the pleasure of working this out, acting in a play. Being able to try out contradictory courses of action, without having to think of the consequences or feel anxiety, seems to be a highly suitable means of triggering reflection processes."

"The way they joined in a circle at the end of the event, now that was pure genius. You were made to raise questions, understand and reflect upon the issues - as opposed to being sent home in a stupor, full of questions and hypotheses. You learnt about the feelings these actors had in the various scenes. Or else, you could just lean back and let it take effect on you."

"No right or wrong. No guilty conscience. Such performances always have a long-term effect on me, they keep entering my memory in bits and pieces subconsciously, and I think I'm not the only one to feel this."