

Case study: Unseen theatre

NAME OF ORGANISATION

The work took place in the school for visually impaired children “Louis Braille” in Sofia, but was organised by drama professor Velimir Velev not by a specific organisation.

PROJECT NAME

“The shadow of my soul” – a theatrical performance of shadows creating animated images. The actors are visually impaired children from the school.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The description is taken from the master’s thesis without any changes and has been translated in full. The text is an interview, which Ina Gerginova took and presented within her master’s thesis.

„The truth is that one day (in 2005) I met a friend on the street, the interpreter Blajo Nikolich, who told me: “Do you want to work with a group of blind children?”. I don’t know why, but I did not even think, I simply said “yes” and that was the beginning. I went to the school (School for visually impaired children “Louis Braille”). I met the vice headmaster, there was no specific project. We agreed that I would come once or twice per week to work with the children on things related to movement and theatre. I did this for free, sometimes I did not even have enough money to put gas in my car in order to get there, but I did. I had no idea what exactly I should do with them. During our first meeting I started with a warming up exercise, I told them: “Let’s wave our hands energetically in the air” – they only moved their fingers, bound with “invisible ties” of fear. For me this was a turning point for me, I wanted to help them feel free before the unknown darkness, full of fear and dangers, to feel happy, to have their flight, “to see the space as bats”. It was not easy – they could not imitate, how was I going to show them something... I was aware that I had to find some kind of approach, which to follow. I did not think. Probably if I had given too much thought I would have become too afraid to do anything at all. I had no special pedagogy skills – I simply had grown to love them too much. Probably this helped me or something out of me, or may be it was God. The pedagogical ideas simply popped out in my mind. Led by the children’s needs, I started to formulate exercises, unconsciously, I was simply seeking solutions to obstacles as they appeared. I wanted to trigger another type of perceptions and this led me to the use of various methodologies and exercises, which I mastered during my time in China and which I reworked for myself in a way, making them serve me in my drama work. I used a broader spectrum of my skills, I transformed them in a way, which made them useful for the children and to help them overcome their problems. This was an intensive process, which took a year, and from once weekly our meetings became more frequent. After the preliminary preparation, in the process of work and aiming at this “spatial vision”, I started giving them tasks requiring from them to bond among each other, through material objects, I used threads, various objects, I came up with ideas how they can “manipulate” each other from the distance, (which later on led me to the idea about the marionettes). In order to make their task even harder I really gave them one puppet each – I wanted to see how well they could manage – this is a system, which is very hard to master even for academy students, who have been accepted on the basis of their talents and skills. The fact that the children already knew what to do with the puppets came to me as a great surprise. They could “see” the dolls, lead them, make them react with a look (something, which the involved children do not do in their life themselves, because for them it is not necessary to turn to the man they are speaking with; if they hear a noise, they also do not turn their

heads in its direction, but experience it in perfect static), their dolls were alive. Without being able to see, these children managed the twenty threads in a way, which would hardly be possible even for us without visually controlling the movements of the dolls – which thread we pulled, what moved – was it the arm or the leg. We can see all this, they – cannot. The children learned to work surprisingly well also with the position of the doll in space, with words and gestures. Later on the school administrators asked me to create a piece with two marionettes and when we demonstrated it in the youth theatre (“Nikolay Binev”), it blew up the audience, it was exceptionally moving and the fact that the children led the dolls seemed unbelievable to the audience. On this day the children asked me to promise them that we would not stop working – they had sensed that no one any longer pitied them, but on the contrary, they were all appreciated. They wanted to keep going.

Then I understood that without much thought I had started something, which I cannot walk away from. I did not have the heart to and I also felt good about it. This work was like medicine for my soul. The children wanted to do something even more impossible and then I thought that the thing most distant to manage is not a threaded puppet, but a puppet the threads of which are light beams, i.e. the shadow. That is how the idea about the theatre of shadows with the blind was born. I told the children that this is really impossible. If you are not able to visually monitor on the screen what is taking place with the shadow, there is no way to create it, not to mention to enliven and animate it. They wanted to try nevertheless. I explained and I did exercises in order to help them understand what is the light and how the shadow is born out of it, how it grows or diminishes and how it moves in relation to the distance and the positioning of the light source; how they can create various images by using their own hands and bodies, how these images can come to life, can start breathing and become enlivened; how to create a “living” bird out of shadows, to show how it pecks, how it flies, how it perches – all things they have never seen but have to recreate with their bodies and hands on stage... „Mission impossible” if you think about it – and thank God I did not give it much thought, I simply worked with them... In 2009 we created the “The shadow of my soul” – a play of shadows, which included a lot of visual impressions, which the visually impaired created by painting on glass and projected on the big screen on the shadows themselves. In stead of hiding behind the screen, the actors were in front of it and the audience could clearly see how these boys and girls were creating and animating shadows without so much as even looking at what they were doing. It appeared that for visually impaired people to create and animate shadows through the movement of their bodies, relying on their inner “vision” and intuition is something quite new! During the world theatre festival for the blind and visually impaired (“Blind in theatre”) in Zagreb, Croatia, specialists from all over the world could not believe that our boys and girls with zero vision are able to create these images alone – the audience was speechless, they could see that it is happening but still it seemed impossible. Voin Perich, director of the festival, stated: “Their performance is exceptional! No one has ever done something like this before ... This young theatre is a serious theatrical phenomenon and could become a trade mark of Bulgaria, known all over the world.” When we returned to Bulgaria, Yuliya Ognyanova said: “The unseen theatre – this is a phenomenon! The fact that for the first time in the history of theatre visually impaired actors are creating a theatre of shadows is a phenomenon, but the most unbelievable thing is something else – the art, which these blind actors are creating on stage is demonstrating to us that they are the ones who can really see, and we are the visually impaired. They don’t need our pity, on the contrary we need their help in order to see and awaken our morality in this spiritless time! This makes them a phenomenon!” In the youth theatre “Nikolay Binev” the performance was played for three seasons. It was an absolute success. Perfect strangers would linger in the foyer in order to share their thoughts: „I have just understood that I am a happy person! Well, yeah, what do I have to complain about, what is my problem, I can achieve everything?... Strange, I tried to think of when was the last time when I supported or helped someone to achieve something good just like that“. I could hear various sentences all in this line of thinking. Yuliya herself made me promise I would describe my methodology of work, but I have still not fulfilled my promise. It is hard for me right now to explain in a few words the specifics of my work, it gathers the twenty years of my theatrical and life experience,

plus a whole ocean of unique approaches, which were born from the contact with them – the visually impaired children, in order for them to become “conductors of energy” and open and sharpen their senses, to learn how to “move as water”, to “lean on the air”, to see the images they are creating, despite the lack of vision. I was expecting that in the course of time assistants would start appearing in order for me to train them and pass on the method to others. Unfortunately this did not happen. Two documentaries were created for the troupe: „The light shadow” by Boris Zafirov and „The unseen theatre” by Dora Petrova. We received personal support from many people, but not from the institutions. The director of the film “The unseen theatre”, Dora Petrova, even collected funds through its show in the Euro Cinema, which enabled us to purchase projectors for the performance, because up to that moment we were renting them every time. The youth theatre was not giving us their projectors. We also had problems with the hall. Finally I understood that we need a constant “home”. The visually impaired more than any other groups need their own, constant, big enough space, where they can move without the danger of physical trauma and Injuries. Each shifting and change in the environment or moving to another place requires time for new adaptation, overcoming the stress, need for becoming acquainted and accustomed with the environment and the hall. The theatrical props and everything related to the work also needs a constant space for storage – this way the visually impaired actors will be able to find and organize their stage work environment, instead of remaining in the helpless position of ones being served, waiting to receive the necessary tools, equipment and stage setting. To go even further: I am convinced that those who want to meet again and again with the performances of these hearty young people also need a constant stage for the “Unseen theatre”, where they can come and see their plays. I will end with the words of Plamen Daskalov, the Bulgarian cultural attaché in Zagreb. After the world premier of “The shadow of my soul” he stated: «Every week here are played performances from all over the world, but I had not seen anything like this before in my life! I am absolutely sure that after this performance everybody left the theatre with cleaner, lighter and better souls!» An actor from Theater Breaking Through Barriers, USA, Nicholas Viselli, after the performance officially shared: «This performance completely changed my mind!» The festival director, Voin Perich, actually added to the sentence: „... This young theatre is a serious theatrical phenomenon and could become a trade mark of Bulgaria, known all over the world.“, added „...If of course, you, the Bulgarians, don’t leave it unsupported, to die!” I still believe we are not going to allow this to happen. I have no idea how we are going to manage this, but I am positive that we are obliged to do it, because by supporting them, we would actually help ourselves!”

AIMS

To create art together with the visually impaired young actors, to help them feel free in front of the unknown darkness, full of fear and dangers, to feel happy, to have their flight.

PARTICIPANTS

Children and young people from the school for visually impaired children in Sofia.

RECRUITMENT OF PARTICIPANTS

No special recruitment is reported.

FACILITATORS

Velimir Velev is an actor, producer, trainer of stage movement, mobile and contact improvisation, theatre of the masks, clown act, movement anthropology and actor mimics in the national academy of drama and film arts “Krastyo Sarafov”, creator and director of the “Unseen theatre”. The “Unseen theatre” is the first and only in the world history of human civilization troupe of blind actors, who are creating in the sphere of visual performance arts: the theatre of shadows, the puppet theatre, theatre of matter and the theatre of visual impression. The „Unseen theatre” has been created by Velimir Velev more than 6 years ago and is the result of 10 years of work with visually impaired young people – completely voluntary activity, away from social projects, target programs, without funding, without media (PR) coverage, work with a lot of love, soul and heart! On the basis of his 20 years of pedagogical and stage practice, only a few years after the start, Velev created a unique drama pedagogical system for work with visually impaired people, which created the “Unseen theatre”! Completely blind, with no visual control, relying on their inner “vision” and intuition, the actors are creating on huge screens, making and animating shadows, animating marionettes from a great distance with leads with tens of threads. These are skills, which are hard to be achieved even by a great part of the professional drama actors. The professional skills of the blind actors and the level of the art they are creating bring them far out and above the categories “theatre by people with disabilities” and “art therapy” and place them alongside the sighted professionals. The unseen theatre has been evaluated by the critics as a real phenomenon in professional drama.

PARTNERS/FUNDERS

There was no funding for this initiative.

OUTCOMES

As described above – theatrical performances that amaze both professionals and the general audience.

EVALUATION METHODS

Participation in festivals and amazing response from organisers, audience as well as from the children themselves – asking this type of activity to never stop.

EVIDENCE

Videos from the performances. Two documentaries were created for the troupe: „The light shadow” by Boris Zafirov and „The unseen theatre” by Dora Petrova.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

Nothing new in addition to what has been already reported in other case studies and/or in national/transnational reports.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR VISION

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Gerginova, Ina (2015) *Master's thesis on the topic "Dance and theatre in the creative group process as catalyst for development of the physical self of visually impaired young people"*, New Bulgarian University, Masters program, Scientific coordinator: prof. Georgi Arnaudov