

Healing Theatre

For 30 years I have been working as a speech formation teacher in several anthroposophically run curative education and social therapy institutions. At the Beatus Home in Seuzach, I am also allowed to lead a theatre group in addition to my speech support work.

Speech formation, with the help of the sounds of speech, the breath and the rhythmic-prosodic element, provides an essential basis. Another aspect is provided by drama therapy: “The stage as a place of freedom and play enables people to find their own performance, to write the drama of their lives themselves.” Lutz von Werder^[1] talks about the importance of the dramaturgical principles formulated by Aristotle with regard to their healing effect. “Catharsis, style, play and the experience of beauty” are at the centre. In short, this is about the mystery of transformation. Especially in a curative education context, the theme of transformation, expressed through the dramaturgical plot, should be central.

To bring full-length (one-hour) theatre production on stage with those “in need of soul care” requires special considerations and a specific approach. The plays should be exciting and entertaining. The actors must not be exposed in any way, but should appear authentic in their personalities. During the rehearsal of the play, they are allowed to grow beyond themselves and to expand and enrich their personal horizons and abilities.

There is great enthusiasm for theatre at the Beatus-Heim. When a new project is called for, there are about a dozen people who are eager to participate. All levels of ability are present – from the talented and articulate young lady with Downs Syndrome to the reserved and non-speaking young gentleman with autism. Everyone wants to be there. But how can the different talents be combined into a whole? It quickly becomes clear: we can forget about standard theatre and drama literature! The demands would be too great and there would be frustration. We want to get into the play quickly, find a suitable role for everyone and present an exciting play, a good story, a whole. Since all the players also have an awareness that they fulfil a certain “role” in everyday life because of their “disability”, they also experience other qualities within themselves that cannot be brought to bear in everyday life. The desire to “break out” is present, the willingness to live authentically into the adventure that the world could also be different than it appears in everyday structures.

This time the players had agreed on the “Devil with the Three Golden Hairs”. How do we get from a fairy tale to a play with dialogue? How are the different levels and talents of the players taken into account?

We start improvising little scenes. We immediately had the idea that the gypsy woman, who had prophesied to the king and is only mentioned in a subordinate clause in Grimm, could even play a leading role in our version. She should appear again and again as a connecting element, comment on the events and also take on a narrative function in silent scenes.

We quickly discovered a strong dramaturgical potential in the king’s encounter with the fortune teller. We began to improvise this scene, with text or silently with gestures. The king’s anger was contrasted with the serenity of the gypsy woman who sees through the king’s malice. Everyone was allowed to play this once and find different ways of expression. In the improvisation, sentences and dialogues that seemed appropriate were already found and written down. Here is an example of dialogue:

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Note:

[1] Lutz von Werder: *Lehrbuch des kreativen Schreibens* [Textbook of Creative Writing], Schibri-Verlag, Berlin 1993, p. 371ff.



Esmeralda:

*A special child is born in the kingdom today!
Everything comes easily to him.
One day your daughter will marry, beware!
Then your power will be over!*

King:

*I will not let him destroy me.
I seek him. The child must die!*

[the original German is in rhyming verse]

Similarly, we approached other climaxes from the narrative in a selective manner. Finally, after several months, a basic framework of the whole play, the key passages and climaxes, so to speak, came together. Everyone could identify with it, because it was mainly their own ideas (not made up!) that came from the

play. Now we were ready to determine the distribution of roles, because everyone should know exactly what they have to do in the further course of rehearsals and be able to practise plots and texts.

The second phase could begin, in which we elaborated and refined the scenes, closed the gaps. After nine months of rehearsals (one afternoon a week), the whole play was ready in concept. We had dialogues and play plots that were tailored to the talents of each individual and to be mastered.

Now the third phase could begin: Rehearsing the scenes, designing costumes, stage sets and props. We needed the props quickly, as they were necessary for practising the play's plots.

In individual rehearsals, the gestures and language were fine-tuned. Rehearsals of whole scenes and finally the complete play with costumes and lighting. Finally, the time had come and we could invite our audience. The play was received with great enthusiasm.

Therapeutically measurable results can be described on several levels - in an understanding cooperation within the acting troupe and beyond that in the development process of each individual. New linguistic and communicative skills were acquired, as well as skills in coping with everyday life and in social interaction.

