

Now for Europe!

Art director Sigrun Fritsch interviewed by Michael Kaiser (artistic director of Junges Theater Freiburg)

(...)Michael Kaiser: Is this description typical of how you arrived at themes for the projects in the first stage? The scope is indeed large - sometimes the performances were inspired by old sagas, sometimes very close to what the participants were actually going through at this moment in their lives.

Sigrun Fritsch: We always asked the participants: What's typical about the place you live in? What do you like about your hometown, what are the myths people know, what are the local legends? But sometimes it was the venue which provided the thematic framework. In Poland the railway station of Bytom was suggested for our performance. The station consists of two parts, one old and dilapidated and the other new and renovated. The old section was used day in, day out by the citizens to get from one part of town to another. The railway station as an "in-between" place, between past and present, a place of waiting, of farewells and of arriving - I found this fascinating. Luckily, this was also felt by the group when we visited the venue together.

In Sibiu, Romania, there were an incredible number of old, ramshackle buildings we would have liked to have used, but which proved to be too broken down or whose owners weren't willing to let us use them. At some point we discovered Astra Park, which happened to be next to an old building which I really wanted as a location for the performance. Astra was a cultural association in Sibiu in the 1920s, which was later forbidden for a long period and hadn't been reinstated until after the cold war. This was a great turning point theme for me, which I presented to the young people. Astra is related to terms such as light, cosmos and universe, which is why I brought along texts from "Cosmic Canticle" by Ernesto Cardenal. In this work, Cardenal asks mankind: How small are we and how big is what's out there? And the group totally went with it.

(...)

Michael Kaiser: I notice time and again in your descriptions that insecurity and the unknown are important parameters of the project. Is that what your work in this area stands for?

Sigrun Fritsch: When one has the financial freedom - which we fortunately had in this project - theatre for me can and must be socially relevant, and this on all levels. I subscribe to a work method marked by investigating on site and working with what we find there. But unlike purely documentary theatre, it's important to me that artistic impulses are set based on these preparations, developed further with the group and consequently a creative framework is formed in which something can happen.

(...)

Michael Kaiser: Is this also connected to the hope that these artistic processes will have an impact on the actual lives of the participants as well as on the towns and the audiences?

Sigrun Fritsch: Certainly. PAN.OPTIKUM specializes in making theatre for the public space. Indeed, in the moment of the experience, there is a very direct dialogue between the performers and the spectators. But in the public space, it is extremely difficult to generate the concentration required by theatre to conduct an intensive dialogue. In order to achieve this, one has to use specific tools of the trade. With my experience in this area, I tried to choose the locations of the projects in the first stage so as to enable this kind of exchange. This way of proceeding interests me artistically very much since I find it extremely fascinating that the venue remains in the memories of the participants in different ways as a result of the artistic application. An awareness of what a live moment can bring about is generated. Plus a sensitization of the perception of the public space occurs on all sides.

(...)

Michael Kaiser: In your descriptions of the two project stages it's clear that the step between the two was a giant one to take - from the sheltered first part to the highly professional production in stage two. Did you feel this pressure yourself, and did your ensemble feel it too?

Sigrun Fritsch: We felt this pressure - it was enormous - but none of the ensemble did. It was important to us that we not pass this on to the group. We can and must bear it and ensure that the performers are able to access the required tools of the trade. Another safety net during the performances was the fact that two of our choreographers were dancing with the group. If things got tricky, they could respond on the stage with their experience and support the ensemble. At the end of the day, these are mechanisms which one can only acquire and expand on with practice over the course of years. In this project I myself was surprised by how stable the ensemble became within a very short time and by how much potency it developed. I think it had a lot to do with the fact that in the development process we extended the boundaries of the individual participants - in keeping with the principle of "Crossing Lines": the actors had to dance and rap, the rappers had to dance, etc. As a result of the process, they experience what it's all about in the performing arts. I'm not interested in seeing what they're already capable of. Only as a result of this are they authentic, they remain alert and are truly "in the here and now".

The full article you may find from June 2018 in the book:
Power of Diversity, Theater der Zeit Verlag, Berlin