

History

„aufBruch“ ART PRISON CITY has been in existence for the past ten years, and it is a German theatre project of singular importance. Productions and presentations have been invited to a number of festivals, and through media attention at home and abroad the project's reputation has grown well beyond Germany.

„aufBruch“ is an artistic project that interacts with social focus points since its inception in 1997, working artistically with processes and interactions within society and politics. The main focus of our work is theatre projects with prison inmates, in the Berlin prison of Tegel alone more than 20 performances have been created over the years – sometimes linked with parallel performances in other more public spaces such as on Berlin's main square, Alexanderplatz, on a freight ship on the city's river Spree, or a short while ago in the the Law Courts of Berlin.

In 2000 „aufBruch“ created an international prison theatre festival in collaboration with Volksbuehne theatre and seven Berlin prisons. For the first time in Germany theatremakers in prison and other artists from all over Europe and the US came together, as well as politicians, criminal justice officers, prisoners, and academics from the social and cultural sciences. At that occasion also a number of exhibitions took place, and the first collaborative prisoners' website was inaugurated.

„aufBruch's“ most important invitations to festivals were „Tegel Alexanderplatz“ (based on parts of Alfred Döblin's novel ‚Alexanderplatz‘) at the international festival „Theater der Welt“ in Berlin 1999 and to the festival „politics in independent theatre“ in Stuttgart, the invitation of Beckett's „Endgame“ to the Berlin Beckett Festival 2000, the production of Peter Handke's „Offending the Audience“ for the German national lawyers' congress in 2002, as well as an invitation to the „timeless“ exhibition at New York's PS 1.

As part of the German-Russian cultural exchanges, in 2004 „aufBruch“ worked for nearly three months in a Russian prison camp near Moscow. A production based on Yevgeny Schwartz's „The Dragon“ was performed there by 25 young offenders to great international acclaim.

Within the European movement of prison theatre „aufBruch“ continues to play a leading role, following its involvement with the Prison Arts Network and the EU project „theatre and prison“ since the beginning; we continue to be committed to the further development of these fora. „aufBruch“ has also created a close collaboration and exchange with the San Quentin Drama Workshop in California, birthplace of the Prison Theatre movement.

In 2006 and 2007 we created the open-air performances „Nibelungen“ and „Robbers Goetz“ at the Tegel prison, a first in our prison theatre work as it posed a number of great structural demands on the prison institution. Over the past years we have continually increased the number of our productions, and the number of our visitors.

The hidden space

As is well known prison is a place of punishment and isolation for people who broke the law or who are violent criminals who threaten the safety of society. By doing so prison fulfills an important function by allowing the state to continue its work as a guardian for the wellbeing of all its citizens.

Therefore the prison also symbolises total control of that same state over the space of personal freedom. Prison is beyond general normality whilst at the same time exerting an important influence on it, not only because it is a concrete threat, but also because it symbolises the machine of the state which one cannot escape. It is in this way that prison

symbolises the potential for control of annihilation that society as a whole possesses over the individual, and in doing so it creates many metaphors for human cohabitation.

The performances stimulate a public debate about the relationship between prison and society, crimes, guilt and punishment, thereby supporting a link between the two parts based on convictions of human dignity, progressive democracy, and the rule of law. The unescapable reality and immediacy of the prison world sharpens the view on the world 'outside', and can thereby help to find new answers for the pressing questions of the function of theatre and art – a theatre that wants to be contemporary has to repeat this question over and over again.

But apart from this added value in terms of society, it is also the artistic value of the prison theatre genre which makes „aufBruch“ maintain its commitment to this field. A prisoner on stage is because of his individual biography immediately a dramatically interesting character, and through the combination of personality and dramatic text the performances acquire their unique authenticity and precision. Also classic dramatic material is immediately charged through the context of the prison and an ensemble of inmates, and a collective presence of prisoners creates an exemplary and aesthetically very intensive reality of a theatrical chorus.

Last but not least, there is also the very theatricality of the visit in the prison which becomes an integral part of the performance experience, thereby creating new levels of perception and reflection in the audience.

Aesthetics of „prisoners' theatre“

The aesthetics of „aufBruch's“ theatre are based on a strongly form-based approach with a chorus that is faced by the individual. This downright classical constellation is the main motor of the performances and is at the heart of our conceptual and practical approach.

The chorus is at the core and writes the scenes. The whole rehearsal process happens under the sharp eyes of the chorus. The fact that in prison there are only minimal personal spaces leads to a strong presence of personal themes within the chorus. These emerge during rehearsal and become part of the performance. It is only by being part of a mass that the individual can think of having a future. The individual is part of a group of people in the same situation, and it is only by accepting this same status on the stage that an ensemble of inmates can be created, thereby allowing theatre to happen. The chorus as a speaking, screaming, stomping, and downtrodden collective body speaks directly to the audience's subconscious, touching on individually stored fundamental information regarding violence and sexuality, but also touching on collective experiences such as war, epidemics and natural disasters. Through the collective presence of the speaking chorus a body of experience is created which allows the audience to place such associations into directly into the performance context, blazing a trail of closer experience of the everything that happens.

The chorus is faced by the hero, the mass is faced by an individual, and the style of choral speaking is counterpointed by the more individual actor work. Every performer is supported individually in each production, finding a place within the overall process according to his abilities.

It is only through the presence of the uniform and ritualised mass gestures of the chorus that the individual drama of the hero becomes possible. The hero contradicts the status quo that is supervised by god-like characters and that is executed by the chorus. Through his actions the hero is looking for an individual process of knowledge, which leads to his own annihilation. This annihilation of the individual hero, of the outsider, results in his re-integration into the collective body of the chorus. The mass absorbs the rule-breaker, be it in form of a myth when he 'dies', be it as someone who returns voluntarily to the fold, or maybe even as a new leader against the current representatives of power.

The conscious or unconscious actions of the hero that lead to his neutralisation, create social change that in turn benefits the chorus, the collective. The sacrifice of the hero is therefore often a central aspect of the performances created by „aufBruch“.

The performances of „aufBruch“ express cultural values on a level of myths, that is, on a holistic level. The main themes are the individual fates within myths of our history, such as the Nibelungen, Götze von Berlichingen or Atridenepos. However, for us myths don't only create a base of cultural self-perception, they also give us the key for the door through which people and societies have to go in order to be able to deal with future changes in our world.

The symbolic power and reality of the prison institution is not best related to through choosing plays or creating aesthetics based explicitly on the prison, but it comes about by itself through the expressive potential of the place. This not only justifies our work but it is also a constituent element in the creation of the special genre prison theatre.

Thus, it is in the combination of the theatrical opposition of chorus/individual with the specific prison situation that „aufBruch“ has created the conceptual base for its work. We also refer to certain expressionist and symbolist theatre traditions. This allows us to approach both Christian and ancient myths, creating a particularly strong social relevance for them. We certainly see relations to the work of other artists in the more recent history of German theatre such as Einar Schleef or Heiner Mueller.

The public interest

The high recognition factor and the specific aesthetics and expressive strengths of our prison productions are the reason for the noticeable long-term commitment of our audiences to our productions, and the continuing growth of audiences. All productions have always been sold out, despite our continued efforts to increase the number of shows and the number of seats available. But it is not only the numbers, but also the specific composition of our audiences which is of special interest. Generally speaking there are three groups of audience members: inmates and their relatives and friends, people who attend for reasons of social or political commitment, and general theatre goers.

For members of the first group the most important thing is contact with their relatives or friends, even if it happens only through the medium of theatre. The price inmates are prepared to pay for this is a six/seven week rehearsal process during which they have to grapple with themes which for the most part are completely new for them. The same can be said for the audience group of relatives who often deal with certain themes for the first time, or even relate to the very medium of theatre for the first time.

The second group consists of people who are primarily interested in the phenomenon theatre. Usually they possess the regular cultural preparation for theatre of the middle classes. Although they may primarily be interested in the institution theatre, they also have to relate to the theatre in order to quench their curiosity. Again, it is through the medium of theatre that they can then begin to relate to inmates in conversation, or ‚read‘ the institution theatre.

The third group is made up of urban theatre goers. They will not be expecting to see a regular performance in a specifically designed space, yet he / she will nonetheless often be confronted by a number of very special situations created by the prison's machinery of dominance and control. For instance, it is not possible to ‚spontaneously‘ decide to go and see a show in a prison, the procedures of applying always require good forward-planning. Or after the show it will only be possible to find out more about the show by speaking to inmates, something which is often a jump across class-barriers. Again, theatre provides a platform for communication.

For all three prototypes of audience groups the visit to a prison theatre performance means that they can experience an unusual encounter across the divides of different origins, religion or social status. This is possible only with a good amount of self-motivation. All of this means that the work of „aufBruch“ constitutes not only an artistic-

cultural potential, but it also offers a political dimension to position yourself within the metropolis of Berlin, and it develops a new kind of cross-community networking.

Relevance

The special genre of prison theatre practised by „aufBruch“ enriches the theatre city Berlin. Over the past years the prison as a place has been met with an ever-increasing public interest. Through its closure it is a reference point for the ‚open society‘, a model that has to worry about its very openness within the processes of world-wide change since the end of the cold war.

The precondition of the success of our theatre work has been the preparedness of the criminal justice system and the public servants working in it, to open this closed space and make it visible. Over the years a fairly trusting collaboration could be established between inmates, prison officers and artists for the sake of art – quite a new thing. This is an important process of negotiation and relationship building within society. However, despite this close collaboration with the prison institution, „aufBruch“ is, of course, a completely independent organisation.

Through its work „aufBruch“ creates a place of relation between those who are ‚inside‘, and those who are ‚outside‘. The performances always consist not only in the entrance procedure and the performance proper but also in a whole hour of conversation after the show during which audiences are invited to speak with the performers. The visit to the theatre finishes only after these conversations and the equally laborious exit procedure are over. Thus we not only instigate an artistic reflection, but also a specifically provoked confrontation between the public and the non-public sphere of our society. Theatre, in this case, is not only a means of communication but also a means for communication.

Contact:

aufBruch KUNST GEFÄNGNIS STADT

Pappelallee 7 - 10437 Berlin (GER)

phone: +49 (0)30 4404 9700

fax: +49 (0)30 441 7639

aufbruch@gefaengnistheater.de

www.gefaengnistheater.de