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Physical Theatre as a Communicative Practice for Meaning Making in the Multilingual Youth Encounter Context

Symbolic creativity of young people, global media culture and community-based youth theatre

Europe is truly multilingual and according to European Union language policy people are encouraged to use their own native languages. This point of view in language politics offers equal possibilities for people belonging to different language groups to present their ideas. However, when children are supposed to discuss about important issues in multilingual context, the verbal language with many translations does not seem to be the only option. I am interested in participant-centred creative drama practices¹ where young people are treated as active cultural agents of child-centred communication.

Anne Bamford (2006, 104) points out, in her global arts-education research, that “there was significant and consistent evidence that arts-rich education contributed to improve children’s achievement both within the arts and more generally across education”.

I argue that physical theatre may function as a communicative practice for meaning making in the multilingual youth encounter context. In this article, I will present the eight key phases and eight characteristics of a creative embodied knowledge production process, namely report the findings of my doctoral study concerning intercultural youth theatre workshop process. The research was undertaken in a context of an arts-promoting European civic association. It is an example of highly successful informal arts-rich education, which has clearly documented benefits.

Several studies point out that the symbolic creativity of young people, their own cultural-aesthetic forms of expression, and media culture provide young people with the means (body, music and visual culture) to make sense of their experiences and to explore questions around identity and community². To leave children alone with commercialized media culture and let them explore important questions around identity and community may have serious outcomes. Henry A. Giroux (2001) points out how democracy and ethical education are in danger when commercialism has stepped increasingly into children’s lives. Atte Oksanen and Sari Näre (2006, 57) point out that virtual playing and gaming are huge branches of business. In 2002, in Finland only, 1 640 000 game products were sold, and the total selling of such products was valued to 64 million euros. In 2007 the

¹ My pre-understanding is that the creative drama practice may be connected with the ethical beliefs of applied drama (Nicholson 2005) and community-based youth theatre practices (Woodson 2004 & 2005a,b).

² See, for example, Drotner 1999, 2004; Dunn 2001; Fornäs & Bolin 1995; Guss 2001; Haagensen 2001; Hartland, Kinder & Hartley 1995; Pääjoki 2004; Rantala 2001; Räsänen 1997; Willis 1990 and Ziehe 1991.

Council of Arts of Finland granted 188 829 000 euros for the promotion arts. From this amount of money 510 000 euros was meant for the promotion of child culture which means 0,3 per cent of the total sum. -

Children and young people are often uncritical when encountering commercialized media culture and at the same time global media culture offers various cultural fragments for communication. Stephani Woodson (2005b, 3) from Arizona State University calls community-based youth theatre “as an applied theory of the social construction of childhood and youth identity worked out in corporation with youth themselves”.

Underpinning research

The overriding aim of my drama educational case study was to deepen the understanding of meaning making in a creative intercultural youth theatre process and to examine it in the context of the 10th European Children’s Theatre Encounter *Bridges* in 2001. The research task was to give a theoretical description of some key features of a creative drama process as the basis for theory about meaning making in physical theatre.

It was a case study about an arts-rich programme, organised by the EDERED-association³. The EDERED association has an International Non-Governmental Organisation-status (INGO) in the Council of Europe (CoE). I have summarized the ideology of the EDERED Encounter as follows:

The Encounter provides a public sphere for sharing everyday experiences and means to explore the meaning of different themes. Culture is seen as a verb and intercultural encountering is symbolized through the language of performance.

The participants of the Encounter construct a new culture, a public civic space, where community-based drama work provides a language in creating participatory democracy among the multilingual participants of the Encounter. In this framework young people are seen as knowledge constructing agents instead of learning objects. (Aaltonen 2006, 91)

³ The abbreviation EDERED stands for European Drama Encounters – Rencontres Européennes de Drama. The aim of the association is the promotion of intercultural work through drama and theatre with children and youth in Europe. This is achieved for example through “the organization and realization of international Encounters” (Statutes of EDERED, 1998, # 2). The idea of the Encounters grew out of an initiative put forward by the Council of Europe in a seminar hosted by Sweden in Eskilstuna in 1979 under the title *Children and Culture in Contemporary Europe*. (Hauger, Piers & O’Dwyer 1999, 1). From 1982 to 2005, members of the EDERED-association have mentored twelve Children’s Encounters and eight Youth Encounters, which the national organisers, coming from fifteen countries, have arranged. Every Encounter had an average number of 250 young people and 50 drama teachers from different European countries. (Hauger et al 1999, 1)

Several arts educational trends influence the art-pedagogical work of drama/theatre artist-teachers and have an impact on experienced creative drama practices. Bamford (2006, 31-32) has grouped major trends in arts education, in her global research compendium, as they are experienced around the world. They are (1) technocratic art, (2) child art, (3) arts as expression, (4) arts as cognition, (5) arts as aesthetic response, (6), arts as symbolic communication, (7) arts as a cultural agent and (8) postmodernism.

In the context of the EDERED Encounter practice at least the last three mentioned trends are clearly visible and allied together. When the communicative and symbolic aspects of art are emphasized it is meant that “the arts communicate through non-discursive means using a visual, musical and dramatic vocabulary that is expressive, cultural and symbolic” (Bamford 2006, 35). According to Bamford (ibid.) the philosophical base for these ideas is expressed in the texts of Herbert Read (1966), who sees that the arts function as “a language of symbols that communicate meaning without hindrance from country to country across the centuries”.

When arts are seen as a cultural agent the focus has turned from symbolic communication to interaction between people and their surrounding. The arts-rich programs of the EDERED are lead by adult artists and accomplished in the spirit of youth and alternative culture. Bamford (2006, 36) points out that “young people saw visual, musical and dramatic symbolism as a way of forging an identity”. She continues by noting that “this reflects the influence of social sciences and politics within the arts community and the view that the arts can display and challenge social ideals and exemplify social constructions of the self as artist or performer within a cultural context”. The pragmatist philosopher John Dewey (1980/1934) may have a strong impact to this trend where the idea of self-expression is expanded with the social intention (ibid.).

Postmodernism is challenging the idea of Arts and arguing that everyday experiences may have the same qualities as fine arts and popular culture. Bamford (2006, 37) explains postmodern trend by saying: “Artistic and creative expression therefore exists as a construction of inner thoughts”. In the domain of postmodernism there exists no one and universal interpretation of the meaning of art work, but many parallel, competing personal narratives. The peaceful existence side by side of personal narratives from multiple points of view is accepted.

The hermeneutic research process in practice

The research around the creative drama practice was a drama educational case study in natural settings. It was carried out by using the methodological principles of grounded theory, theatre and performance studies interpretive ethnography, and critical hermeneutics. The three steps: phases of description, structural analysis and interpretation at a theoretical level have been in use during the whole process of writing.

For the purposes of my research I classified this event as a Theatrical Event (Sauter 2004, 3-14). According to theatre studies a theatrical event can be divided into four segments:

Cultural Contexts, Contextual Theatricality, Theatrical Playing and Playing Culture. I followed this methodology and the segment which interested me most was Theatrical Playing. The content of this article is focused on this segment. This area poses interesting questions:

- *What are some of the key phases and characteristics in a creative drama practice?*

Interpreting the answer to this question leads to further questions concerning identity and community (re)construction. Such as:

- *How are the categories, 'community' and 'child' constructed in an intercultural drama practice?*

The data

The research material (transcribed interviews, coded questionnaire answers and videotapes of participants activity) were gathered from 12 to 15 year old children and their leaders who came from 18 different countries. The field research lasted the same period of time as the Encounter, namely from the 8th July to 22nd July in 2001. Quantitative findings of survey material were interpreted through direct reference to qualitative observations of drama educational practice. The participants of the two weeks' Encounter event used English as lingua franca, as well as 17 other languages, therefore the event was a truly multilingual theatrical event. The creative aesthetic process of theatre making and the sharing of the performances is the focus of the Encounter. Participants from approximately ten different national groups formed one multilingual group which had 20 participants and two theatre workshop leaders belonging to different nationalities. The starting point of creative drama process for all groups was the theme of the Encounter, *Bridges*.

Glossary

Physical theatre: In physical theatre meanings take non-verbal forms such as images, body postures and movements.

Some characteristics in this tradition:

the emphasis is on the actor-as-creator rather than the actor-as-interpreter

the working process is collaborative

the working practice is somatic

the stage-spectator relationship is open

the liveliness of the theatre medium is paramount

(Callery 2001, 5, see also, for example, Barba & Savarese 1991; King 1981; Marshall 2001; Potter 2002 and Zinder 2002)

Multilingual

The term multilingualism can refer to phenomena regarding an individual speaker who uses two or more languages, a community of speakers where two or more languages are used, or between speakers of different languages. (Retrieved September 09, 2008 from Wikipedia: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Multilingual>)

Intercultural performance

[...] is not one style, not one thing; it is an ongoing process of meeting, cross-pollinating and producing new and relevant work for its surroundings. As long as people and cultures meet there will be new ideas, new ways of communicating and creating. (Martin 2004, 4)

Creative processes of theatre

Young people engage in creative processes as they take part in the range of activities involved in making theatre. Creative processes produce fictional representations of the world – the images, the ideas, storylines, characters, relationships and atmospheres that make up any piece of theatre – drawn from participants' own experience and imagination.

Youth theatre leaders tend to introduce an idea, issue, story, theatre text or fictional character to stimulate young people's imagination and then encourage young people to take part in range of activities – individual and group games and exercises, skills training, devising exercises, performance, rehearsal and production – to develop their ideas. (Hughes and Wilson 2003, 107)

The eight interrelated aspects of creative drama process

Eight inter-related aspects can be distinguished in the intercultural theatre workshop, as shown in Figure 1. They are the following: (1) creative atmosphere: flow energy in presence, (2) cultural production, (3) dialogic and polylogic relations, (4) paradoxical communication, (5) dramatic meaning making, (6) well-working exercises: combination of the physical and the imaginative, (7) dramaturgy, and (8) site-specificity.

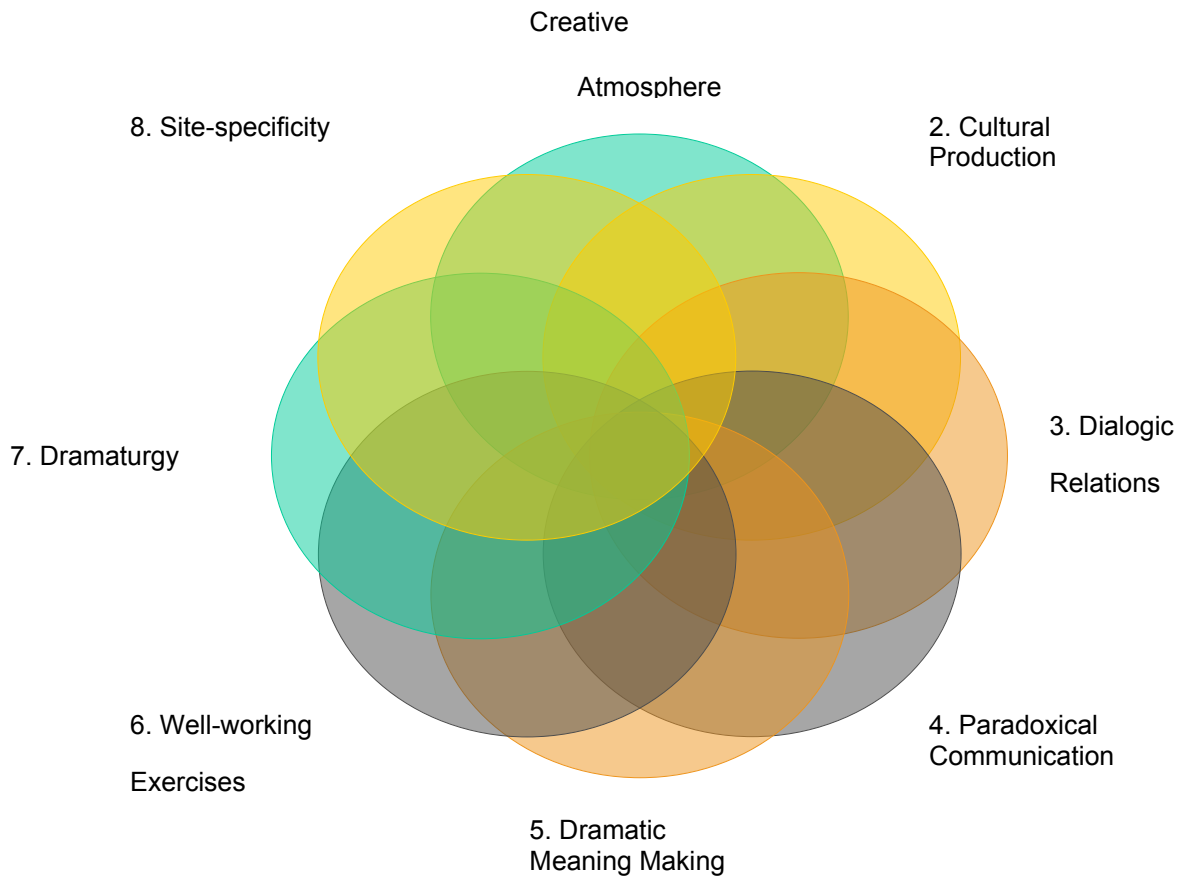


Figure 1: The eight inter-related aspects of creative drama process

1. Creative Atmosphere: Flow Energy in Presence

It can be argued that in a creative drama process as in a successful research process the basis is a creative atmosphere, a creative mode of being. New insights are possible to achieve only when the channels of creativity are opened. The leaders frequently repeated in their accounts the concept of 'energy'. Given the importance of the concept energy it becomes clear that energy means simply a capacity for doing work. An optimal energy level is described with the concept 'presence'. When the group achieves the state of presence it makes possible for the group to create their personal authentic stories without repeating stories from the media or using preconceptions.

According to Csíkszentmihályi (1997, 110-123) performance of 'flow' energy is possible when children's abilities and challenges to do tasks, are kept balanced. If the challenges of the tasks are too overbearing, the children become worried and nervous. If the abilities of the children are higher in relation to the tasks, they get uninterested (Toivanen 2002, 200). It is crucial therefore, that the leaders succeed in getting the whole group to the level of flow energy. Then first they may feel 'the short magic moments' of discovery.

2. Cultural production

Leaders, directors and artist-teachers who work in a child-centred way want to democratize the skills of theatre art. They want to offer the skills of performing arts to the participants as a medium to allow children to communicate their message on stage. The cultural production is made to empower the participants and find ways in 'giving voice and being heard' (Sinclair 2004). Children find it important to make something 'ready'. The cultural production is an important part of the creative research process. It is one form of group-based answer to the research questions which have been posed.

3. Dialogic and polylogic relations

Dialogic relations are emphasized in art educational relationships. Hierarchic or one-dimensional sender-receiver, talker-listener relationship is expanded so that "it may be possible to appreciate otherness and accept alternative realities" (Anttila 2003, 309).

Dialogic relation is not the only option in a group based activity as drama. Relations may have even more complex forms. They may be polylogic, which means simply that meanings are created in a relational network.

Distributing knowledge creation between the student/student and the teacher helps develop increased understanding. It also helps foster critical analysis and gives students space to develop. Drama leaders should value a direct, democratic dialogue, encourage young people to produce authentic stories and respect their points of view.

4. Paradoxical communication

Children and young people appreciate a joking atmosphere. Playing as a mode of being is based on paradoxical communication. It means that what we are talking about is actually not what we are meaning with our talk. Paradoxical communication in interpersonal encounters is widely discussed in Gregory Bateson's (1978, 39-51) theory of play and fantasy. In play the paradoxical mode of communication is negotiated between players and the messages are not supposed to be taken seriously. The rules of play and a paradoxical frame of communication create freedom for many interpretations in the situation. Because playing is based on paradoxical communication which is impossible to explain in a logically correct way it seems to be underestimated in an educational context. However, it seems that children and young people in their everyday culture use a lot of paradoxical communication and appreciate joking adults.

5. Dramatic meaning making

One of the key concepts in drama is 'aesthetic doubling' (Østern & Heikkinen 2001, 110-123). It means that the participants of the drama process reflect their meanings in the transformational space between the fictive and real world. The play with roles, story, place and time creates freedom to express more than it is possible to express in one-dimensional reality. The ideas of young people get embodied forms when daily reality is transformed into extra-daily reality. It becomes possible to talk about abstract concepts like love or friendship when they are presented in a fictional frame.

Michael Fleming (2003, 98-99) points out that

[...] as it's best dramatic meaning making allows participants:

to be emotionally engaged yet distant

to be serious yet free from responsibility

to be participant as well as observer

to be open to the new while rooted in the familiar

to simplify situations in order to explore their complex depths

6. Well-working exercises: Combination of the physical and the imaginative

In non-verbal, embodied communication the physical and the imaginative are combined. According to Nancy King (1971, 7) non-verbal communication may be defined as follows:

the expression of feelings, attitudes and emotions through movement

the study of contact

the use of voice in other than speech and singing

the study of concentration and

the study of relationships

Non-verbal communication is the central aspect of communication. In the multilingual situation non-verbal communication also works for a concrete aim. The variety of languages at the same time controls the possibility for equal verbal communication as well as it increases the need and interest for non-verbal communication.

Well-working exercises in the area of non-verbal communication training are needed, because the body is a highly essential area of identity negotiation. There are many restrictions concerning how the body should move in different situations. The body is a site where gender, age, attitudes and other differences between cultural groups are represented and negotiated. In creative drama workshops such “preconceived or culturally imposed ideas” (King 1971, 8) are negotiated.

The performers share the same place in having on-stage-relationships. They need to be able to sense each other. The sensitive ‘body awareness’⁴ means that they are able to build bridges to space, to themselves, to each other and to the audience. The body positions in space create meanings for the performers as well as for the spectators.

7. Dramaturgy

Different dramaturgical models are connected to diverse epistemological fundamentals (Allern 2003). The concept dramaturgy is based on two words, namely action and work (Gladsø, Gjervan, Hovik & Skagen 2005, 16). For a drama leader it is important to be conscious of how the different dramaturgical choices influence the outcome of the creative work. The dramaturgical models may be divided into four basic models as Janek Szatkowski (Gladsø et al 2005, 168) suggests. These are the dramatic, epic, simultaneous and meta-fictional models. Different forms of child play or mythical thinking may also offer a model for dramaturgical choices.

The basic elements of dramaturgy are role, story, space and time. They are influenced by tension, contrast, symbols, rituals and rhythm. The dramaturgical choices are made by deciding on interpretation, focus, turning point, style and form of drama. (ibid, 179)

There are roughly speaking two different dramaturgical approaches in media and theatre. Juha-Pekka Hotinen (2002, 208-227) suggests to call them *old* (traditional, Aristotelian) dramaturgy, and *new* (postmodern performance or montage) dramaturgy. Hans-Thies Lehmann (2006) uses the concepts *dramatic* and *postdramatic*.

⁴ *Body awareness* is called ”proprioception” (from Latin proprius meaning “one’s own” and perception) in movement theory. It “is the sense of the position of the parts of the body, relative to other neighbouring parts of the body”. (Retrieved September 09, 2008 from Wikipedia: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Proprioception>)

The postdramatic dramaturgy is a typical representation of fragmented postmodern thinking. The identification of characters, actions, motives, interaction and message may be defined as a representation of mimetic, dramatic dramaturgy.

Dramatic	Postdramatic
Story	Fragments
Plot	Composition
Conflict	Difference, contrast and variation
Character	Role, self or passer by
Dialogue	Polylogue
Linear	Parallell

Several theatre leaders like to bring together fragments and invent a traditional story, because they argue that children prefer linear narratives. Why do they claim that children like linear narratives? The dramatic dramaturgy is based on the thought of integration and coherence with its preconceived and somewhat universal narrative plots and characters. When the period of childhood and youth is the period of identity construction, the traditional model seems to propose a solid ground for such construction. The ontology of a dramatic model is dialectical. Lehmann (2006, 39) defines the dialectic essence of drama as follows:

Drama took on a distinguished role in the canon of the arts because of the dialectical essence of the genre (dialogue, conflict, solution; a high degree of abstraction essential for the dramatic form; exposition of the subject in its state of conflict).

The postmodern dramaturgy offers a more fluid model to work with identity construction. The ontology of such dramaturgy is existential. The fundamental ethical questions are solved in dramatic model by posing forces against each other. In postdramatic model the situation-specificity demands to take a personal view and be active concerning own choices. Young people use in their own game and play culture (f. ex. computer games and LARP) polylogue, parallel and fragmented narrative structures. The postdramatic dramaturgy is more complicated for the drama leaders to work with, but at the same time this option offers more space for child-centered agency.

8. Site-specificity

Theatre is spatially expressed form of Arts. It is crucial for the performers to know the possibilities and limitations of the space. Creative drama process takes place in a spatial environment and therefore the site that is chosen will characterize the artistic development. For example a play made for the Colosseum could be inappropriate for my living

room. This is the reason that site-specificity is one of the characteristics of a creative drama process.

The eight interrelated phases of creative drama work

Throughout the devising process of theatre performance there can be seen that the diverse phases of the devising process are in a cyclic repetitive process instead of hierarchical steps. The devising process of theatre can be shared into the phases of preparation, intensive work, incubation, insight and validation as other creative research processes (Hakala 2002; May 1996, 186 and Uusikylä 1999, 63).

Preparation

1. Embodied presence in time and space: Intertwined exercises of imagination and body awareness
2. Seduction: Appreciation of young people's talents (seeing the participants), use of symbolic language of youth culture and paradoxical communication

Intensive work

3. Psychophysical theme and form work with external and internal energy in critical thinking-working structure
 - movement, voice, rhythm: private
 - imagination, playfulness: semi-private
 - improvisation: semi-public
 - performance: public
4. Dramaturgical theme and form work
 - Planning
 - Playing
 - Observing
 - Feed-forward analyzing
 - Critical thinking-working in practice

Relaxation/Incubation

5. Free play-time

Insight

6. Negotiation and combination of parts
7. Rehearsing – shaping the form of the message

Validation

8. Performing the message to the audience (Aaltonen 2006, 179; Kjølner 1994, 188-205)

Preparation is divided into two interconnected phases: (1) *embodied presence in time and space* and (2) *seduction*.

The core of creative being, as mentioned before, is embodied presence. It means relaxed and concentrated being in the moment. This appearance is essential during the entire process. Being in presence is demanding. It may, however, be trained by joining mental images with the training of body awareness (Klemola 2004, 85). While the participants of

the devising process breathe freely and have a connection with themselves, others and space, it becomes likely to continue to the next phase, seducing.

The seduction phase is closely connected with motivation. A valuable way to enhance participant attitude is accomplished by appreciating young people's talents, using the symbolic language of youth culture and communicating paradoxically.

Intensive work can be divided into (3) *psychophysical* and (4) *dramaturgical work*.

In psychophysical theatre work, there are many different techniques to achieve the goal and various mixed vocabularies to describe the techniques. Michael Chekhov's (Zinder 2002) two keys, 'the physical' and 'the imaginative' are, however, used in every technique. Psychophysical work is portrayed as a non-verbal effort with external and internal energy by using movement, imagination and improvisation. Critical thinking-working structure is used in psychophysical theatre work, which means work at four levels. There are varieties of feed-back forms, which assist the participants to relate their own strengths and weaknesses to the assessed work.

At the private level, the exercises are made alone, and there is no sharing or sharing without analysis. At the semi-private level there is a face-to-face feedback associated with peer assessors. At the semi-public level the work is critically reflected by the leader and other interested observers. Finally, at the public level the theatre work is presented to the audience and reception of the performance offers new openings for the performers. Phil Race (2005, 95-111) points out the importance of "learning through feedback". He wants to discuss if it would be more appropriate to use the concept *feed-forward* instead of *feedback*.

Some writers already use the term 'feed-forward' to describe those aspects of feedback which particularly point towards what to do next, rather than merely looking backwards at what has (or has not) already been achieved by learners.

The dramaturgical work is, as defined before, essential in the entire process. In every drama lesson many overlapping dramaturgical models function simultaneously. It may, however, be noticed that one often used technique is the use of pre-planned improvisations. There the starting point may be a concept, like love for example, or a picture. Then the participants plan their improvisation in a small group. After planning they play their group-based products, observe others' performances, learn through feed-forward analyzing and work on with improvisations.

Relaxation is not a waste of effective project time. It is needed because in every creative process there seems to be a requisite for a space between intensive work and insight. Psychophysical theatre work can be compared with creative research work. In theatre work (5) *free play-time* means in this context game-time for fun and enjoyment without reflection.

Insight relates in devising process to the phase of (6) *negotiation and combination of parts*. During this phase the dramaturgical choices are made by making group-based decisions concerning interpretation, focus, turning point, style and form of performance. Next phase (7) *rehearsing/shaping* relates to the fixing phase, where the hidden message of the group is transformed into clear form.

Validation in research context means the outcome of the research work. In the context of the devising process, this phase corresponds to (8) the *performance* part. The performance is shown to the audience where the outcome of the devising process is validated.

Why do working methods in physical theatre offer good opportunities for working in a creative way in a multilingual context?

I have summarized in this article the eight aspects and phases of the creative drama process. The civic European association EDERED has accomplished successful and challenging theatrical encounters for 20 times. The main priority of the organization has not been educational or social. It has been cultural and artistic. However, by working with the arts-rich programmes they have been able to lift up children to the official stages and influenced the communities to see the children and young people in a positive way. Children have been seen and heard. Children have by themselves found out own social constructions of their private childhood and worked out questions around youth identity in corporation with artist-teachers and for themselves. The multilingual, intercultural situations which the organizers of the EDERED have faced, remind of many class room interactions of any urban European suburb. Artistic drama processes could be done in every school class, because physical theatre truly offers a meaningful language for communication in a multilingual context.

Conclusions

1. The symbolic creativity of young people in everyday life is performative. It is expressed through the body and also through music and visual culture. The symbolic expressions of young people carry cultural significance.
2. The language of physical theatre is based on body images, movement and music. Through the embodied language of physical theatre it is possible to express the feelings and experiences of young people, because meaning making in physical theatre is close to their own everyday symbolic language.
3. In a multilingual context, where the verbal languages are secondary, physical theatre offers an embodied language for communication.

4. It is possible by means of physical theatre, to construct symbolic worlds, where questions about intercultural identity and multilingual community are examined and where the provisional answers are constructed in social interaction.
5. Communities create structures of feeling which are possible to examine in community-based theatre practices as physical theatre practice with young people.

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