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Legislative Theatre - Take part! Its about us!

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© Land Tirol/Reichkndler, presentation of „Mach mit! Es geht um uns!“ on March 20th 2017 at the Tyrolean parliament.

On July 1st the new “Tiroler Teilhabegesetz” (Law to support the participation of people with disabilities in society) will come into force. It was an unanimous decision on December 13th 2017 by the Tyrolean parliament that was accompanied by standing ovations. Among the visitors there were many actors that participated in the Legislative Theatre project “Mach mit! Es geht um uns!” (Take part! It’s about us!). So far it was a unique project in Tyrolean history to use the creative potential of theatre as a participatory way of law making.

But one thing at a time:

The Tyrolean (Tyrol is a federal state of Austria with its own laws, its own government and administration. Although there is an Austrian law – and EU laws – some issues are regulated by this regional legislation) law for people with disabilities, learning difficulties or psychiatric diagnosis had to be renewed according to the UN-Convention about people with disabilities. Forum Theatre shows difficulties and struggles of people living the issue – and therefore they are experts – in order to search for possibilities and ways to improve the situation. “In doing so the needs and desires of people concerned and affected by the law directly have been elaborated and collected during the last year (2016)”, says Christine Baur, minister for social affairs when the project was presented at the Tyrolean parliament. On March 17th 2017 scenes were presented and statements were handed over to the politicians by actors in the “big hall”. It was her initiative that Forum Theatre became Legislative Theatre. Due to a resolution of the parliament and the government this participatory method was chosen according to the Convention of the United Nations on the rights of persons with disabilities that says: “In the development and implementation of legislation and policies to implement the present Convention, and in other decision making processes concerning issues relating to persons with disabilities, States Parties shall closely consult with and actively involve persons with disabilities...” (http://www.bmas.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/PDF-Publikationen/a729-un-konvention.pdf?__blob=publicationFile) And “actively” was taken in the literal sense in this theatre project.

“The method of forum Theatre chosen by the state of Tyrol facilitates real participation! Due to this kind of dealing with the given situation people are able to participate that hardly or not at all communicate via spoken language. Via acting it is possible to use non-verbal expressions of emotions to co-create the process and influence what’s going to happen. Participants (spect-actors) take part as whole persons and not just on a rational level.” (Klaus Springer, director of the “Elisabethinum”, an inclusive institution for parents-kids-groups, kindergarden, school, day care centre, shared living, therapy and job trainings) Three teenagers from there were part of “Take part! It’s about us!”

Prolog

In order to create awareness within the community and to find potential actors for the project all over the country kick off events took place in May 2016. First games (Columbian Hypnosis and Pushing against each other) were done there to give a first impression of what the work will be like and to collect already some material (ideas, stories) for the content of the plays. About 900 people were reached through this. About 40 of them registered willing to perform. All of them with disabilities, learning difficulties or mental health issues. From the end of May till mid June a group of 30 (incl. 3 care givers) people met to develop and rehearse Forum Theatre plays. I was facilitating. Verena Lerchster, a care giver, afterwards wrote: "There was so much excitement, beauty, tension but it was also frightening and shocking what I was allowed to experience during this intense time of cooperation. (...) We created scenes that portrayed the problems and difficulties and struggles of people in need of support, with disabilities or psychiatric diagnosis clearly and with a hard-hitting truth. Nothing was euphemistic, some things were scary but nevertheless we could work with plenty of joy and fun."

Within the group – and I learned to use attributions very carefully and aware of their limits but still want to use them describe the heterogeneity of the group – there were younger and older people (aged 15 up to 70-something, I never asked, like I also never asked for diagnosis), women, men and trans⁹, people from various regions (city, rural areas), natural born Tyroleans and people who were born somewhere else, people in a wheelchair and walkers, people hard of hearing or seeing, people with trisomy 21, with multiple disabilities, care givers and care takers, people with learning difficulties, people with autism, people with post traumatic stress disorder or with border line syndrom. This variety became a real strength of the group because we were a living community as a whole with all facets of life. The project was strongly supported by Nicolas Dabelstein (playwright, director) and a team from a consulting firm (wikiprevent|k) and the artistic director of InterAct (Graz) Michael Wrentschur. It wouldn't have been possible without the good will and openness of the bureau for social affairs and the jurist Thomas Jenewein and the social workers Susanne Fuchs and Julia Kantschieder.

1st act

17 out of those 30 became enthusiastic actors. "At the beginning it was only a way to contribute my opinion. It wasn't my plan to act on stage, but then I was fascinated. I think this project is really useful and powerful.



Pic: Peter Schafferer, Scene "Half Your Life is spent at Work"

The responsible ones at the government and the administration are very impressed about the outcome." (Bernold Dörrer, actor) Four plays named "The Letter", "The Wait Loop", "Half Your Life is spent at Work" and "God in White" (meaning doctors who behave like gods) made difficulties and people's struggles with official correspondence, on the way to a self-determined life and living on your own as well as with officials, at doctor's surgeries and places of work subjects of discussion. With 21 performances all over the country we reached an audience of more than 1000 people. Due to the interactive nature of Forum Theatre more than 200 suggestions (interventions) were shown how to maybe improve the situation (and the law). Every performance was designed to be as equipped for the disabled as needed. We worked with sign language, audio description, large projections in the background that showed the content in simple picture stories, induction loops and simultaneous speech-to-text interpretation in huge letters. We played twice in every district and four times in the biggest one. The largest audience was in Innsbruck at the large hall of the parliament where 220 people were in the audience.

Due to the limited abilities of the spect-actors on the one hand but their extraordinary and individually highly developed skills on the other hand the interventions on stage were full of outstanding aesthetics and symbolism. Changing of the rhythm and speed of the scene, speech melody and intonation, creation of words, sounds and gestures, dialects, individual languages (often only understood by a very close reference person), speechlessness, individual and special movements because of wheelchairs, limited mobility, spasms, lack of impulse control and again and again very emotional, sensitive, empathic and sympathetic gestures and behaviour transformed the original scenes as well as the consciousness in the room and the stage into a place of real and lived inclusion.

I quote two feedbacks how it was perceived: "Beforehand we want to thank for the accurate scenarios that were showing the realities of our clients and we thank for the sensitive integration of the challenging and ambiguous interventions and how Armin Staffler dealt with notes and remarks from the audience." (Leo Alber, boardmember of the Psychosocial Care Service Tirol) "This way of working deeply moved me. You dare und know how to deeply engage and admit to people and then facilitate cautiously their going further with all their openness and limitations. This is not just based on learned know-how but requires courage and personality along with love for humanity." (Margaretha Hammerle M.D., Medical Director for Physiotherapy at the Tyrolean Health Insurance Provider)

2nd act

Many members of the parliament (all parties were represented) and the government were present at the presentation in the chamber of the Tyrolean parliament. It was a highlight of the project. Every single intervention and suggestion that happened during the performances was documented and forwarded to the politicians. This document entered the process of lawmaking and – even more important – lived practise. Some desires and concerns like training and awareness-raising actions for office workers already have been implemented. Michaela Lödler, an actress: "Even though not every concern transforms into law this theatre project shows how important it is to make space and time and listen to the opinion, experiences and eventually to the stories of people affected. Just being seen, heard and recognizing the will to be understood from the other side, like the "official Tyrol", politicians and civil servants is already doing a lot."



© Land Tirol/Reichkendler; Actors at the government bench

Epilogue

A statement read by Jan Kickert, Austrian ambassador at the UN in New York, at the "Conference of States Parties to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities" on June 13th 2017 said: "(The) federal state Tyrol, decided to create a new Disability Act using a new form of involvement. More than 1,500 persons with disabilities, including people with mental and intellectual disabilities, have participated in a "Forum Theatre", a so-called "Legislative theatre".

April 24th 2017: The theatre project "Take part! It's about us!" won the Austrian Administration Award within the category "Diversity, Gender and Integration". The jury –experts in science and administration – honours the outstanding creative and highly participatory law making process as it is "impressive, innovative and on a very high level". In their opinion the UN-Convention is successfully realised with this good-practise example because it is guaranteed that persons with disabilities are sustainable involved in the law creation process like it is demanded. The visualization of problems and how inclusive it was, highlighted by the jury. The jury and also the Tyrolean minister for social affairs emphasise that Forum Theatre can be applied for many policy areas and has got potential for many forms of public participation.

The last sentence is very true and I just want to mention a few inspiring initiatives that I know and I ask others to contact me to quench my curiosity.

InterAct – Workshop for Theatre and Social Culture <http://www.interactonline.org/>

Legislative Theater Berlin <http://www.legislative-theater.de/>

Kuringa Berlin <http://kuringa.org/de/madalenamadalena-berlin2.html>

Theatre of the Oppressed New York <http://www.tonyc.nyc/legislativetheatre>

An Erasmus+ Project, Partners: Pekarna Madalenske (Slovenia), Giolli cooperative (Italy),

Fundacja Dobra Wola (Poland), Active Inquiry (<http://www.activeinquiry.co.uk/UK>), <https://www.facebook.com/Legilab1486245158129392/> or

<https://legilab4progress.wixsite.com/legilab4progress> Contact: legilab4progress@gmail.com

Always inspiring:

<https://www.cardboardcitizens.org.uk/>

<http://theatreforliving.com/>

Last but not least I want to thank every spect-actor and of course the actors (Barbara Augustin, Bernold Dörner, Renate Geißler, Margit Graber, Michael Kalisch, Maria Kerber, Michaela Lödler, Lisa Mucher, Esohe Ogbetun, Ariane Pischl, Mai Scherthauer, Heinz Schuster, Nina Stutz, Erni Todeschini, Thomas Wallner, Jutta Weimer, Anna Zand), the supportive staff at the office for social affairs and the minister and her team, special thanks to Michael Wrentschur (InterAct) and to all my teachers along the way, Andreas Keckeles who first introduced me to TO, Irmgard Bibermann and Lisa Kolb-Mzalouet who made it possible to experience Forumtheatre and Augusto Boal in Austria and Tyrol, to Augusto Boal and to David Diamond for their generosity and their never ending efforts to make the world a better place!

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