

REPORT ON THE DRAMA-WORKSHOP

Biography Heiderose:

Heiderose is a teacher for literature and theatre at the University of Hildesheim, Germany. Her students learn to show their understanding of modern literature with methods of modern theatre. She uses her experience to write chapters for German schoolbooks, in which pupils learn to understand different kinds of literature, especially drama. Heiderose is volunteering with Sambhali Trust for a month.



Biography Verena:

Verena is currently studying directing and script-writing at the Filmacademy in Ludwigsburg, Germany. During the years 2002 and 2007 she studied "Cultural Sciences and Applied Art" at the University of Hildesheim and Marseille. She achieved her diploma in her main subjects theatre, media, literature and politics in August 2007. Besides her work as a director, she holds regularly workshops in filmmaking, theatre and creative writing for teenagers and young adults in youth centers and other social-cultural facilities. Verena is volunteering with Sambhali for two months, teaching both theatre and English.



Introduction to the drama-workshop:

The concept of the drama-class is basically improvisation-theatre. The actresses are girls and also young women - from the age of 13 to 40 years. Some of them already have children and once in a while they bring their kids to join the group. These women have never acted before. In the beginning it felt very strange for them and they were a little shy. Although they had no idea what to expect, they all seemed curious and open-minded to the process of theatre. It didn't take them too long to pick up different tools and methods of acting, so that they finally started to improvise scenes independently. So far we have the impression that they have had a lot of fun discovering their dramatic skills, which they all certainly have.



The drama-course is structured every day in a similar way, but the topics, technics and stories are constantly changing. After warming-up, usually with music and exercises for emotional or vocal expressions and miming, they start to prepare a performance of a story that they have been told. These tales are usually connected to the everyday-life of the girls in India. At the end of the session they perform it to the audience. The girls quickly learned to focus. They now trust each other and understand how to express the emotions of a specific character and how to represent it. They have also started to identify with different characters in the play, so that they are more and more able to perform their own interpretation of a story using several methods of theatre. They have also learnt theatre techniques that will help them to be more flexible with their expressions.

Personal impression:

When I first arrived at Sambhali Trust I felt welcomed by the friendly atmosphere; Govind, his family and the staff - including the volunteers - took care of me right away. I couldn't wait to get to know the girls of Sambhali Trust. In the afternoon I met Heiderose who is a teacher in theatre and literature back in Germany. She is a couple of years older than I am and of course she has a lot more experience in teaching drama, so I knew right away that it would be a huge challenge, not only for the girls, but also for me to improve my skills and widen my horizon.

The first night I could hardly sleep, because I was so excited to start the theatre class and to meet all the actresses the next day. Heiderose started the class a few days before I arrived, so she prepared me; telling me everything they had done and explaining that all the girls were open-minded but also shy. They had never acted before, so most of them felt uncomfortable improvising on their own. In the beginning they were understandably embarrassed and giggled and talked. We both knew that the most important goal for the girls was to gain self-confidence through theatrical expression, by improving their acting skills and by having fun whilst doing so.



My first impressions were very positive and I knew that I was going to really love these girls. Although they had all been nervous about acting, I felt their extreme curiosity and some of them proofed already their special sensitivity for emotions and atmospheres. They all seemed to have a great group awareness, which is of course very important in acting.

As a director I am used to hiding behind the camera and I don't usually act at all. But at first, to engage the girls and get them going, we had to make fools of ourselves. Heiderose and I tried our best and acted with the girls. In the first week we did an improvisation using different technics - based on mime and body-language, and I quickly realised that something extraordinary had begun. Of course, they all laughed at our clownish acting, but after a while more and more girls got into it and they really enjoyed it. Even the shyest girl started to open up after that week. In the beginning they copied a lot of our ideas, but that soon changed. At the end of each theatre class we narrated a story Heiderose and I had prepared the day before - we didn't tell them how the story ended so that the young women could prepare an improvisation of the story (in groups) and make up their own ending.

After the first 10 days almost every actress of our drama-class started to use their own imagination and they built up stories with personal ideas. They worked with different characters, places and props - but this time they had to find their own plots and show it to the audience. The further the girls got the more they included themes from their daily lives, and they started to feel confident enough to act out their feelings, and in a very critical way.

Heiderose and I weren't sure whether the girls would want to perform to an unknown audience, so we didn't ask them straight away if they would like to. In the end we had no reason to be doubtful; when we finally asked them, they all agreed and were very excited. From that point on they started to take their acting even more seriously.



The most important thing for me, however well the performance went, was that almost every girl showed up - proud and brave enough to perform their skills. I was overwhelmed to see the girls, walking up the stairs of the mini-auditorium in their most beautiful dresses. Almost everyone showed up. Only one girl, Joody, was missing. She comes to the Payal Centre, when her father is at work. When he is home, she is not allowed to leave the house. She is the oldest child in her family and has a lot of duties to fulfill in the household as a result, so she can only sneak away when her father is at work. I didn't know about this before. She had been one of the shyest girls and she really opened up in the last few days of our drama-course. It had been obvious that this girl was doing really well and I was so upset not to see her on stage on that last Sunday. Her father had been at home and she couldn't leave her house.

For a foreigner it is hard to understand that a girl is not allowed to do theatre. I try to stay as open-minded as possible, but it's hard for me to easily adjust to a patriarchal society - especially as I mostly grew up without a father.

I had been so happy to see the actresses - I hugged the girls very tight and gave all of them a little piece of wood to knock on in case they were as nervous as I was. We had quite a good turn out: all the girls from the photography-class, some tourists, Govind and his friend Verendra all came to watch. Unfortunately only three mothers showed up; no fathers. This upset me a little, but the girls didn't seem to mind. I had the impression that they had not expected their families to come and that they were very satisfied with the whole presentation anyway.

The performance itself turned out to be very successful. I have never seen the girls concentrate so much on their acting. They didn't look at the audience, they took their roles seriously, they projected their voices and even improvised new dialogues. While I was watching the girls I had tears in my eyes. In the beginning the girls hadn't realised what they would achieve through theatre, and the power they had to reach people with their performance.

I am happy to see how far the girls have come in the last 4 weeks. They stood on stage with pride, and the audience was impressed by the huge impact of their theatre.

In conclusion, I want to say that I came to the SAMBHALI-TRUST-project with no expectations at all. I just tried to put as much energy and effort in the theatre-class as possible and to adapt my skills to the way of life and the temperament of the Indian girls.

In my experience, most of the women who decide to be an actress appear to be outgoing and self-confident. Working with actors back home is completely different. I had to deal with personal issues which are very different from those of the women at Sambhali Trust.

I am very impressed by the impact of the acting-process on these women: its potential to empower them. Through the tools and techniques of theatre, the women and girls quickly began to discover their own personalities and their self-confidence grew. It was just amazing to discover new skills and hidden talents together, which they hadn't realised they had. I am confident that the theatre-work has a considerable impact on the girls as it supports their hopes and visions.

On the other hand I had no idea how theatre could bring people together. Even though I do not speak any Hindi, it was easy to get in touch with the girls. In my opinion the process of acting together is one of the strongest ways to communicate with each other - no matter where you come from. This whole experience really touched me and I will certainly never forget this. I can't wait to go further with the girls next month.

I want to thank SAMBHALI TRUST for offering me this unique and deeply meaningful experience.



(Verena Jahnke / Jodphur / April 2011)