

Hochschule Merseburg/ University of Applied Sciences

Social Work. Media. Culture.

name: Janett Schönfuß

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Performance of the play

“Á Mörkunum”

(Hlutverkasetur)



This paper contains a qualitative research approach to participation in a theatre project called „Á Mörkunum“. Five participants were interviewed between 4th - 19th of June 2014, four participants and the leader of the project. All participants had struggled with mental health issues. The purpose was to gather information on how involvement in the theater project helped in their daily life. Questions focused also on how well participants could handle stressful situations, why they were committed to long hours of rehearsals and how they handled the pressure of a performance in a real theatre in front of an audience. To guarantee accuracy of the answers the whole interview was audio recorded. All interviewees were asked for written permission.

The director had many years of experience in the theatre. He was also a psychodrama therapist. He had worked as a contractor at Hlutverkasetur since January 2009. He directed both psychodrama groups and drama lessons at the center. The first rehearsal of the play took place on the 17th of March. At this point nothing except the title „Á Mörkunum“ was clear, not even a place to perform had been arranged. The title expressed the concept, of being in between, in between two spaces. As the leader explained: „*It's about limits..it's about not being exactly like most other people*“. Before the first rehearsal there was one meeting with eleven participants. In all 30 people were involved in the setting. The play was performed twice. New actors came in the second time. One month passed from the first rehearsal until the first performance. In spite of the time limit the leader knew that they could do this, „*I always knew that there would be something in the end*“. He described the work with the performers: „*They were kind of committed...once we were started they were willing to come whenever*“.

Several concepts came up when analysing the interviews, which were based on audio recordings. The project leader answered in three words how he would describe the process: *endurance, focus, and spontaneity*. Performers used the following words in their descriptions; *improvising, chaotic, spontaneity, interesting, challenging, fun, pride, and difficult*. This was a journey far from easy, but the process was fun and everyone experienced pride when they were finished.

Two performers became part of the group accidentally. Both of them were asked to participate while they were spending their time at Hlutverkasetur. One of them described that the project leader asked him “*Do you want to go in?*” and he said: “*Well, you know. What the hell? I will try it. If I like it I will stay, if I don't I'm gone*”. The other two performers became part of the

project more consciously. One of them was invited by e-mail by the project leader himself and the other performer was asked by the director of the center.

Difficulties experienced during the time of rehearsing and how they handled it, was explained by one of the participant. *„It was really hard to ground myself, just to stay there and not to be wobbling and just allow myself to speak loud. I think that was most difficult for me“*. During the interview one of the participants said that he had been bullied since the age of six and it had never really ended. He was frightened of being on stage, because he was used to behave in a way that ensured no one noticed him, which was impossible on stage. *„I’ve always been depressed and I was always holding myself back to make sure I don’t talk to anybody and don’t make any mistakes...to be aware of myself“*. To step out of the routine of holding back and not to be noticed, was a huge step *„I was depressed and had phobia... and it helped me a lot to be there“*. It was an unfamiliar situation to perform and a big step out of the comfort zone. *„In the past I have avoided some places where there have been a lot of people...my heart was pounding just before I went on stage...,but then, you know, I suppose I just tried to be calm“*. Self-harming was another issue that one performer had to deal with. In both those cases the influence of their mental status was a barrier, but it could be used in a positive way: *„I was acting in a scene where I was supposed to be either in a psychiatric hospital or in jail. So this helped me also because I know how it is to be locked inside“*.

The performers gained a lot from the dynamic of the group which was described as *„special bond“* by one of the interviewees. *„We were really singing it with a feeling to each other. So much friendship and trust between us. The trust was the most important lesson for me.“* Another one said: *„I found out so much about myself...I finally found my strength. I guess, even for the first time in my life“*. Another example: *„It was pushing the limits that I had. I really love it“*, which shows again the confrontation of the fear that the participants had. Another reply was: *„I’m not used to express my emotions...it helped me kind of to get in contact with how I feel and it let out some emotions. I had not expressed any kind of love in years. Love for much at all...to sing a song that was very much different from what I’m used to express on a day-to-day basis. It hits a nerve, an emotional nerve“*.

Direct response from the audience was rewarding. None of the interviewees described any negative response from the audience. Good feedback meant a lot and made them feel proud of themselves *„Everyone I talked to, they just loved it...it was great! I just felt like the king of Iceland.“* The head of the project later said: *„I think it’s actually amazing what happened. I think it’s amazing, because most of the people are not used to working in the theatre“*.

Statements from the participants confirmed this „*I was afraid, but it was so important for me to do it until the end*“. The leader of the project noticed: „*It was not about being mentally ill or disturbed. It was about making a theatre progress and that is really interesting. It just disappeared...the myth is that some of them don't have any capacity to work for more than half an hour, but they had rehearsals for six hours*“.

Conclusion

Trust between the group members and the project leader gave each single member of the group courage to overcome personal fears and challenges. The leader of the project however said he didn't take into consideration if someone in the group had a history of any kind of illness. „*I don't care about it in the theatre. Once we were at the theatre nobody ever mentioned any illness*“. There was a number of drop-outs at the beginning of the project. But the ones who could foresee the benefit from being a part of the group and the project stayed in spite of huge challenges.

This form, to take part in a theatre project is a powerful tool both as a recovery method and also as a part of vocational aims. To gain trust, to create a feeling of belonging in the group and the positive feedback from the audience that the participants got from their hard work made a difference and helped them to increase self-worth and self-esteem. It is also a powerful tool against stigma to break down stereotypes on how society thinks about people with a history of mental illness. Next to the cliché that some people are „not normal“ or even „crazy“, people think that individuals who suffer from mental illness are not able to work in an efficient way.

Resources

Kvale, Steinar (1996): Inter Views – An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing. SAGE Publications, Inc. New Delhi.

Mayring, Phillip (2003): Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse – Grundlagen und Techniken. Beltz Verlag. Weinheim und Basel.