



BRIGITTE CHRISTENSEN AND NIKOLA DIKLIC: THE THEATRE THAT IS CAPABLE TO REVEAL POTENTIAL IN EVERY ONE OF US

“Eutopia” is a multicultural project that has aroused in the context of “Aarhus – European Capital of Culture 2017”. Led by cinema and theatre actress and director Brigitte Christensen, and musician and composer Nikola Diklic, “Eutopia” initiates various artistic projects in order to create a room for divers encounters and inspire cultural changes within the local community. In the following interview, the presenters of “Kaunas – European Capital of Culture” Forum (organised in May, 2018), Brigitte Christensen and Nikola Diklic, shared their experience in community plays building and creating life-changing experiences through

theatre.

“Eutopia” produced community plays, such as “Somali Memoirs” and “Mørkhed”, where people from very various background and with vary various experiences meet in order to create together. How did the idea to make theatre plays with people who have never acted before came about? And, how do they feel about theatre?

Brigitte Christensen (B. C.): In the context of the “Eutopia” we have done these two. However, I have been doing community plays around Europe for many years, not only for the purpose of integration, but for the opening up the communities. On these performances, we gather people who have never been on stage before, which is almost a condition, and we never make any pre-selection. That’s the point of a community play, everybody can participate. One just have to have the will and the enthusiasm to be guided through this marvellous, magical thing, approaching the theatre. Being on stage in a completely professional context, may show them that everybody has an incredible potential. We, as the professionals must be able to take it out of those people.

Nikola Diklic (N. D.): The important thing about this whole process is not to make some kind of a laboratory or workshop. It’s about the process which is very personal and psychologically very involving. However, at the same time, we must be demanding, because this is a professional performance, they go on the stage in front of the real audience. That’s the hard part, because we can’t treat those people as the professionals, but we can’t just leave them to have some fun and that’s it. We have to go through these very hard living situations, because it opens their minds and can change their lives. Furthermore, we have to be totally enthusiastic, to give everything we can, because if we don’t, those people will understand it immediately. They’re very fragile. In consequence, this process is also a purification of the revitalizing professionals. It’s a challenge for everybody. That’s a beautiful thing. But we must do it very honestly, otherwise it’s a total failure.

You already mentioned that there’s no pre-selection within communities, but how do you choose the communities to work with?

B. C.: Normally we are invited to work in some place by the local organizers who have already heard about us or have seen our plays, and want us to make the same thing in their town, community or theatre. Together with local organizers we try to attract people through media and we organize meetings that are open to everyone. However, sometimes we have special cases. For example, our first community play within a framework of “Eutopia” – “Mørkhed”- was only for women.

N. D.: Women of different age and social layers. It was very interesting..

B. C.: People who would have never meet on other occasions, worked together.

What usually happens on such encounters?

N. D.: The interesting things is that nobody knows each other at the beginning. However, through the long and demanding process, those people became a family. They keep in touch after the project for a very long time, because when they go through all this together, they stick together.

B. C.: Us as well, we spend some good time to understand the place and getting in contact with the local people, because the community play must be connected with what is actually going on in the place.

So, you actually purpose the topic for the play when initiating open calls, or you develop it with people who participate?

B. C.: We try to find out what is happening in the town, what are the struggles of local people, why they do not connect, what is their story, or what is their lack of story. Then, of course, we make a frame of the story. However, we never make pre-scripts, because eventually we have to do the show on the people who are participating.

N. D.: It's like the real theatre from the times of Shakespeare. We do notes every day after rehearsing, just as it was done at his time. We react to the things that are taking place on our rehearsals and we make something out of it. It's the most beautiful way to do it. All those stories are taking account of actual moment, but sometimes we put these stories in other place and time. We pretend that something happened a century ago, although we actually talk about today.

B. C.: Like on our last play, 'Somali Memoirs', we used some personal stories of the participants, but on stage they have to be there as psychological and physical characters. It's a real performance.

N. D.: However, the process itself change a lot the minds of the participants and it has a long-term effect on them. We had, for example, some people who've been on the therapies before and who after the theatre experiences with us didn't need it anymore. We find it very important to involve people into something that demands them to be very open.

B. C.: It's a very big challenge for us as well. Because apart from doing it for so many years and having developed some kind of a method, we have to be there completely as if it was a first time. We have to gain the trust of the people who are participating, so that they agree on doing whatever it takes.

With “Eutopia” project you also initiated a festival that took place in the actual ghetto and involved both, professional artists and local people? Could you tell us a little more about it?

B. C.: The Eutopia International Festival was meant to be one big performance. There was the beginning, the development and the end. It wasn't just a sequence of different events.

N. D.: It was one big five-days event where we had a mixture of big name events and very nice artistic initiatives by the people from the local community. So, we managed to have these both levels, which, I think, is a key of all activities of “Eutopia”.

B. C.: The Festival took place in a big concrete buildings district with around 7500 inhabitants, which is just 4 km away from the centre of Aarhus. It's a long story, but now 90 percent of people that are living there are foreigners from Muslim countries. They have almost no connection with local community, and most of the locals do not dare to come there because it has a bad reputation of violence and criminality. It was a big task for us to get people from outside the ghetto to come and participate in the event.

We created the sort of a small village for the festival inside this very big area of concrete, because we had to have a place where we could host the performances. We called it “Eutopolis”. It was a place where people could spend the whole day, eat, drink and participate in different events. We tried to involve both, local community and people who came from outside the ghetto, so we initiated some home theatre events. For example, we produced the short performance of Shakespeare's ‘Hamlet’ in private apartment of local people, which was called ‘Hamlet Short’ and took around 20 minutes. ‘Hamlet’ was always popular, but sophisticated. We brought it into home environment, so that after the play people could eat together and discuss the ‘Hamlet’. It was an incredible experience.

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