

Staging Success



In the project Theatre for Everyone, our keyword is **participation**. By taking part in the performance, the spectator is inspired to act in his or her life and is likely to continue taking part in theatre activities, transforming the impressions of art into a personal experience. Our developmental work with disadvantaged youth has been based upon this approach.

We have experimented with various techniques to harness these awakened energies for **educational purposes** — such as improving focus and attention/listening skills, self-awareness and social behaviour, and developing the linguistic/verbal competencies of youth.

In Theatre for Everyone, when we persuaded youngsters to cooperate with us, we motivated them with a promise of stage success. The young participants are motivated by the direct success of their performing art work, and carry it forward in their lives. The process of organizing the performance and

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working out the topic and storyline based on social issues central to their own lives proves to be transformational for them; they discover their agency and are motivated to continue with theatre and social engagement as well.

In our regular camps and drama sessions we channel the unleashed energies of young people into creative work, and spur social transformation manifested in amateur theatrical companies that sprout in the settlements we work in. Here, the key word is **self-organization**. In the last four years, newly established unsegregated theatrical companies started work in the Cserehát region, performing their own productions in their own and neighbouring villages.

We facilitated the founding of six amateur companies by assisting in their legal incorporation and development. As they get increasingly involved in the work of these companies, the family and friends of the participating youngsters, and other community members, are likely to contribute to their upkeep – and we regularly apply for small funding for them in cooperation with the local NGOs.



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Our master programme for developing a community theatre network in the Szikszó micro-region is made up of six sub-projects:

- 1) Over the years we **presented 130 performances**: *Shipwreck* was based on local stories collected from Roma and non-Roma people living together in the region, and *Prince of No Man's Land* was an interactive tale. We provided no fixed ending. It was up to the audience to choose it and contribute to a possible conclusion of the story. Our aim was to infuse the spirit of interactive theater in the life of the villagers by involving them in the live performance.
- 2) A **drama class** followed each performance in order to persuade the youngest that acting was an exciting thing to do. Our actors and instructors returned whenever there was enough interest shown in a follow-up. We **regularly visited** 21 villages in the region to **train and develop the performing skills** of local youth. Parallel to the game sessions we invited the adults for a moderated talk on common themes – this is how we were able to boost local support for further theatre activities of the youth.
- 3) By the end of each school year we selected 50 participants for our **summer camps** from the hundreds of applicants. They prepared short performances during the camps, so we expected them to come to the camp with elaborated play ideas. To help them in this work, we organized **preparatory weekends** a month before the camp where **personal mentoring** was provided to the chosen participants.
- 4) The participants of the **drama camps** worked in **regular groups**, each organizing and producing its own performances with our support. The overall artistic quality, however, remained our responsibility. Final performances become ‘professional’ enough that participants had success not only at the closing gala, but on the road later on, including performances outside Cserehát such as at the Sziget Festival.
- 5) During the school year we **provide follow-up programmes** within and outside the schools, mentor them for future performances, and support them in participating in regional amateur festivals and performances on local community days.
- 6) Through our EU projects such as Youth In Action and EXCEPT (www.exceptnet.eu) we provide them with international exposure that broadens their experiences and their vision.

Our main, long-term purpose is **community development** among the Roma minority of the Cserehát region, empowering Roma youngsters involved in our programme, as well as teachers, minority leaders and social activists to affect change in their own communities. They acquire necessary skills when working on a **common agenda**, first for their own performance and later on for their amateur company. Theatre is an ideal medium to build and sustain collective competencies. Being a community art, theatrical practices develop skills like team building, intra-group cooperation and competition, and conflict management.

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Our medium-term goal is to improve certain **individual competencies**, especially those relating to entrepreneurial leadership. It is of crucial importance that Roma minority leaders (as well as youth who are willing to assume leading roles in the community) **recognize new opportunities** and organize their peers to take advantage of them. Theatre is an optimal device for improving both problem-solving and leadership skills. Furthermore, young people who are successful on the stage return to their homes as examples for others in the community to follow. Their higher self-esteem helps them in acquiring other individual competences in school.

In our experience of the performances and workshops, elder and younger participants are equally hungry for the live action and emotional experience that theatre provides. When participants feel they can express themselves boldly and safely, they begin to extend that active engagement into their own lives. This newly gained self-confidence leads to independently establishing amateur companies and other activities of their own, as seen in Abaújszolnok, Alsóvadász, Felsővadász, Léh, Méra, Aszaló and Selyeb. In this way, Roma and non-Roma youth learn how to organize their community for future agendas. Such leadership skills will be useful for their future as entrepreneurs or minority leaders.

Community activities like amateur companies break the overall passivity of the local Roma minority. Staging their own stories helps villagers articulate their problems on a social level. Daily work in non-segregated artistic companies helps the long-term goal of social development and integration of the Roma minority.



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