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Workshop at the “Power of Drama Conference” May 2006
Playing with the challenging word/ world of IBSEN to help us survive the problems of today

When the “Power of Drama” organisers invited the participants to give a workshop, I immediately said YES, and was very happy to have the possibility to work with youngsters and teachers from the city of Mostar. I decided to give a workshop in relation to some of Henrik Ibsen plays, and underneath is what I gave the organisers as a description for them to use when inviting participants to join in.

Content:

This year, 2006, in Norway we are celebrating it's a 100 years since our great play writer Henrik Ibsen died. In this workshop we celebrated him by using extracts from some of his most famous plays (The Wild Duck, A Doll House, Peer Gynt) to explore these situations through drama in relation to problems of living today. This may be both “normal” problems of living – dilemmas we all will have to face and deal with in family, school, friendship and working relations – and more threatening special problems some of us may experience once a lifetime or more often.

Discussion: Why and how can working through drama and texts as IBSENS help us to live today? Does the power of drama reveal or unlock itself or is it dependant on specific circumstances and/or condition?

THE WORKSHOP

When the day for the workshop came, Wednesday the 24th of May, I was very happy to realise that the participants turned out to be 31 students from secondary, around 16 years old, with their teachers. In addition some teacher-students and Idea delegates joined in. It was marvellous and challenging to experience how the room was filled with a lot of embarrassed energy as all the youngsters, where the majority was boys, filled up the room. I realise I would have to turn all that energy into productive work, if we were to succeed together in this workshop.

Greeting each other

The students were very eager to start working at once, and I realised that they needed to do something that gave them the possibility to move around in the room and do something, before I introduced the topic for the workshop. I decided to start with the Boal exercise, where we all walk around in the room, greeting each other, using both our hands, and with the main rule that you always need to shake and hold hands at least with one person, both your hands must never be free or empty. The students were eager, smiling and greeting each other, and after a while I ask the students to sit down on the chairs in the room.

Then I started by introducing HENRIK IBSEN, very shortly, just telling that he is Norway's most famous play writer, who died a hundred years ago, and that his most famous plays are A Doll House, The wild Duck and Peer Gynt.

Since the students came from two different classes, I reckoned there could be some students that had not yet met or talked together or did not know each other at all. To give the students the possibility to talk together I asked them go in pairs and tell each other if they had heard about Ibsen and eventually something they know about IBSEN and his plays.

After a while we summed up:

- Who has heard about IBSEN?
- Who has read something he has written?
- Who has seen one of his plays at cinema or at the theatre?
- Do you learn about Ibsen at school in Bosnia-Herzegovina?

Some of the students had heard about Ibsen, and the teachers said they do learn about Ibsen in the secondary school, but that these students probably had not yet studied anything by him.

Then I started by introducing HENRIK IBSEN, once again by presenting a picture of him on the overhead, and told/repeated that:

- He is Norway's most famous play writer
- His most famous plays are A Doll House, The wild Duck and Peer Gynt
- These plays are rather complicated with different layers, but in short we can say he takes the side of, or defends, the underprivileged.

Then I presented the main character from each play:

NORA, the female main character in A Doll House did something illegally/crime for love: she manage to borrow money by signing falsely with her dying fathers name, to safe her husbands life.

HEDVIG, the young girl in The Wild Duck makes a sacrifice for love: she killed herself with a gun to prove her love for her father.

PEER GYNT, the mail main character in Peer Gynt, lives as a dreamer and fantast to escape the harassment from his mates and society. His mother told him fairytales to keep the spirit when his father died – he drank the farm and money away.

The students got the possibility to choose which character and play they wanted to work on. The majority of the secondary students wanted to investigate in Nora and A Doll House. To divide into groups, I used a game like activity. Six of the girls were ask to stay around in a circle, and the others were walking around the circle as long as the music played, and as soon as the music stopped they had to join up with one of the six girls in such a way that the groups got a equal number. It seemed like the youngsters wanted to be in group with the ones they know, so the game did not function the way it was meant to. I had to intervene and do some negotiating and then the groups where established and we started working with:

A DOLL HOUSE (1879)

The information was put up on the overhead once more:

NORA, the female main character in A Doll House did something illegally/crime for love: she manage to borrow money by signing falsely with her dying fathers name, to safe her husbands life.

Drama work: The students were asked to create three still image/ frozen picture of this information/these three situations:

- Her dying father - Nora arrives – her father is dead.
- Nora signing falsely
- Nora, Helmer and the three children go to Italy. Helmer needs a warm climate to recover. He thinks it is thanks to the inheritance from Nora's father.

The students found their working space in the room, discussed, planned and improvised their ideas of how to make these frozen pictures – and they were all really engaged in the working process. There was a lot of energy in that room! After a while each group presented their pictures for their classmates, who had the benefit of knowing the context for the pictures, but even though had to look very closely to do the interpretation. It was very interesting to experience the students interest in each others frozen pictures. I looks like there was a lot of excitement in watching their classmates taking on the roles in these fictional situations.

Teacher in role as Nora - Questioning the teacher:

The participants ask questions to the teacher to find out more about Nora's situation. I used the convention teacher-in-role, played Nora, and answered the students questions. To help the students to find questions, they were firstly asked to plan, two and two, one question they wanted to ask Nora. The students started out by asking why Nora had to sign falsely, and the challenge for me, was to answer the question in a way which gave the students a lot of information about the play and at the same time could give the students impulses to new questions. The teachers and the Idea delegates joined in, and the result was a very concentrated and engaged session, with some really brilliant moment in between.

The end of the play

The end of the play was distributed between the participants, and two persons had to share one copy together. Since all the teaching was in English, I told them I would read Noras lines, and they were to read Helmers lines, in turns, around the circle. The pairs could decide who should read aloud, and if no one in the pair wanted to read, they could say PASS, and turn it over to the next pair. I secure that it was very OK to say PASS, because there would be several rounds, so they would all get the possibility to read if they wanted.

After having read through the end, I asked them to talk to each other, two and two: Why does Nora leave her husband and children? We ended by summing up the answers about what happened to Nora and Helmer in the end, and discussed this a bit.

After a brake, and some exercise to create new energy (the students had already had a whole school day when the workshop started at three o'clock) we continued.

I told the youngsters that it was very astonishing that Nora did leave her husband, and that the society had really strong reactions on this in Ibsen's time – they found it very provoking. In fact Ibsen had to rewrite the end, when the play was to be staged for the first time in Germany, and had to let Helmer succeed in convincing Nora to stay with him and the three children. I continued telling them that now a days in Norway, it is nearly quite opposite. The divorce rate in Norway is about 50% (even if many do remarry again twice or more) and that people who stay together in a life long marriage get a lot of attention – how is that possible? Further on I asked them how the situation is in their country. In Norway it seems like people very easily brake out of marriage, no matter if there are children involved or not.

Drama work

In the groups discuss (I gave one by one question – not all at once):

1. Why - for which reason does a wife/woman leave a man today – or the other way around?
2. Is it possible to prevent divorces? Are there situations where one could say it is totally wrong to divorce?

The students were asked to create small improvisations (or still picturing with inner thoughts) to answer the last question. They discussed and worked very hard and engaged and came up with different situation, that was presented/ played and discussed:

Presenting and discussing: What is this picture telling about why it is this wrong to divorce? The audience analyse and answers. The youngsters very clearly showed in their plays that they wanted to say that divorce is a bad solution, nearly what so ever. Before divorcing the couple should sit down, talk and get professional help if needed. The plays was about unfaithfulness, keeping up the stress with all that has to be done in a family, the partner getting angry and bored because of a lot of quarrelling between the family members and children strongly interfering when parents wanted to divorce (threatening with suicide).

Evaluation

In the evaluation afterwards the students said they had enjoyed the work, they had found it fun, exciting and a quite new experience. I, as the workshop leader, found it trilling to do a workshop in Mostar, to meet the challenge to work with this group through the language English and to experience the joy of managing to turn the youngsters energy into productive creative work. And, I think its important to teach Ibsen in an actualised way that can engage our young generation .

Thanks a lot to the young ones and teachers that participated in my workshop and a big, big thank to the organisers of the “Power of Drama Conference”.

The end of A DOLL HOUSE

Nora: Yes, indeed I can. It was tonight, when the wonderful thing did not happen; then I saw you were not the man I had thought you were.

Helmer: Explain yourself better. I don't understand you.

Nora: I have waited so patiently for eight years; for, goodness knows, I knew very well that wonderful things don't happen every day. Then this horrible misfortune came upon me; and then I felt quite certain that the wonderful thing was going to happen at last.

When Krogstad's letter was lying out there, never for a moment did I imagine that you would consent to accept this man's conditions. I was so absolutely certain that you would say to him: Publish the thing to the whole world. And when that was done--

Helmer: Yes, what then?--when I had exposed my wife to shame and disgrace?

Nora: When that was done, I was so absolutely certain, you would come forward and take everything upon yourself, and say: I am the guilty one.

Helmer: Nora--!

Nora: You mean that I would never have accepted such a sacrifice on your part? No, of course not. But what would my assurances have been worth against yours? That was the

wonderful thing which I hoped for and feared; and it was to prevent that, that I wanted to kill myself.

Helmer: I would gladly work night and day for you, Nora—bear sorrow and want for your sake. But no man would sacrifice his honour for the one he loves.

Nora: It is a thing hundreds of thousands of women have done.

Helmer: Oh, you think and talk like a heedless child.

Nora: Maybe. But you neither think nor talk like the man I could bind myself to. As soon as your fear was over--and it was not fear for what threatened me, but for what might happen to you--when the whole thing was past, as far as you were concerned it was exactly as if nothing at all had happened. Exactly as before, I was your little skylark, your doll, which you would in future treat with doubly gentle care, because it was so brittle and fragile. (Getting up.) Torvald--it was then it dawned upon me that for eight years I had been living here with a strange man, and had borne him three children--. Oh, I can't bear to think of it! I could tear myself into little bits!

Helmer: (sadly) I see, I see. An abyss has opened between us—there is no denying it. But,

Nora: Would it not be possible to fill it up?

Nora: As I am now, I am no wife for you.

Helmer: I have it in me to become a different man.

Nora: Perhaps--if your doll is taken away from you.

Helmer: But to part!--to part from you! No, no, Nora, I can't understand that idea.

Nora (going out to the right): That makes it all the more certain that it must be done. (She comes back with her cloak and hat and a small bag which she puts on a chair by the table.)

Helmer: . Nora, Nora, not now! Wait until tomorrow.

Nora (putting on her cloak): I cannot spend the night in a strange man's room.

Helmer: But can't we live here like brother and sister--?

Nora (putting on her hat): You know very well that would not last long. (Puts the shawl round her.) Goodbye, Torvald. I won't see the little ones. I know they are in better hands than mine. As I am now, I can be of no use to them.

Helmer: But some day, Nora--some day?

Nora: How can I tell? I have no idea what is going to become of me.

Helmer: But you are my wife, whatever becomes of you.

Nora: Listen, Torvald. I have heard that when a wife deserts her husband's house, as I am doing now, he is legally freed from all obligations towards her. In any case, I set you free from all your obligations. You are not to feel yourself bound in the slightest way, any more than I shall. There must be perfect freedom on both sides. See, here is your ring back. Give me mine.

Helmer: That too?

Nora: That too.

Helmer: Here it is.

Nora: That's right. Now it is all over. I have put the keys here. The maids know all about everything in the house--better than I do. Tomorrow, after I have left her, Christine will come here and pack up my own things that I brought with me from home. I will have them sent after me.

Helmer: All over! All over!--Nora, shall you never think of me again?

Nora: I know I shall often think of you, the children, and this house.

Helmer: May I write to you, Nora?

Nora: No--never. You must not do that.

Helmer: But at least let me send you--

Nora: Nothing--nothing--

Helmer: Let me help you if you are in want.

Nora: No. I can receive nothing from a stranger.

Helmer: Nora--can I never be anything more than a stranger to you?

Nora (taking her bag). Ah, Torvald, the most wonderful thing of all would have to happen.

Helmer: Tell me what that would be!

Nora: Both you and I would have to be so changed that--. Oh, Torvald, I don't believe any longer in wonderful things happening.

Helmer: But I will believe in it. Tell me! So changed that--?

Nora: That our life together would be a real wedlock. Goodbye.

(She goes out through the hall.)

Helmer (sinks down on a chair at the door and buries his face in his hands): Nora! Nora! (Looks round, and rises.) Empty. She is gone. (A hope flashes across his mind.) The most wonderful thing of all--?
(The sound of a door shutting is heard from below.)

Henrik Johan Ibsen (1828 – 1906)

was an extremely influential Norwegian playwrights ho was largely responsible for the rise of the modern realistic drama (dubbed "the father of modern drama"). It is said that Ibsen is the most frequently performed dramatist in the world after Schakespeare. Despite spending much time in exile, living in germany and Italy, Ibsen is held to be the greatest Norwegian author of all times, being celebrated as a national symbol by Norwegians, and as one of the most important playwrights in world history.

His plays were considered scandalous to many of his era, when Victorian values of family life and propriety largely held sway in Europe and any challenge to them was considered immoral and outrageous. Ibsen's work examined the realities that lay behind many facades, possessing a revelatory nature that was disquieting to many contemporaries.

Ibsen largely founded the modern stage by introducing a critical eye and free inquiry into the conditions of life and issues of morality. Victorian-era plays were expected to be moral dramas with noble protagonists pitted against darker forces. Every drama was expected to result in a morally appropriate conclusion, meaning that goodness was to bring happiness, and immorality only pain. Ibsen challenged this notion and the beliefs of his times and shattered the illusions of his audiences.

Henrik Ibsen was born to Knud Ibsen and Marichen Altenburg, a relatively well-to-do merchant family, in the small port town of Skien, Norway. Shortly after his birth, however, his family's fortunes took a significant turn for the worse. His mother turned to religion for solace, while his father declined into a severe depression. The characters in his plays often mirror his parents, and his themes often deal with issues of financial difficulty as well as moral conflicts stemming from dark private secrets hidden from society.

At fifteen, Ibsen left home. He moved to the small town Grimstad to become an apprentice pharmacist and began writing plays. In 1846, he fathered an illegitimate child with a servant maid whom he rejected. Ibsen came to Christiania intending to attend university, but cast off the idea, preferring to commit to writing.



Photo of Henrik Ibsen in his older days

From http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henrik_Ibsen where you can find information and text about Ibsen and his plays in many languages. Opening page: www.wikipedia.org