

International TO-Workshop in Sarajevo

by Till Baumann, Roberto Mazzini and Michael Wrentschur

“The atmospheric city of Sarajevo will be the setting - the streets will be our stage” said the e-mail-announcement of the international TO Workshop in Sarajevo, and around 100 young people applied. 24 of them participated – coming from Bosnia, Serbia, Croatia, Macedonia, Slovenia, Kosovo, Senegal, Italy, Spain, England and Germany. From 19 to 26 July 2003 they took part in a workshop organised by “Schüler helfen leben” (SHL), a German NGO founded by school students in 1992 and since then entirely run by people under 25.

We were invited to Bosnia to conduct the one-week-workshop in the SHL house in the Bosnian capital, focussing on Forum Theatre and aiming at a street performance at the end of the week. “What should be changed in the context where you live?” was the basic question for the search for topics and the development of Forum Theatre scenes. This basic question had to do with our suggestion not to deal with the issues of possibly traumatic war and ethnic conflict experiences, but more with the fact, that the group represents the young generation who will be the responsible creators and participants of the future civil society in their countries and regions. During the whole week, the theatre work was able to build up a very strong and confident group atmosphere. The participants were really ready to deal with theatre and their issues in a powerful, vivid, intensive and very often “laughing” way.

The fact that the participants had different national and ethnic backgrounds was not an obstacle at all – they found and defined lots of common topics and questions they wanted to theatricalise and to bring onto the Sarajevo streets:

- How to face the passivity of young people at university, who are not “standing up for their rights”?
- What can women do against domestic violence and exploitation?
- How can people deal with homophobia in an officially mostly heterosexual society?
- How can we change the social imbalance created by capitalism, how could we change the capitalist system?

What shoppers and passers-by came across in the late afternoon of 25 July was a mixture of walking-act, silent parade and rhythm performance, leading them to the little square in front of the Catholic cathedral where the four Forum scenes concerning the issues mentioned above were going to be performed. There they were confronted with a heterogenous group of young people playing scenes in Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian, Slovenian, Macedonian (all “Balkanese” anyway, as we were told) and some English, joked by jokers translated by translators: from English into Bosnian, then back from Bosnian into English.

The street performance and the scenes collectively developed by a mixed group working together over a period of one week are the main outputs of this project. We suggested not dealing with the hot questions of war and ethnic conflicts. The group agreed because for them this was a time to build up cross-cultural relationships, not to face cross-cultural conflicts. They wanted to cooperate and to make theatre together, to have fun, to dialogue with people in the street. For us, the main reason for this suggestion was that facing war experiences requires more sophisticated techniques such as the “Cop in the head” and the

time to take care of the strong emotions this work evokes. There was no setting afterwards, when people could come back home and find support and a group of friends to continue the process. But this choice does of course not mean that it is not possible to work with TO on those issues, it is only matter of creating the right conditions.

The GIOLLI–InterACT–DOMINO cooperation in Sarajevo was the third step after DOMINO had invited GIOLLI and InterACT – among others – to come to the Eastern German region of Halle-Merseburg in June 2002 to work with youth and multipliers and after a joint GIOLLI–DOMINO workshop at the European Social Forum in Florence in November 2002. And after this Italian-Austrian-German workshop experience in Sarajevo, some new plans of the three companies were exchanged. It seems that TO can be a powerful method in the Balkan region to support people in creating change, to find new possibilities of solving conflicts and empower them to participate in civil society.