

Helga Utz

Children's Opera

(...)

This is the beginning of Edward Lear's poem THE JUMBLIES. Jumbles are people who always get things confused, and in this case they venture far out to sea – without any equipment, insecure, using a sieve as a boat.

Two different perspectives are shown in Lear's brilliant poem from 1846: Firstly, the perspective of the helpless child being thrown into life and without any other choice but to cross the water in a sieve. Day by day, the child must wish for and dare the impossible. Anybody who has ever collapsed with exhaustion in the early evening after having spent a whole day with a three- or four-year-old kid will remember what it felt like when the question „Can we now finally start to play?“ was stated. Children possess an endless source of energy, curiosity, daring, and imagination. It is their only way of surviving in the world we bend into shape for them. For the poem also contains the perspective of those who are watching from the shore, mocking the Jumbles, calling them stupid and unable to cope with life – in other words, the perspective of those who deny those children everything positive.

(...)

There are two truths: It is foolish to sail in a sieve – that is the truth of the adults. But at the same time, it is wonderful to sail in a sieve, and that is the children's truth.

(Image 1) In the picture we see the monk Luca Pacioli, a brilliant mathematician. He invented many things, such as, for example, around the year 1500, double-entry book-keeping, the basis of modern economic activity. The painter depicts him together with with a mysterious object, a so-called rhombicuboctahedron. Its shape is full of mysteries, yet made of glass and transparent, closed but half-filled with water. This is exactly what I try to do with my children's operas!

The most important thing is the MYSTERY that magically attracts children.

(Image 2) One of my first libretti was TILL EULENSPIEGEL. Here you see a photo taken at the first performance in Darmstadt. The most interesting part is the overall idea of the staging: My concept based on the idea of having the action take place on a quasi medieval market-place surrounded by the town's church, stores and workshops in which the scenes were played. The audience had no seats but moved around freely, which brought about funny situations especially ones involving little kids.

TILL EULENSPIEGEL consists of a collection of tales centering on a witty, lazy and often deceitful protagonist, a presumably authentic man who lived at the end of the Middle Ages when the rigid class structures – which he opposed all his life as much as meanness, greed, vanity, ignorance, and blind obedience - started to loosen.

In addition to my professional work I repeatedly organised social initiatives and was in charge of many free projects in schools and pre-schools. I would like to present two of them to you.

Let's start with:

THE WORLD REVOLVES AROUND MARCO

Conceptually, this is a piece of work „by children for children“ meaning that the children themselves performed, shifted the scenery, took decisions about the music, found the costumes, designed the sets, painted, sang and, what's more, invented the text according to the roles they wished to play. I did guide and adjust a little bit, but the main ideas came from the kids who attended third grade which means they were eight and nine years old. Eventually, we had five settings:

The classroom was turned into a supermarket, partially by using painted décor, partially by means of naturalistic objects. This girl here was really keen on playing a cashier because she wanted to do „beep“ all the time.

[Photos]

This boy wanted to act as a cucumber which gave the story a first comical twist.

Social differences were visualized, although in a rather bold and simple way. Please note the hand-painted china! And here Grandma and Grandpa are coming for a visit.

[Photos]

The fashion show was performed with great dedication.

[Photos]

And here is where all dramatic knots were unravelled: the PIZZERIA:

[Photos]

I cannot remember what exactly these two very realistic policemen contributed to the dramatic proceedings.

[Photos Policemen]

The next school project is almost my favourite one – it is a fairy tale. I love fairy tales as source material. The old fairy stories are deeply rooted in our minds for good reasons. They do not depict reality in an unworldly and always optimistic way, but describe conflicts in ways that enable children to believe in the possibility of a solution.

For one thing, life gets sorted: beauty/ugliness, diligence/laziness, strength/weakness, foolishness/cleverness, loyalty/disloyalty, innocence/malice, courage/cowardice, humbleness/arrogance, modesty, envy, curiosity, greed, slyness, deviousness – children know all these qualities and want to learn how to deal with them. It is the foremost achievement of the fairy tale to clearly name and assign such characteristics. Another achievement is something which „modern“ tales have far more difficulties with: In fairy tails, everyday life, reality, seamlessly blends into the world of magic and thus depicts exactly the child's perception. There is no distinct boundary between the magical and the real world – miraculous events take place right next to everyday occurrences, and fixed categories can become flexible. Distant things come close, small ones grow, paupers can be crowned king and powerful people can be brought down.

For all of this to come about, we need a „magical“ happy ending. I am not referring to unworldly optimism but to something that enables children to let themselves in for the frightening aspects

of the conflict's resolution; this gives them a chance to mature mentally and projects an understanding of things that are otherwise taboo. The children can accept that life is not all harmony and goodwill but that you have to brace yourself for attacks coming from inside as well as from outside. And they learn to cope with the fact that often very close and beloved persons turn out to be the enemy – which might be the most important aspect, and one almost exclusively dealt with by fairy tales. The proverbial „wicked stepmother“ signifies the (commonly repressed) fact that not only do our families not always give us good things to take with us on our journey through life but that they are also our heaviest burden.

Wanderings of the Soul – Sources of the Night

We may banish our dreams from our daily life, but everybody knows that we never leave the dream world as the same person that we were upon entering it. The shift from waking to sleeping plays a major role in many fairy tales, but the waking consciousness with its rational perception, and sleep with its irrational dreams, are just codes for the different levels on which our hearts live – next to the clear day there is the mysterious night. By dealing with these „dark sides“, the fairy tale enables children to take a look into the secret chambers of their own selves.

In June 2004, I initiated the performance of a short musical play at a Darmstadt elementary school that was very open to actions of this kind.

[Photo School]

All second-grade pupils were invited to apply. Eventually, we had twenty kids from several classes. Except for a few scenes which were developed by means of improvisation the lines were written by me. The children produced most of the costumes, painted the woods and the castle, rehearsed the singing and speaking and, on top of all that, a dance.

[Photo Shoes]

I had chosen the play *The Shoes That Were Danced to Pieces*. The soul setting out for nightly wanderings which the body does not, or not exactly, remember the next day is a subject found in many cultures. *Die zertanzten Schuhe* are a version of this global motive edited by the Grimm Brothers.

[Photo King – Girl]

I tried to create the basic situations very intensely. There is the old king, a single father unable to cope with raising his twelve daughters. Every morning, the shoes in front of his girls' bedchamber are danced to pieces although the door is carefully locked.

[Photos Adrian 1 – 3]

Finally, the mystery gets unravelled by a poor soldier after an old woman has given him the crucial piece of advice: By not falling asleep, he can enter the „other world“ consciously which enables him to solve the conflicts.

The heart of the play, of course, consisted of the girls' nightly pleasures, being secretly watched by the handsome soldier.

[Photos 1 – 6]

A lot of effort was put into the spectacular boat ride. By singing, the girls enter the mysterious world of night and joy beyond the water. The songs held the play together and allowed the kids to live it up in spite of the rigid form of the play. The ride in the boat ZAPATA was an impressive highlight: at the bow, a piece of blue silk was waved about while the singing children, grasping the rudder, carried the boat through the wild sea.

[Photos Boat 1 – 6]

Eventually, all ends well and the wedding can be celebrated.

[Photo Emma]

The children talking about their success.

[Photo Four Girls]

At first, the applause was received sceptically but then caused great delight.

[Photo Applause]

For a Vienna production I wrote three libretti based on fairy tales edited by the Grimm Brothers.

Fairy tales provide children with the most important „weapon“ in the battle against disruptive forces, – they provide them with confidence. It might be that we put blind faith in life, – just think of what you have to read in the newspapers every day –, but having confidence gives us our only chance, – see Edward Lear´s JUMBLIES. The fairy tale never grows tired of repeating, over and over again: As desperate as a given situation may seem, as small and helpless as you might feel, be confident! Help is near, and it consists of using your own strength. About this, the fairy

tale is uncompromising. If you do not trust in the justice of life, if you rely on your wealth and possessions, on your prestige, your beauty or your unscrupulousness, you will be punished severely. On the other hand, there is one aspect that fairy tales are not so uncompromising about: morals are not clearly defined, and they are not suitable as a basis for the criminal code, – which makes them so alluring, since it inspires us as adults to think anew about profoundly human problems.

Another advantage that fairy tales provide (especially as far as stage performances are concerned) are their immediately understandable symbolic references. A castle means wealth, a deep forest means danger and unforeseeable encounters, animals represent the power of the uncounscious, a king signifies the top level of human hierarchy and a wedding the successful integration into human society; and to inherit a kingdom stands for having matured sufficiently and knowing one's own personality. The fairy tale does not problematise these aspects but uses them as clichés that help to explain a story.

[Photo *Schere*]

The Valiant Little Tailor is one of the best known and best liked fairy tales. It is easy to identify with its „hero“ – or, rather, anti-hero. The initial situation is desperate.

[Photo *Einleitung*]

The poor tailor does not have enough money to buy jam which he would like to put on his bread.

[Photo *Schere Auftrittslied Schneiderlein*]

But he is straightforward, likeable and fun-loving and manages to compensate his physical weakness and his lousy social status by using his courage and cleverness.

[Photo *Blau*]

This fairy tale is a so-called *Aufklärungsmärchen*, a story of enlightenment: man counters mythical powers and the fundamental force of nature with his intellectual faculties.

[Photo *Riesenschuhe*]

He acts, as Kant demanded, „on his own account“, uses reason in his fight against nature's forces (the giants in the wood), overcomes the wild and animal elements (the boar) and disenchant the mythical (the unicorn) which from then on can never exercise power over him again.

[Photo *Garten Petersil*]

At court, which is characterised by vanity, deception, cruelty and insidiousness, the tailor makes his fortune.

[Photo *Ratgeber Streitlied*]

The princess wants to marry the brave hero, and her stupid father agrees.

[Photo *Prinzessin – König Papa*]

The wedding can be celebrated.

[Photo *Balleteuse. Glocken.*]

At night, the princess finds out that her hero husband is an ordinary tailor, but the attempt on his life fails.

[Photo *Bett und Nacht*]

A last monster remains to be defeated. Then the tailor is king for good.

[Photo *Rotes Monster Sakaläm*]

So the fairy tale keeps telling children: Help is near and you get it by using your own strength.