

Case study: Prof. Tsonka Velikova's experience

NAME OF ORGANISATION

The work took place in the National Music Academy in Sofia and involved the efforts of prof. Tsonka Velikova to properly train visually impaired students.

PROJECT NAME

Training program at National Music Academy in Sofia.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The description is taken from the master's thesis without any changes and has been translated in full. The text is an interview, which Ina Gerginova took and presented within her master's thesis.

“The work with visually impaired students is an enormous challenge for a pedagogue, who has no experience and no developed skills in this direction. My first meeting with a blind student presented a huge stress on me. Only afterwards I noticed that my colleagues are experiencing this in the same way due to the fact that we feel respect, pity and to a certain extent, fear of this disadvantage and do not know how to make contact with visually impaired students in a way, which is not traumatizing for them, but giving them confidence. We are also unaware how to behave in a non underestimating manner as far as their potential is concerned. In addition to this, we do not know (since I have not found comprehensive literature on this subject) how they comprehend information, related to theatrical behavior and the visual representation, which exists in theatre. Mostly due to my personal shortage of confidence, I proposed to the student to be involved in those exercises, which she found understandable and feasible and during the remaining time – to listen and when there is something unclear – to ask me. Our exercises included training actor tasks for improving gesture communication. She claimed that she understood everything, but she was not joining the practical work and since I teach group classes in the musical academy, I had no idea how to encourage her to participate in the active tasks. She was listening very attentively with interest, asking questions during the lectures, attended these lectures with pleasure, still I failed to achieve her full participation in the process. The simplest tasks when I was holding her hands and drawing with them the spatial image, which demonstrates how gestures take place, made an exception. Gradually, during my work, when I started meeting other blind or visually impaired students, I understood that the people with sight problems do not know or cannot understand the fact that we are gesticulating and mimicking; that the body, the face and the eye expression participate in the verbal expression. Later on I noticed that my students were using their full foot when taking a step (probably this makes them feel safer), this – when entering the stage – immediately gives away their visual problem. Thanks to another student, who is now a renowned Bulgarian artist, I overcame my anxiousness when working with blind students. In a very original way he helped me to look at his blindness from a different perspective – as a challenge for himself, which is also richness – in the sense of use of the other senses, which we, the sighted ones, have not developed (finger and skin perceptiveness, sense of smell, etc.). One day I found him in the auditorium, which is completely covered in mirrors, walking alongside the walls and touching them – obviously studying the dimensions of the hall, in order to get an idea where we actually work. When he sensed that I had entered, he turned around, I felt embarrassed, but he – sensing this embarrassment - said: „Wow, it appears I am really handsome, how come it took me so long to notice this?“ This way he certainly wanted to show me that only on that day he had become aware that the room is full of mirrors. With his sense of humor

my student overcame the embarrassment, which I felt towards his condition. Before that I was not even able to allow myself unmonitored dialogue freedom, I always used to say “visually impaired” in order not to hurt him, and he would respond: „I am blind, prof. Velikova, I am blind.“ It turned out that he is considering his condition quite reasonably, without any self pity. Thus, gradually, our mutual work improved – he showed me himself how I should approach his education. I no longer took his hands in order to show him the gestures, on the contrary – he was touching my back, my hands and fingers, as well as those of his colleagues, in order to understand the muscular activity, through which we are expressing a certain state of mind – denial, acceptance, agreement, etc. – all those gestures that we have visually adopted from our parents, from our surroundings, from fashionable behavior. I remember the student asking me: “How do I achieve this?“, and I was answering him with: „Just think with your hands, leave nothing unsaid within your body.“ He was worrying that he may at some point over-do it, but I assured him that if something of this kind was happening, we would immediately let him know. I had given him the task to work with his hands and the mimics of his face in search of the motion equivalent of the words, which he wants to say, of the thoughts he wants to express. After the holidays he returned demonstrating a huge development. By means of my observations I also understood that the visually impaired students have a very adequate eye expressiveness, but they usually close their eyes or bow their heads, and precisely because of this we, the surrounding people, are afraid of their white pupils. Due to the fact that my student’s eyes are blue, despite the pale coloring of his pupils, my student looks light-eyed on stage and when he steps out to sing, he expresses everything with his face; from the first row – we - teachers, students, his relatives and friends, could see that he is giving no signs of his impaired vision. Naturally, he was helped out on the stage by a colleague of his, but he was looking at the audience and I could notice that his gaze energy does exit, despite the lack of vision. It is active and communicative, just like with people with normal vision. My student was able to achieve great expressiveness and I was encouraging him in this direction. During 2009 this young student was performing the main role in the concert presentation of the opera “The thief of peaches” (keep in mind that this opera had not been yet presented on stage!), of which I produced the libretto and the composer was prof. Blagovesta Konstantinova. My student managed to express all the feelings and emotions of his character, spontaneously, with the help of his body language. All people present were quite impressed by the fact that he was not allowing even a hint of his blindness – it seemed as if on stage he had completely forgotten about it. One day my student made a joke: „I should be punishing you, prof. Velikova“, „Why?“ – I asked and he replied: „Because the bus drivers are no longer opening the front doors for me.“ He directs his eyes towards the approaching bus, retracts his white walking stick and it seems that the drivers no longer recognize him as blind. Each of my visually impaired students demonstrated a remarkable sense of humor. I got the impression that this sense of humor develops in an attempt for overcoming the others’ pity. They do not have troubles communicating with sighted people, on the contrary – we have problems with their blindness. It is not that we are refusing to communicate with them, but because of the pity we feel, we isolate ourselves from them. Thanks to my blind students I managed to overcome the obstacles in communication with visually impaired and to look upon them as upon any other person. I have conversed with them whether – considering an opportunity discloses itself – they would have an operation in order to enable their vision and in most cases (particularly with those for whom blindness is congenital) the response has been negative or they doubtful, because they are used to living in the audible world, while the visual world is completely unknown, scary and they worry that it might even be disappointing to them. Unfortunately, I discovered that my fellow colleagues, the professors, are mostly worried when they have to look a blind person in the eyes. In order for a blind student to make the fastest and most comprehensive progress he/she should be given the opportunity to work into a casual and supportive environment secured by all teachers. It is with bitterness that I have to testify that at present, this approach is used rarely or even as an exception. Thanks to my practical experience I reached the conclusion that students with visual impairments are able to establish a reasonable energetic communication with their gaze, because their eye muscles

are intact. They lack the habit of using them, but when they develop it, they can squint or open their eyes widely (expressing disbelief, surprise and other emotions), they can blink with their eyelids and in fact – from just a few meters away, thanks to this fulfilling communication, the viewer does not have the feeling of the artist's blindness. However, our society has not been educated to communicate with the visually impaired and to perceive them naturally and casually. As an example for this, my student went to a national singing contest and the organizers required from him to go out on the stage wearing sunglasses; when I asked him why, he answered that according to them – it was more aesthetic this way. He complained that he felt as if he was placed behind a screen. At the last round my student insisted on taking the glasses off and he actually sang without them. Afterwards he won this contest. However, the same happened to him during TV programs where he was interviewed. We, the sighted people, cannot overcome our own inhibitions and prejudices. We use the sunglasses as a barrier between us and blindness, and thus we kinder our own emotions. Society needs to be educated in this direction, because on this stage, we are forced to discover ourselves how we could communicate with the visually impaired ... The visually impaired students often walk with lowered shoulders, their arms hanging slightly forward, ready, if necessary, to avoid an obstacle. This body posture directs their energy downwards. This limits the breathing process and hinders the expansion of the voice during singing. It seems as if no one ever told them they should walk with their heads up, with open eyes, because closing the eyes and lowering the head robs them of the possibility to have a clear facial expression, the starting point for which are the eyes. The eyes are the starting point for the smile, for the lifting of the eyebrows, for the facial muscles, which adequately adapt to the eye expression. Because of this deprivation, the blind develop a frozen face that makes their visual impairment clear even from a distance of one hundred meters. Thanks to the active cooperation with my visually impaired students, I managed to develop an adequate methodology for work with them, which gave a very good result. I discovered that by touching the muscles on my back, my hand, by following every act, which takes place, including a stage fall, a stage fight, gesticulation, the visually impaired students understand how the muscles contract, what tension they are under and how they sculpt the movement, because here it was important for them to feel the energy, which forms each movement and how this leads to the body expression; when I was holding their hands and drawing the image of the movement with them, the result was rather mechanical, there was no life in it, no content or thought, even if it looked reproduced perfectly. I had to find an approach, which was not simply keeping the image, but also presenting the same muscular expression and to be substantiated by the respective energy intensity. In addition to expanding the movement – whether it is a stage slap on the face, a gesture or an element form a dance, the blind student needs to learn with his/her energy, he/she should be able to awaken it, to direct it and expand it in order to achieve the meaning of the movement. Otherwise, the mechanical performance of a movement robs it from emotion, concretization, expressiveness, which are of major importance for the actor's behavior. Without them it would look like a visual imitation, a shape without content, nothing different from unnecessary waving on stage. The most important thing with singing is that, even if we take the world famous Andrea Bocelli, we see behavior typical for the visually impaired. The closed eyes have no expression, people with impaired vision can also direct their gaze to the left, to the right, towards a person, the turning of the eyes also turns the head and the body, directs the intention, triggers a step, a shifting of the weight. The actor behavior is inextricably connected with the energy and the gaze is energy's main engine, it gives it color and meaning, otherwise it is doomed to remain an imitation. It is a pity that not all professors aim at researching this issue, but are content with a student who walks on stage and sings correctly. But this is not what it means to teach someone art. The achievement of the professor would be rooted in helping the student to extract, regardless of the student's educational needs, meaningful behavior. This would be precious, this would build an artist, because meaningful body behavior leads to a meaningful vocal behavior, because the voice is pushed out based on joint mobilization of energy and muscles. If the latter are formal, the singing will also be formal, whether acoustically correct with achieved highs, lows and transitions, and will fail to convert the vocal performance into a touching,

inspirational experience for the audience. We are going to notice the nice voice, the good timber, but the meaningful modulations would be missing. If we listen to such singers we will notice that the voice sounds wonderful, the melody is moving, but there is no greater emotion, nothing to leave us breathless. This can be sensed by the more perceptive audience. The voice should not just float through the air, it should be active, having a direction, an objective, meaning and character. If the professor fails to achieve this, he/she achieves nothing. Considering that I failed my first visually impaired student, I was left with a feeling of pedagogical and purely human dissatisfaction from not being able to find the proper approach. There was a red light turned on in my mind from the thought that I was still needing to explain the processes to myself and when I met the next group of students (one of them with partial vision, but with problems with the work we were doing that had origins in her own energy state on the basis of the development of emotional processes), gradually deepening the thought, discovering the reasons and the methods, I achieved deeper contact and easier understanding, leading to the positive effect of the visually impaired students feeling the need to come and work on par with their fellow colleagues, which was in no way a burden for the latter, on the contrary, they were enjoying the achieved results and were saying (especially for my male student, whom I am mentioning more often than others) that it is as if my visually impaired students were gaining their vision on stage. Unfortunately, I repeat again, life and contacts in (Bulgarian) society fail to maintain and encourage these skills within the visually impaired. Many people lower their gazes when a blind person looks at them, without understanding that energy and content exchanges are taking place between the eyes, just like between projectors. We are thus depriving ourselves from full contact with these people. This is our problem and I have often shared this with my students, they know it.

The problems however do not stop there. The visually impaired children in Bulgaria study in specialized schools, but later on, if they decide to continue with higher education, they go to the mainstream educational institutions and the environment there is not ready for them – it is not that the visually impaired youths are unprepared, we are unprepared. My student (the one who is often mentioned) comes earlier in order to study the environment, each corner of it; he knows all my facial muscles, because he is active and he is looking for ways to show the others how easily they could communicate with him, but not all visually impaired students possess such maturity of life skills. The mass underestimation, the reason for which is the impairment, is creating obstacles before the visually impaired for developing their communication skills.”

AIMS

To create art together with the visually impaired young singers, to help them use their potential for expressiveness in order to achieve exceptional results on stage.

PARTICIPANTS

Students at the National Music Academy in Sofia.

RECRUITMENT OF PARTICIPANTS

No special recruitment is reported.

FACILITATORS

Prof. Tsonka Velikova is a professor at the National Music Academy (NMA) “Prof. Pancho Vladigerov”. She has graduated acting and foundations of stage movement at the National academy for theatre

and film arts “Krastyo Sarafov”, and she has specialized in the state institute of theatre art – Moscow. Prof. Velikova teaches at the NMA since 1980, and as of 2008 she obtained her professor degree in “Foundations of stage movement” in the vocal faculty. Prof. Velikova is creator of the methodology and the program, which establishes the plastic education of the opera singer in NMA. She is a teacher with a long experience of working with visually impaired students. Her researches and methodologies have taken into consideration proven achievements of psycho-somatic medicine and the most modern theatrical methodologies, as well as Yoga breathing practices. By means of fascinating etudes, decisively but also delicately, softly and without violence, the fragile nature of the creative young person imperceptibly accumulates creative useful plastic vocal skills and habits. One establishes confidence in one’s own expressive skills, the inherent performing emotionally plastic potential is released, the psychological and physical comfort is increased, as well as the general theatre culture. The style and etiquette skills, the walk, the work with historical costumes, the stage fight and falling are ready artistic elements, which can be usefully integrated in any stage setting solutions. Prof. Velikova is the author of a number of articles on various theatrical topics, two scientific books, which reflect in a multi-faceted manner the theoretical grounds for the plastic education of the vocal artist. Based on NMA “Prof. Pancho Vladigergov” data: <http://nma.bg/bg/structure/?id=93> [electronic document], checked on 15.07.2015.

PARTNERS/FUNDERS

No specific funding. The process of training visually impaired students was a part of the regular academic activities and responsibilities of prof. Velikova.

OUTCOMES

As described above – student with exceptional singing skills, developed on the basis of the work of prof. Velikova and the support of his fellow students, who all helped him to understand the tension in the body and the strength of the process.

EVALUATION METHODS

Evaluation of the performance and artistic presence of the student during music performances.

EVIDENCE

The testimonials of the students.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

Nothing new in addition to what has been already reported in other case studies and/or in national/transnational reports.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR VISION

The really interesting notion shared by prof. Velikova in her interview is related to the body posture of the visually impaired person and the natural limitation of the use of the entire aerobic capacity of

the lungs. The same goes for the use of sunglasses or the closing of the eyes / lowering of the head, which limits the communication.

Should be taken into consideration during exercises – to point out what is a proper stature and the need to use the eye muscles and to hold the head up.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Gerginova, Ina (2015) *Master's thesis on the topic "Dance and theatre in the creative group process as catalyst for development of the physical self of visually impaired young people"*, New Bulgarian University, Masters program, Scientific coordinator: prof. Georgi Arnaudov