

Bibliodrama as an Instrument for Interreligious and Intercultural Communication

BASICS Conference in Krakow, Poland, 18-21 May, 2013

One of the enormous challenges in Europe – and elsewhere in the world – is how people with different religious and cultural background can live together in harmony and mutual understanding. Within the EU Grundtvig financed BASICS project (2011-2013) the goal has been to find out in what way bibliodrama can be a useful instrument for interreligious and intercultural communication. BASICS stands for *Bibliodrama as a Way of Intercultural Learning for Adults*. Five countries with different background settings have co-operated in this innovative project, Poland, Hungary, Iceland, Turkey and Israel. The initiative came from **Maria Schejbal**, psychodrama assistant/adult educator, and her colleagues at the Bielsko Artistic Association Grodzki Theatre, Bielsko-Biala, Poland. Two members of the European Bibliodrama Network have had leading roles in the project, **Krystyna Sztuka**, psychologist, Poland, and **Péter Varga**, psychodramatist, Hungary.

Dialogue as an instrument for communication

The point of departure for the project partners has been the conviction that “only dialogue allows people to live in unity in diversity”. Both within the European Community and the United Nations a new understanding of cultural diversity has been launched during the last decades, signifying that cultural diversity should not be seen as a hindrance to peaceful co-existence, but as an asset and a source for sustainable development (*Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expression*, UNESCO, 2005). An important source of inspiration has been *The White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue*, published in May 2008 by the Council of Europe. It proposes intercultural dialogue as a new approach to managing the increasing cultural diversity in Europe in a democratic manner. Describing interreligious dialogue as a dimension of intercultural dialogue, the White Paper encourages both religious and civic institutions to engage actively in intercultural dialogue. In a very fruitful way, the BASICS project has responded to the arguments that “intercultural competences should be taught and learned, spaces for intercultural dialogue should be created and widened and intercultural dialogue should be taken to the international level”.

Reading sacred texts

Within the BASICS project, a conference was organized in the beautiful cultural city of Krakow in Poland, May 2013, in which I was fortunate to participate. The theme for the conference was *Reading Sacred Texts – A Source of Division or a Medium for Positive Encounter?* Through workshops and seminars the participants were able to learn from experiences and knowledge gained by the project countries so far. Including a closing conference in Turkey 30 Sept – 4 Oct on the theme *A Peaceful Way to Experience Diversity*, the project will have covered two international conferences as well as two internal project events and extensive implementation of pilot workshops in all the participating countries, drawn up differently

according to background settings in each country. However, a common feature has been the acquisition and implementation of bibliodrama techniques by the facilitators and the formulation of clear goals for the workshops regarding attitudes, skills and knowledge to be gained by the participants with particular emphasis on “intercultural competence”.

European networking

I had heard about the BASICS conference in Krakow during the EBN congress in Hannover 2012 through Krystyna Sztuka, who became a dear friend of mine during those days. This is a good example of the valuable network contacts gained from the meetings of the bibliodrama movement in Europe. During the last year, interreligious bibliodrama has been a focus of interest for me, since Corinna Friedl, minister from Malmö, and myself prepared and implemented the first interreligious bibliodrama in Sweden (Stockholm, 7-8 April 2013). Consequently, my expectations coming to Krakow were high, as well as my wish to learn more about interreligious bibliodrama and reading of sacred texts.

Many participants from Scandinavia and Hungary

When the conference opened at the Jewish Community Centre in the Jewish quarters of Kazimierz, the first surprise to me was the large amount of Scandinavian participants, altogether 10. Most of my new Scandinavian friends seemed to have little knowledge about the European Bibliodrama movement, which gave me a great opportunity for networking.

Apart from an expected majority from Poland, there was a large group from Hungary. During the project, Péter Varga and his co-leader have run a basic training for bibliodrama leaders with participants from a wide range of religious traditions, representing Hungary’s religious and social diversity. The whole training group actually participated in the conference, a fact which contributed in a positive way to the climate of learning within the “international” group! The international representation also included participants from Turkey, Israel, Holland and Belgium. As far as I understood, a number of the conference participants had encountered or worked with bibliodrama mainly in non-religious settings. To me this was a positive surprise, since in Sweden the church-related settings are dominant.

Three workshops during the first conference day

The first day of the conference started with experimental practice of Bibliodrama. Three workshops were offered representing different scenarios that had been developed during the BASICS project. **Anna Łoboda** from Poland presented a model for working with values on the text about the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24). **Péter Varga** facilitated a Polish speaking workshop using psychodramatic methods to enact chapter 2 of the Book of Ruth, telling the story how Naomi and Ruth, her daughter-in-law, arrive in Bethlehem.

I participated in the English speaking workshop led by **Yael Unterman** from Elijah Interfaith Institute in Jerusalem, one of the project partners. With the help of bibliolog techniques we studied chapter 1 of the Book of Ruth, which describes how a famine-struck Jewish family is forced to leave their home in Bethlehem and immigrate to another country, Moab – a story

parallel to present life situations for millions of people around the world. Yael Unterman, who learned the bibliolog from its originator Peter Pitzele, USA, facilitated the workshop in a charismatic and humorous way. After the usual opening stages – a short warm-up, introduction and reading of the text – the facilitator described the situation that the story tells about. She had just marked out a circle on the floor with black scarves.

– You are now the citizens of Bethlehem who are discussing what to do, when the village well has dried out! What are your thoughts? To stay or to leave? – You are now Naomi! We will ask her whose idea it was that the family should leave the village and move to the land of Moab.

Through well chosen questions, the group was helped to identify with the characters of the text, meeting them during different stages of the story. In this way we as participants could illustrate the life of the family from a number of perspectives. What was it like to leave the home village? What was the situation of the family in the new country? Could Naomi accept that her sons married Moabitic women? Yael presented different techniques to deepen the issues and move the story forwards, as well as techniques for sharing with the group in what way the drama had touched us personally. Due to Yael's gifted leadership and the group's strong involvement, the bibliolog workshop let the text come to life in a vibrant and strongly emotional way. This helped us understand the complicity of life conditions for many people in our world today, and – specifically – how they can be influenced by religious beliefs and cultural traditions.

Group discussions

In the afternoon, all the groups met for sharing and discussion around experiences from the workshops, the session masterly chaired by **Peta Jones Pellach**, Elijah Interfaith Institute, Israel. Focus for the discussions were the concepts of *diversity*, *identity* and *unity*, all crucial to the understanding of intercultural and interreligious communication. Important issues of dialogue and tolerance were raised and discussed: How far do we tolerate otherness in our own privacy? What values cannot be compromised? Where do we set our limits? How much do we let go in order to be open to the other person? In accordance with the *White Paper* Peta underlined the necessity of common values when entering into dialogue or at least that each partner is clear about his/her own values. I found the discussion on common values quite interesting from a European perspective. In my group there were people from most of the participating European countries, of Muslim, Jewish and Christian background, and still we were in full agreement on values that cannot be compromised, for example human rights, women's rights, freedom of mind, freedom of speech, truthfulness, integrity and non-violence. Again quoting the *White Paper*: "If there is a European identity to be realised, it will be based on shared fundamental values, respect for common heritage and cultural diversity as well as the respect for the equal dignity of every individual".

Visit to Auschwitz

During the second conference day, the international guests (that is the Grundtvig Grant

Holder) were invited to a guided tour of the former concentration camps in Auschwitz, situated not far from Krakow and sadly enough part of the dark side of our common European heritage. Under proficient guidance and with the help of excellent technical equipment, the group was piloted through the two camps Auschwitz I and Auschwitz II Birkenau. For almost the whole tour, the impressions were so strong that very few words were exchanged within the group. Facing the suffering of millions of camp prisoners, words don't suffice! There are always fresh flowers on the execution site in Auschwitz and at the Memorial in Birkenau.

Lectures and panel discussion

The third day of the conference took place on the *World Day for Cultural Diversity for Dialogue and Development* (21 May). This time the venue was the Jesuit University Ignatianum. The programme was filled with short lectures on issues relating to interreligious dialogue and bibliodrama as a tool for such work. In her introductory speech, the moderator Peta Jones Pellach gave an overview of the field of interreligious dialogue. She underlined that religion can be a powerful force to create meaning and identity in the here and now and inspire hope for the future. Already, there is extensive co-operation between religious traditions, working for common values like peace, justice and protection of the environment. "Dialogue on a deeper level is achieved when there is positive appreciation of difference and recognition that we have much to learn from the wisdom of other traditions", she pointed out. In her experience bibliodrama can be used as a tool both for the search for commonalities and the appreciation of difference. In a skilful way, Peta Jones Pellach monitored the presentations of the day and the concluding panel discussion between the speakers and the auditorium. The eleven presentations made the day very rich, but also a bit hard to digest.

In the search for effective tools for intercultural and interreligious dialogue, all the project partners emphasized on a positive evaluation of their bibliodrama experiments. This was also the case in the feedback from the workshops as an experimental part of the conference. The project partners agreed that bibliodrama must be regarded as a powerful tool for interfaith dialogue. Bibliodramatic roleplay allows participants to connect to each other through the common human situations appearing in the text. Active participation in bibliodrama works as a special training for intercultural competence. It teaches tolerance, listening to each other and accepting different points of view. "In Bibliodrama we improvise, the most creative thing we can do. It provides us with a chance to discover ourselves and other beings and teaches us empathy", one of the lecturers pointed out. The uniqueness of bibliodrama is also underlined in the final report by Peta Jones Pellach, describing the climate in the Jerusalem group:

"... much of what transpired, particularly in later sessions, involved participants sharing very personal insights and uncertainties, expressions of deep faith and raw feelings, which would not be revealed in most environments. Through the medium of the text, each participant's humanity came to the fore. We learnt about each other's faith and we

also learned about each other.” (The Word and the Act, p 81).

Personal impressions from the conference

An important part of a European conference is, of course, the sharing of experiences with other participants. For the bibliodrama movement in Sweden, the exchange with other bibliodramatists in Europe has for long been part of our lifeblood. The BASICS project has created great enthusiasm for bibliodrama, but I noticed that many of the people I talked to were not familiar with the European movements for bibliodrama and bibliolog. As far as I understand, it is very important that the enthusiasm created in the BASICS project could in some way be channeled into the existing European movements for bibliodrama and bibliolog. I believe that this could lead to fruitful mutual inspiration. One way to achieve this is to invite the participants in the BASICS project to the next EBN congress in Finland 2014. Another way is that members of the EBN involve themselves in the process by visiting the learning and communication platform www.bibliodramatic.net, where all the scenarios from the pilot workshops have been published (see below).

My main impression from the conference was the obvious enthusiasm for bibliodrama/ bibliolog as an instrument for intercultural and interreligious dialogue that has been created by the BASICS project. I highly appreciate the possibility to learn from the competence on interfaith dialogue represented by the project partners and to be able to network with them.

Returning to the theme *Reading Sacred Texts – A Source of Division or a Medium for Positive Encounter?* the conclusion of the conference must be that using bibliodrama in order to read sacred texts adds a valuable dimension to the intercultural dialogue, which includes a positive encounter with the other’s culture and individuality as well as their religious beliefs. The summary of the Hungarian experience, which can be read in the final report, however shows that the process can be quite challenging and relies on the length of the process and the trust that can be created in a safe environment. “The length of the group process and the strengthening of the group trust lead to a cathartic conversation, whose emphasis was Christian-Jewish dialogue and the clearing up of historic traumas and misunderstood religious gestures and symbols. We devoted one of the sessions entirely to this dialogue, and this further deepened the tolerance and the openness and readiness for dialogue within the group” (The Word and the Act, p 20).

However, on two points, my expectations of the conference were not quite met. I had expected more participants from non-Christian traditions. I met a few Jewish and Muslim participants, but no representatives of the Dharmic traditions, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism. Maybe it is part of the challenge for interfaith dialogue to involve people outside the three Abrahamic traditions?

Also, all the texts that were used in the workshops were from the Old and the New Testament only. With regard to the theme *Reading sacred texts* I had hoped to gain insight into

sacred texts of other religions and how to use them in bibliodrama in a respectful way. However, by reading the scenarios from the workshops, I have learned that the work in the pilot workshops included for example Golden rule quotations from a number of religions, among others African traditions, the Nordic Hávamal and Hindu and Buddhist sources, as well as texts from the Jewish Hassidic tradition and texts by the Muslim poet Rumi. For those who are interested in learning more about how to use sacred texts in bibliodrama, I recommend studying the scenarios from the BASICS project.

Documentation and evaluation

I would also like to congratulate the planning committee, especially the project co-ordinator Maria Schejbal and her colleagues from the Grodsky Theatre, to a fantastic job. All the planning details of the conference, from the beautifully designed invitation to the excellent conference material, were above anything else that I have experienced. Especially impressive I found the ambitious documentation and evaluation both of the pilot workshops and the conference itself. The careful evaluation has been carried out by **Aleksander Schejbal** and **Łukasz Putyra** at EST Lifelong Learning Centre, Poland. The documentation, which also includes instruction videos created by **Krzysztof Tusiewicz**, can be found on the learning and communication platform www.bibliodramatic.net. There you can find bibliodrama- and bibliolog-based resources to increase your tool-box of activities as well as a space to communicate with other professionals in the field. The platform is open for everyone working with issues related to intercultural communication and interfaith dialogue. It is available at no cost; simply register and begin browsing the site. Also, keep an eye open for the final report from the BASICS project, coming up soon. It is definitely worth reading!

I started my article by referring to one of Europe's biggest challenges, to live in harmony in diversity. The BASICS project has responded to this challenge in a very promising way. My hope is that the bibliodrama movement in Europe will actively involve in the process in the future.

Birgitta Walldén, Certified Psychodramatist, Certified Bibliodramatist
birgitta@wallden.eu

Photos: Krzysztof Tusiewicz

References:

The White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue, Council of Europe, May 2008

http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/intercultural/source/white%20paper_final_revised_en.pdf

Bibliodrama Learning and Communication Platform

www.bibliodramatic.net

More information about the BASICS project can be found at
www.basicsproject.eu

The Word and the Act. Bibliodrama in Intercultural Dialogue, edited by Maria Schejbal.
Final report from the BASICS project, published in five languages, English, Polish,
Hungarian, Icelandic, and Turkish.