

Intercultural dialogue An ideal into practice

I am the way I am
Jacques Prévert

A culture is a point of view to look at the world, a lens to read and understand it, a foundation for the communication of people. Culture is a language that defines us as Human beings. To meet another culture means to look at the world with another pair of eyes, a pair we're not used to. To understand the culture of the other demands to put an effort into it. But how beautiful is the world with a different pair of eyes!

The ensemble Quoiwasmitä was founded bearing in mind the ideal of interculturality. Six artists, four countries, have worked and met in order to create a live performance. Facing tolerance, frustrations, fears, ideals and playfulness, each member has learned about some of the ups and downs of intercultural dialogue. We propose to share our experience during these few pages.

I. Quoiwasmitä

1. Who are we?

It would be impolite to start this report without introducing ourselves first. All the more so that our identity, our goals and our journey have had an impact on everything we will say during the following lines.

Everything began in 2009, as three young puppeteers from three different European countries (Finland, France, Germany) met in Turku, in the puppetry department of the school. Together they worked on the graduation festival. This experience led them to acknowledge that dialogue is at the core of performing arts, for two main reasons:

- Building a common language and a common vocabulary is a necessary condition to the creative process as soon as there are 2 artists or more. It is even more important if they are from different cultural backgrounds and/or professional understanding. Through dialogue, the process is improved by the cultural and individual differences and not strangled by them.
- The dialogue between artists and audience is the completion of the performance. But this dialogue is too often a one-way road.

The ensemble Quoiwasmitä was set up few months later; in order to answer the will to create together and to carry on this artistic and human experience. Because of the troubles we had communicating through a language that is none's mother tongue, we chose a name for the company that brings together the lingual obstacle and the decision of overcoming them:

- Quoi ?
- Was ?
- Mitä ?

3 new artists joined the project (French, German and Lithuanian) and we started the making of *Iarnvith*. During 3 month we experienced intercultural dialogue daily. Together we thought about it. This is our contribution to the subject.

2. Limits of our experiment.

It is essential - in order to understand both our project and the conclusions we will draw now - to describe the composition of the group rigorously. There is an objective diversity in the ensemble, but also a great deal of similarities that have made the process of intercultural dialogue much easier. This is why our experience should be regarded according to our specificities.

The ensemble Quoiwasmitä is made up of:

- 6 individuals,
- 4 nationalities (1 Finnish, 2 French, 2 German, 1 Lithuanian)
- 4 professions (1 pianist, 5 puppeteers including one stage designer and one specialist in literature)
- 3 schools (Turku, Stuttgart, Dijon)

But there are many similarities as well:

- All are women
- All are European citizens,
- 5 out of 6 have lived or live in Turku
- 5 are puppeteers and even though they were trained in different schools (Turku and Stuttgart), those schools are known in Europe for sharing a close understanding of puppetry.
- 4 have followed a class given by Rene Baker
- All speak English.

II. Looking for a definition

1. What is intercultural dialogue?

The definition of intercultural dialogue - as given by the Rainbow Paper - echoes with our political and artistic search. So why not quote it verbatim? Intercultural Dialogue is *"a series of specific encounters, anchored in real space and time between individuals and/or groups with different ethnic, cultural, religious, and linguistic backgrounds and heritage, with the aim of exploring, testing and increasing understanding, awareness, empathy, and respect. The ultimate purpose of Intercultural Dialogue is to create a cooperative and willing environment for overcoming political and social tensions"*¹

Intercultural dialogue is neither equating nor distant respect. It is first and foremost an exchange. We define mathematically three possible cases of cultural meeting:

$$1 + 1 = 1 + 1$$

Case of distant respect. There is no exchange but sterile observation.

$$1 + 1 = 1$$

Case of assimilation. There is no exchange but a loss of identity in the identity of the other or in a new common identity.

$$1 + 1 = 1 + 1 + n$$

Case of intercultural dialogue. The individuals or groups preserve their cultures, but have grown and learnt from each other. « n » cannot be quantified.

¹ Platform for Intercultural Europe – THE RAINBOW PAPER – Intercultural Dialog : From practice to Policy and back. p.4
http://ec.europa.eu/culture/key-documents/doc/forum/rainbowpaper_en.pdf

2. Intercultural experience and contemporary society.

Intercultural dialogue is a political, humanistic and, to a certain extent, idealistic (as soon as it is meant in its universalist dimension). Through the dialogue, I assert that we can live together, that human relationships are not necessarily those of power but of meeting.

We live in a society of diversity, in which immigration and local distinctive identities are part of the everyday life. Many cultures coexist in a shared geographical space going from the family circle to the global, through the regions, the states, the associations... Following *Culture action Europe*, we assert that the intercultural dialogue is “*the way to promote a mutual understanding, a better coexistence, the European citizenship and the gift of belonging*”². We go further and affirm that the intercultural dialogue is the necessary condition to mutual understanding, peaceful and convivial coexistence, world citizenship and gift of belonging. The man is a *social animal*³ in a world of diversity. Through the intercultural dialogue, the diversity goes from a passive collection of differences to an active, voluntary and efficient collaboration.

Living with the open or closed wounds of the past and modern wars, the choice of intercultural dialogue is a political statement.

2. When is there intercultural dialogue?

To answer this question, we first have to answer to: what is culture? Many thinkers and philosophers have attempted to respond to this interrogation but the question is still opened. The intercultural dialogue suggests a dialogue, yes, but between who and who?

The definition given of culture by the UNESCO is symptomatic of what is commonly understood when one says “intercultural dialogue”: culture is “*the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterize a society or social group. It includes not only the arts and letters, but also modes of life, the fundamental rights of the human being, value systems, traditions and beliefs*»⁴. This applies to the sociological and anthropological acceptance of the word. And, beyond any doubt, there is a lot of work to be done through intercultural dialogue in this domain. Observing the past and present cultural conflicts will give all the possible reasons to think this way. However this definition is too often limited to its geographical dimension. We tend to restrict the intercultural dialogue to social groups of different sizes that are defined through their geographical origin(s).

Through our reflexions, we decided to deepen the fields that belong to the “culture”. Can we talk about a professional culture? Or about an individual culture? Does each school or training hand out a specific culture to its students? In the core of a sociological culture, is there a generational culture, parallel to the first one?... Our experience and discussions lead us to answer yes to each of these questions.

Culture seems to be a great set of Russian dolls, one hiding another, all containing many more. From our point of view, the Humanity is the mother doll and the individual is the minimal cultural unit.

We shall go as far as to apply the definition of culture into the field of puppetry where the inanimate is also a dialogue partner. We will observe later how the object is an interlocutor and a support to the human intercultural dialogue.

² Culture Europe Action, explorer le concept de dialogue interculturel
<http://www.cultureactioneurope.org>

³ Aristote, *Ethique à Nicomaque*

⁴ Définition de l'UNESCO de la culture, Déclaration de Mexico sur les politiques culturelles. Conférence mondiale sur les politiques culturelles, Mexico City, 26 juillet - 6 août 1982.

3. Questions around the intercultural dialogue

- *Dialogue between four sociological cultures.*

How does the communication act happen? What are the mediation tools necessary in order to communicate? And how does the intercultural dialogue give birth to a new micro-culture, resulting from exchange and not from assimilation?

- *dialogue between six individuals.*

Do we need to develop an intercultural dialogue when the interlocutors have the same geographical origins? Are there as many experiences of intercultural dialogue as there are individuals?

- *dialogue between four puppeteers, one stage designer and one musician.*

What are the specifics of an intercultural dialogue of professional nature? Are the conflicts or exchanges similar, whether the culture is anthropologic or professional?

- *dialogue with the audience.*

The audience is part of the performing arts. We tend to forget it: there is no show without viewer. All the more so, a show is only completed with the individual and collective reception. Can we go further that the one-way exchange usually in place in theatres; can we go towards reciprocity?

Each audience is different, because of the variety of generations, nationalities, or backgrounds. Each brings a different culture - thus a different view and understanding - that transforms our own understanding of the performance. The audience could become an active partner to the artistic process through intercultural dialogue. Is the performance enough to set off the dialogue? How can we make the start of the dialogue easier?

And a wide, burning question: what is the role of art in intercultural dialogue?

- *intergenerational dialogue.*

Addressed to a wide audience (from 9 to 99 years old), *Iarnvith* allows the artists to meet with different generations, and to those generations to communicate also together. What are the specifics of these dialogues?

- *ecological dialogue.*

The environment one lives and evolves in influences tremendously the culture of the inhabitants. Paradoxically, the nature can provoke a cultural shock to the traveller. In the field of puppetry, one uses this type of cultural elements: the inanimate. The creative process is based on a form of *dialogue* with the materials used. What is the form taken by this peculiar intercultural dialogue? What role does it play in the creative process?

Those are many questions we asked ourselves and will try to answer here, according to our very own experience. We do not think of our project as having a universal purpose. But we do hope that these interrogations will inspire others to wonder as well.

III Intercultural dialogue as a basis for communication.

1. The toolbox of intercultural dialogue

As we came from different cultures, we had to develop a set of skills allowing us to have a peaceful and enjoyable intercultural dialogue, not to forget that our aim was to build a show in three months.

Here is our toolbox list. It is not exhaustive, but it is an open road for more experiences to come. Some of the entries are obvious, yet they deserve to be reminded. So, for a blissful intercultural dialogue, one needs to have or to build:

- **The will to understand the other.** Culture shapes the way we see the world. When people from different cultures meet, their dialogue can easily lead to misunderstandings. Thinking they speak of the same thing, they actually talk over objects of completely different nature. So, in the case of intercultural dialogue, one has to understand what is told, but also what the other means by what he said. This takes time and a great deal of open mindedness. And one has to be conscious that on a tired evening, it might not be possible.

An example among others: spring. In Continental Europe, it is the season of buds, growing leaves, a time of hope. In Finland, spring means depression, melting snow, grey sky... If in the process of the show we decided to use the word "spring" to define the general atmosphere of a scene, we better first precise which spring we mean...

- **The will to talk to the other.** Understanding is one thing, communicate is another, especially when the language used is nobody's mother tongue. In this case, one needs to be patient and allow himself to take the time he needs to express his thoughts. In order for two people to understand each other, they need to get to know each other. One cannot remain silent. This is a process, a process that requires time. The intercultural dialogue happens in the long-term. It is not immediate. The dialogue with the other is a learning process, renewed as many times as there are people meeting. The participants to the intercultural dialogue have to tame each other, from the very beginning.
- **A base to build exchanges.** In the case of *Iarnvith*, we have observed that the intercultural dialogue was accelerated because we had a common goal and subject around which the exchanges were organized. This applied for the dialogue inside the ensemble or between the ensemble and the audience. The performance became the mediation tool of the communications, or a pretext to communicate. Every participant has shared a common experience and used this experience in order to create dialogue. *Iarnvith* has been this base, but also likely the start of a micro-culture, fleeting but real. Because of this common experience, we were – for the duration of the project – the members of the same culture/community. And there is no doubt that this very project has become a part of our individual culture today.
- **A common vocabulary / A common language.** In a field as little spread as puppetry, the professional divergences are many, whether they concern the way of working, the understanding of stage or that of the puppet/object. There are different cultures of puppetry, from a country to another, a school to another, a theatre group to another. The diversity of names given in order to define the profession reveals this phenomena: *Figuren Theater* (Theatre of figures) in Stuttgart, *Puppenspiel* (Doll play) in Berlin, *arts de la marionette*

(the arts of puppetry) in Charleville-Mézières, *Visual Theatre* in Jerusalem, *Nukketatteri* (Doll theatre) in Turku... The codes of manipulation, the respect for the object, the movements, the understanding of the puppeteer's role, the hierarchy of the manipulators (...) are as many subjects that need a dialogue and the creation of a common technical and professional vocabulary. We had to build our own dictionary, made from everyone's contributions, puppeteers, stage designer and musician. Such intercultural dialogue was a necessary condition to creating together and was not made without difficulties. For it is not easy to get over the fear of not knowing enough, of not being able to change, to get over the conviction of being right. At the end of the ordeal of learning through the intercultural dialogue – whether it ends up in a success, a failure or a mix of both – one comes out grown up as a professional and as a human. There is no doubt that a professionally oriented intercultural dialogue affects the individuals and thus the society/culture he belongs to. Such projects serve as basis to the intercultural construction as wished by the Rainbow Platform. They develop the *competences* of the participants to *dialogue through actions*⁵.

- **A common references system.** Living together combined with the desire of sharing has led – without this being planned – to the appearance of a common reference system between the members of the group. It would not be exaggerate to assert that a culture (in the sociological acceptance of the word) was born during those three months. We had daily experiences together, we shared our musics, readings, recipes, we developed a form of English impregnated with all of our mother tongues... All these shared elements, born from the intercultural dialogue, have led to a new culture. And this culture is not an assimilation of our cultures (that kept their own integrity) but results from growing together.

$$1 + 1 + 1 + 1 + 1 + 1 = 1 + 1 + 1 + 1 + 1 + 1 + n$$

2. The *devising material* method in the puppeteer intercultural dialogue

Without knowing it, Rene Baker – British specialist of puppetry – has played a great role on the intercultural dimension of the *Iarnvith* project. Among the members of the ensemble, four followed her course in Turku in 2009 and learnt there a very specific approach of the stage material and of the creative process: the *devising material method*. The principles of this method lead to an intercultural dialogue in the artistic work.

Devising material means that :

- everyone (on stage or not) participates actively to the creative process, proposing images, sounds, ideas, desires, stories...
- the vector for every proposition is the material. By material, we mean any object, text, stage design, space, music, sound, light, puppet or puppeteer; everything that is in the theatre space. It is possible in such approach to work without the use of the language.

⁵ Platform for Intercultural Europe – THE RAINBOW PAPER – Intercultural Dialog : From practice to Policy and back. p.4

http://ec.europa.eu/culture/key-documents/doc/forum/rainbowpaper_en.pdf

Opening the text, we find « the three principles of the intercultural expérience » : dialogue, compétence, action.

- The material is the main source of stage pictures. **The puppeteer listens to the material more than he invents.** This aspect certainly deserves an illustration in order to be understood. Generally, the puppeteer puppeteers the puppet in order to obtain what he wants from it. With the devising material method, the puppeteer explores the puppet in order to discover the movement it offers. Many movements appear, that would not have been possibly imagined intellectually. In the first case, the puppeteer makes the puppet walk, in the second he helps it walk. To do so, the manipulator has to create a form of dialogue with the material.

We digress here to push our reflexions further and assert that this form of communication between the puppeteer and the material is an – extreme – form of intercultural dialogue. The material expresses itself through a bilateral exchange manipulator – manipulated. This exchange can be analyzed through 2 levels:

a) **Cultural aspects of the material.** One reads a culture (language, expression of emotions, distinctive characteristics, values...) of the wood, a culture of the iron, a culture of the body, a culture of the voice, of the text, a culture of the lights and sounds, etc... Obviously these cultures proceed from an anthropomorphist or even animistic projection of the human culture onto the inanimate. During the creative process, the cultures of these materials are combined within a space where everything is meaningful: the theatre space is a space of meanings. The directing work must take into account the cultural values of the inanimate as understood in the human cultures. This work is complicated because of the diversity of the audiences. White for an Indian will not refer to the same cultural space as white for a European. The material reflects the Human cultures and will form the basis of the intercultural dialogue established between the puppeteer and his audience.

b) **The material as an interlocutor.** For the puppeteer, the material is a culture in itself with which a dialogue will be created. Puppeteer and material build a common language and vocabulary (of movements, emotions, rhythms...), they discover each other with time, willingly. Some days are good, some less (especially if the wood gets stubborn). As awkward as it may seem, this intercultural dialogue is fairly close to that between human beings. Our toolbox can be applied point after point.

- The play and the pleasure of *discovering* together (should) describe the general atmosphere of the rehearsals. The director does not have to produce intellectually the stage pictures. These appear during the process and serve as basis for the show to come. Everything is created here and now. Then the director's work is to organize all these proposals in order to build a coherent dramaturgy. And this is no small work...

The stage material, being created together, on a daily basis, the complicity and the mutual understanding of the participants around the project grows proportionally. The pictures are built over time, resulting from yesterday's pictures, preparing the ground for the pictures to come the day after. A culture – almost a mythology – is formed with and around the show. Through the intercultural dialogue, we write a new page of our culture; a new culture that intend to enter the culture(s) of the audiences.

The devising material method matches some fundamentals of the intercultural dialogue and creates favourable circumstances to it happening: some kind of participative democracy, respect of everyone, exchange and collaboration, conviviality.

IV. « The convivial compromise »⁶

This expression is used in the first pages of the rainbow paper and left us somewhat confused. The adjective « convivial » does not raise any kind of problems. But the idea of compromise... The compromise is a “*state, intermediary solution, middle term between two extremes*” or to lesser evil “*a settlement of differences by mutual concessions*”⁷. Mathematically, the expression *convivial compromise* would be:

$$1 + 1 = 1 \text{ (with a smile)}$$

Ideally, we would reject any idea of compromise, as a principle. And often we did not have to resort to compromise, even a convivial one. But we cannot assert that we did not ever had to use it during those three months.

The intercultural dialogue is easy as long as it relates to fields that are unknown to one of the interlocutors. We accept gladly to learn from the other one what we don't know. But how to keep a constructive intercultural dialogue if both interlocutors have a strong and diverse knowledge around the subject discussed? Gustave Thibon wrote with reasons: “*We can always learn what we don't know, not what we think we know*”⁸. Generally speaking, the dialogue between people of diverse professions was easier than the dialogues between colleagues. Even though there are more cultural differences in the first case, the promiscuity in the second reinforces conflicting tendencies ... because the egos come on stage.

The conviction of being right is the biggest obstacle we had faced. Certain to have the solution, we don't listen anymore. The intercultural dialogue becomes a dialogue of deaf. The symptoms are: silence, picky attitude, systematic contestation, proving the other one wrong (i.e. I show you this cannot work and why and make everything so it practically does not work). Questioning one's culture because of the other's culture is felt as being questioning one's identity.

To defuse this type of situation (and this is an unavoidable situation), the compromise is an efficient tool. However, accepting the compromise does not mean to compromise! The *convivial compromise* signifies that we give more weight to what we can become together, not to what makes our difference over a detail. Cultures are not a set of “*irreconcilable*”⁹ differences. Instead, differences are signs for the diversity of possibilities. “*We consider diversity as a fundamental human asset. Peaceful coexistence opens up new avenues of productive cooperation. Intercultural Dialogue can turn our diversity away from being socio-cultural difference into active inter-group collaboration. Diversity necessitates exchange and negotiation over values and actions.*”¹⁰. There is not one single path that can be followed but as many paths as there are cultures. The intercultural dialogue brings us to the place where we learn how to accept to take from time to time the path of the other one. By doing so, we widen our range of possibilities, in a convivial manner.

It is not always easy. We have to tackle our own attitude and state of mind. We shall not forget that “*Intercultural action should be motivated by a sense of human solidarity and increase where possible **social cohesion** as well as **individual freedom***”¹¹.

⁶ THE RAINBOW PAPER – Intercultural Dialog : From practice to Policy and back. p.3

⁷ Trésor de la langue française informatisé (TLFI)
www.cnrtl.fr/definition/compromis

⁸ Gustave Thibon, *L'ignorance étoilée*, éd Fayard, 1984.

⁹ Rainbow Paper p 5

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid. (we underline)

V. Importance of the arts to set up intercultural dialogue in contemporary society

We are convinced that art is an essential and efficient mean to establish intercultural dialogue. Though its impact cannot be measured mathematically (a pity we cannot attempt a new mathematical translation), the experience we shared **with** the audience gave us enough reasons to assert that art as a great part to play in creating intercultural meetings.

We'll start by quoting in extenso a chapter from the Rainbow paper, for it resume perfectly our feelings on the matter: *"The arts play a key role in Intercultural Dialogue. Intercultural Dialogue is conducted by and between artists; their audiences are inspired accordingly. Many works of art communicate across borders and boundaries and so they can be seen as vehicles of Intercultural Dialogue. Much art draws from many different cultures and is thus intrinsically intercultural. The arts also facilitate participatory processes. Active involvement in artistic and cultural activities allows for an easier understanding of other perspectives, the existence of other memories and histories, the capacity to take risks, the ability to be confident in your peers, the skills to be creative, the knowledge to analyse reality critically. The participation of citizens in cultural activities helps prevent discrimination. Today, the process of human development, which is individual, cannot be complete without the unique inputs provided by the arts"* ¹².

With *Iarnvith*, Quoiwasmitä wanted to initiate a philosophical and sociological debate with the audience concerning childhood and the taboos of death and illness in Europe, with a special focus on escapism. A heavy subject, for a wide audience (9+) told through the story of Mia, an eight years old girl, whose mother dies little by little from cancer and whose father does not manage to communicate. Mia escapes from the reality and builds her own imaginary place that she fills with folks more or less good-minded. The picturing of death and illness is highly cultural and varies according to the societies. In our desire to establish an exchange with the audience, we had to establish an intercultural dialogue between groups of different social backgrounds, generations and ethnical origins. This was necessary to setting a basis for discussion.

In order to make the dialogue easier, we have been using for the performance the structure of fairy tales (a universal structure), but also referred to local fairy tales (specific) we had collected in Finland, France and Germany. As we discussed with the audience after the show, the German and Finnish audiences – even though they saw the same performance – came to talk about the subjects first by using a known cultural element. The Kalevala (Finnish mythology) was the starting point of one conversation in Turku ; Hansel and Gretel that of a discussion in Flensburg. The intercultural dialogue (as sharing cultures) is easier through the presence of recognized cultural patterns for the ones exchanging. The local starting point allows one to get quickly over cultural regionalism and reach the intercultural sharing. Reassured, the interlocutors can meet.

The point of views and the centres of interest are changing according to the generation, the social situation, the ethnical origin. Children wanted to discuss about imagination by talking around the King of the Forest. The adults discussed imagination through the drawings of children. Children were taken by the story and the characters; the adults shared first their impressions about the semiotic system (metaphors, symbols, references) of the performance. The children wanted to know where the mother was. A

¹² Rainbow paper p.10

little girl from a disadvantaged area in Flensburg offered to Mia her Snow-White Barbie to replace the mother. The parents were discussing with us about the use and meanings of the white scarf, symbol of the mother.

Behind those differences, it became very clear that – whatever culture – the audience members referred to their own personal experiences when discussing. Children talked about their fathers who also read newspapers, adults about their parents sometimes gone already, elders about their children... *Experience existence*¹³. “I” is the starting point for the intercultural dialogue. It addresses the “you” of the other viewers who listen and often find themselves in this “I”. The intercultural dialogue is then the exchange of experiences between individuals opening and offering themselves.

We can underline the role of *Iarnvith* in this phenomenon. The performance served as a cultural ground on which the different cultures could communicate. For dialogue needs a shared reference system in order to lead to a mutual understanding. Art (as a cultural act) is a support to cultures meeting each other.

Conclusion(s)

Jacques Prévert wrote *I am as I am*, a poem that claims the right to be who we are and to meet the other one without losing our identity on the way. With *Iarnvith*, we assert that the intercultural dialogue is a form of exchange that

- acknowledges the right to exist of every culture,
- implies a willing and convivial effort to understand each other,
- supports the development of every culture through the meeting with another,
- celebrates the diversity and similarity of all.

The borders are thin between interculturality, assimilation and impenetrable integrity. The practice of intercultural dialogue is always uncertain, tending to one or the other extreme. Thus the people have to renew their efforts and be conscious of their attitude and actions. Our modern societies invite to excessive cultural relationship, between the globalisation (which erases differences and identities) and a world that closes itself behind xenophobia. The intercultural dialogue, whatever shape he takes – artistic, political, social, economical... - is the tool of living together in conviviality. Local initiatives to enhance intercultural dialogue have to be encouraged and tried. To the public politics and all the members of the Humanity to make a step.

¹³ Sartre’s existentialism motto.