

'Jumping Mouse' and 'Sisimizi'

THEATRE Zeppelin from Hamburg (Germany) and Dhow Countries Music Academy (DCMA) stage childrens theatre in Zanzibar Stephanie Grau, theatre director of the Theater School "Theater Zeppelin" in Hamburg, Germany, is visiting Zanzibar and performed at the Dhow Countries Music Academy (DCMA) her play "Jumping Mouse" and directed the Kiswahili play "Sisimizi". Grau makes theatre now for over 30 years, mainly with children and youth, but she also made several documentary films for German TV about children's theatre as well as feature films for children. In February this year she received a prize for her latest theatre play. 'Daily News' interviewed Stephanie Grau at the DCMA.

Question: Can you tell us more about the Theatre Zeppelin?

Stephanie Grau: Theatre Zeppelin was founded in 1979 as a place, where children play theatre for children. It is now a theatre school for about 200 children from aged 6 to 20 playing in 17 ensembles. We have our own stage on a boat on one of the many canals in Hamburg. And each year we have 100 performances. So we're pretty busy.

Question: What kind of theatre do you play?

Stephanie Grau: That depends. Often we use stories from childrens books. But frequently the children make up their own story, coming from their own experiences. And that is very important, to express oneself through theatre. I love to work in themes that represent our me and the future.

Question: How did this cooperation with DCMA come about?

Stephanie Grau: Muecke Hünckhardt, the new CEO of the Dhow Countries Music Academy, is an old friend of mine. She is from Hamburg, like me and for many years she worked in culture management and we made several projects together. So when I planned to

come and visit her in Zanzibar, we immediately thought about it how my visit could also benefit the music school here in Zanzibar, especially the children's outreach program of DCMA.

Question: So what exactly did you do here in Zanzibar?

Stephanie Grau: We did two things here, actually. First of all, I met here with one of DCMA's teachers, Said Vuai, who works in the academy's children's program. He has a lot of experience in this field. He lived for several years in Germany worked there with kindergarten children teaching them music. He told me a short story of Sisimizi and then we worked for a month together making a theatre play out of it.

Secondly, I came to perform my play, the "Jumping Mouse". It is an old Native American fairy tale about a small mouse that hears a strange sound and tries to find out where it comes from. On this dangerous journey the little mouse shows how courageous and how helpful it is. In the end, it is transformed into an eagle.

Question: And what is "Sisimizi" about?

Stephanie Grau: It's about a small ant that loses her family

and wanders alone through the forest. She's very hungry and afraid. But she finds a house full of food and she manages to stay and defend it against the big animals that want to drive her away.

Question: Is it a theatre play only for children?

Stephanie Grau: Not necessarily. DCMA invited children from various Nursery and Primary Schools in Zanzibar; so most kids in the audience were quite young. But like every good story there's more than one

meaning to it. For the very young children it's more the fun to play in this adventure. Older children and adults maybe see more the philosophical message.

Question: Which is?

Stephanie Grau: Well, in both stories we have very small but very brave animals. But they take their lives in their own hand and although they're small, by being smart and helpful they make a lot of difference in the lives of others.

Question: You like to work with children. Why?

Stephanie Grau: First of all, I like children very much. And I think theatre for children is extremely important. A society without culture is a terrible place. Our children are the future of our society and if we want them to grow up to be able to face the challenges of the future, they have to be inspired, creative adults. Inspiration and creativity is what culture and theatre is all about. Playing theatre comes natural to children; role-play is part of normal children's play. By taking on the role of someone else, we can experiment with our life. And of course, theatre is a wonderful way to express one's ideas and communicate them to others.

Question: As we heard in your first time to Africa? How was it for you working in this new environment?

Stephanie Grau: It all went very, very well. All people involved worked very hard. For example, for "Sisimizi" we had to build a complete stage, with small Zanzibari door and all. A local carpenter did it in a matter of one week. We worked with local Tinga Tinga painters. It went very, very smooth.

Question: What is planned for the future?

Stephanie Grau: I can't say yet exactly. We hope of course that this is just the beginning. Co-operation works both ways. It would be wonderful, if we could bring "Sisimizi" to Hamburg. It would be very inspiring for our children, too, to be exposed to an African play. And of course, that much is sure "Sisimizi" will travel through schools as well as on the island and on the mainland.

Question: Do you already know when the play will be shown in Dar es Salaam?

Stephanie Grau: Not exactly. DCMA is still working out the dates for performances in Dar es Salaam and other towns. But it will be in June or July.



The CEO of the Dhow Countries Music Academy (DCMA) Muecke Hünckhardt (left), Said Vuai (centre) and Stephanie Grau during the DCMA first show in Zanzibar recently. (Photo by a correspondent)

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