

10CHILDREN SEEKS TO USE COMPELLING STORIES OF POVERTY TO ENCOURAGE RULERS TO CHANGE



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A colorful supermarket with bulging shelves. There is a long line at the checkout. A woman's bank card refuses, even as she reluctantly abandons the broccoli and chips-in-the-offer. Her son gets angry and at the same time he tries to soothe the shame that takes hold of his mother. The line grows and people grumble more and more viciously.

Thus opens *Das Pommes-Paradies*, the second performance of 10CHILDREN - art for change, the movement with which director Liesbeth Coltof and dramaturg Dennis Meyer focus in ten cities around the world on the pain and resilience of children growing up in abject poverty.

In each city, together with artistic and social partners, a performance, a documentary, an exhibition and an educational project will be developed around a specific aspect of poverty. After Cleveland, the second edition also took place in a Western city: Düsseldorf. Is Cleveland one of the poorest cities in the United States; Düsseldorf, on the contrary, is one of the richest cities in Europe. Working closely with D'Haus Junges Schauspiel, Coltof and Meyer conducted research on the theme of "healthy food and malnutrition" in several of Düsseldorf's disadvantaged neighborhoods.

Coltof: "Together with German-Turkish playwright Akin Emanuel Şipal, we listened to the stories of children and their families. We met children who find it normal not to eat at night twice a week. We spoke with a divorced father who himself does not eat all week to be able to put healthy meals on the table at least the three days a week his daughters are with him.

We visited with a Syrian family with eight children who fled two years ago and are trying to cope. And we spoke with a medical couple who introduced the term 'silent hunger': the continuous hunger caused by eating food that lacks good nutrients.

It is striking that children from immigrant families eat better than German children. Many different cultures traditionally cook with vegetables; that knowledge is still there. That happens much less in German food culture. Eating habits, and thus unhealthy eating habits, often pass from generation to generation. Just like poverty. One of Düsseldorf's poorest neighborhoods is a triangular area between two highways and a factory. In the 1950s, homeless people were housed there. Their children, grandchildren and even great-grandchildren still live there. They feel at home and safe there, but unemployment is high. I celebrated Christmas there. Children and their parents gathered on a bare lawn with a tiny log cabin and decorated pergola. There was soup. It was cold and it rained. But they celebrated Christmas together with the whole neighborhood."

Based on all those conversations and stories, Şipal wrote *Das Pommes-Paradies*. Out of frustration with the humiliation at the checkout, son Emin (Cem Bingöl) decides to stay in the supermarket after closing time to fill his cart with groceries. To his surprise, the supermarket at night is anything but quiet. Vegetables and fruits are watching him closely and the broccoli (Leon Schamlott) is competing with the chips (led by the beautifully singing Aylin Celik) over who is the most popular. Clearly, the broccoli loses out. But Şipal uses a great sense of humor in his theatrical text to exploit the fact that an unloved underdog in real life, can almost automatically count on the audience's sympathy on stage. The entire audience, half of which consisted of children and adolescents during the premiere, loudly scanned his name. The audience cheers and applauds, making the broccoli the favorite and playfully raising awareness of the importance of healthy food.

Emin also meets a hungry moth, an overworked supermarket manager and the girl Johanna (Yulia Yáñez Schmidt). She has moved into the supermarket. When the school psychologist suggested to her that she was just a kid and needed help because she wasn't doing so well in school, she quit. At home, with her gambling father laid off because of a bad back due to heavy lifting, she hasn't been a child for a long time. She vacuums, runs errands on what little money there is, and she makes cheese toast for her father while going to school on an empty stomach herself. So she certainly does not want to be treated as a child. In a touching scene, it becomes clear that good intentions to help children often meet with misunderstanding, because the story of the child herself is not really heard and understood.

Present at the vibrant premiere at Junges Schauspiel are the mayor of Düsseldorf, the deputy minister for arts and sciences of the state of North Rhine-Westphalia and the consul of the Dutch Consulate General in Düsseldorf. The deputy minister, Michael Reitemeyer, expressed in his opening remarks how much the topic affects him personally. He knows the feeling of "not being allowed to participate" from himself as a child playing soccer in the neighborhood. He sees it as one of his tasks to do something for children who, because of their position, cannot structurally participate in society. The mayor, Stephan Keller, is visibly moved afterwards. He takes a picture with the young people in the audience.

Meyer: "One of the goals of 10CHILDREN is to touch the people who have the power and money to change the lives of children living in poverty with compelling stories. The visible

presence of these dignitaries highlights the social significance and can further get the 10CHILDREN movement rolling. "If the mayor thinks it's important, I can think it's important, too," he said. We find, even after Cleveland, that jump-offs are occurring. The Düsseldorf Office for Social and Youth Affairs, for example, together with Junges Schauspiel, has set up an educational project around this topic that will continue for another year and a half. Similar projects are being set up in the US following our example. Although we are still looking for funding to be able to shape the project in all ten cities, we are building a powerful movement in which people inspire and support each other to really make a difference.