

Guignol in the Squares

La Friche la Belle de Mai

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Aline Soler MY PLACE IN THE WORLD

I can only begin to explain what the problematic of employment and apprenticeship is at La Friche la Belle de Mai by starting with a definition of who I am, and am not, there. I am not a social worker, I am not a therapist, I am not an administrator, I am not responsible for the employees, I am not an artist. The Friche helps me solve my real identity problem by obliging me to continually invent and search for a meaning to give to the multiple and various things I do. This place is unique because it allows things and people who are looking for each other and who want to try out a different contact with work, life, culture and creation, to be there. The (undefinable) job I do only exists in this unique place and undoubtedly could not exist anywhere else.

One of the peculiarities of this project is of promoting initiative and research, allowing every person to find their own place, to "find their own place in the world". Consequently another characteristic is the imperative need - made evident because of its strength - to put the artist's perspective at the heart of all actions and activities as the reference for reality.

La Friche is not an organisation for apprenticeship (many such organisations exist in France operating within different fields), it is a living structure based on some strong principles: giving weight to the artist's perspective to regulate the work, opening towards the town and its neighbourhoods, welcoming an audience with integration difficulties, giving space to artists' hypotheses and undertakings and to sharing their points of view.

I can resume the concrete activity addressed to the above-mentioned audience in three points:

1. "... our aim is that they should be more beautiful on leaving than on arriving. We invite these people so that they



can become aware of their language, actions and perspective", says Armand Gatti, talking of the seventy workshop participants being trained in the wonderful adventure of *Marseilles: Adam, What?* This workshop which took place from March to July 1993, did not aim to make professional theatre practitioners of the participants. The interest lay within the dynamic of the work to achieve a project which created the awareness mentioned by Gatti. Other minor activities are organised, involving sharing and meeting in practical workshops in theatre, plastic arts, writing, hip-hop and reggae music which allow a different contact to culture, artistic work and professional artists.

2. To allow socially excluded people, who are attracted by the artistic and cultural environment, to find their place and develop a professional project which progressively integrates a job while getting to know the reality of the field of work.

3. To create new skills in learning about the traditional Guignol puppets, opening up a path towards a profession for people who would never have thought of doing such a job before. This activity was stimulated by the demand of Massalia Theatre, an artistic producer, and by the possibilities of investing in creating puppet plays for the parks and public gardens of Marseilles.

The richness and interest of a place like La Friche (its rarity as well) lies in its capacity to be permanently open to demands coming from the town, from its inhabitants and from the artists. Exchange happens naturally here, while opposing the fatality of exclusion by simply recreating social ties in a space which belongs to the artists, a place in the world for those who wish to have it. And if I still am not able to say who I am, I clearly know what I do there and why I do it.

Marie-Josée Ordener

GUIGNOL IN THE SQUARES

A year ago they were twelve, twelve unqualified long-term unemployed, who had just left school or who were living in difficult neighbourhoods in Marseilles. Right now they are ten, working in a hundred square metre workshop right inside the Friche la Belle de Mai. They work on different puppet show projects. Fifteen co-operators, directors, puppeteers, visual artists, actors, technicians and singers have contributed with more than eight hundred hours of training.

Philippe Foulquié, director of Massalia Puppet Theatre and of the Friche la Belle de Mai started this project which allows ten people the opportunity to become professional puppeteers and work in the parks of Marseilles.

In April 1996 Philippe gave me the task of putting the project down on paper (within the frame of neighbourhood cultural projects, subsidised by the Ministry of Culture) and to make it actually happen between June '96 and October '98. I have worked as a puppeteer with various companies for fifteen years, and although I do not have any experience as a teacher or animator, this project has filled me with passion and I have been caught up in it body and soul now for twenty-seven months.

It has been twenty-seven months of crazy adventure, while Massalia Theatre - the first permanent puppet theatre in France - and I together discovered for the first time this new pole of activity: training. Desire and energy are the two master words guiding this professional puppeteer training, that we want as much as possible to centre around the various aspects of the craft.

It is important that each learning phase of the different techniques should be immediately reinvested in a proposal of play in front of an audience. These passages back

and forth are essential for me. After five weeks of training we were already in the parks presenting rehearsals of *Pulcinella*. This could seem premature but it allowed us to find a new centre for the work around the reality of the parks and understand more clearly where to place our efforts.

After some months of work, I realised how ambitious, but also how ambiguous, our project was. It was ambitious because we were proposing a style of life, more than a training programme, to these young people. We were proposing a craft in which passion has to be the conducting element, in which you work for yourself to give to others and do not take up work offered from the outside, a craft in which questioning is constant, where uncertainty is always present.

The fragility of some, related to their personal investment, became evident during the first creative phase. Having other people looking and judging the work released an aggressiveness in some participants that could only be calmed down with a special time of reflection, during which each person had the opportunity to express their difficulties relating to the group and to the teachers. The whole Massalia team was present together with the teachers.

Our project was ambiguous because the people recruited had not previously had the intention of becoming puppeteers and it was us who had solicited them to this, and this led us to question ourselves: "Are we able to create artists?" "Are we able to set forth vocations which are necessary in such a profession?"

After a year of work two people preferred to leave because they found another training course which suited their wishes and abilities better.

Up until now, socially speaking, this training has shown itself to be a success. It has at last given a chance to these twelve people to "settle" and acquire a level of

normality in the face of everyday life; it has given them the opportunity to get up in the morning to go to a workshop where they find a structure which demands something from them and permits them to demand something from it in return.

We have not been able to solve all the problems in relation to the social aspects (apartments, insurance, various allocations...) as part of the training course itself, but we have worked in close collaboration with the social workers of the P.L.I.E. (Local Economic Integration Planning). Our privileged connection with various social structures has allowed us to rapidly solve some of the problems (lodging amongst others).

My role as a central point of reference in the workshop is developing into accompanying each person so as to give them confidence in their work. It is essential that someone is there to listen, listen and listen again. The workshop is far from being serene as the personalities are very strong. Not everyone will become a puppeteer, but this time allows them to reformulate their wishes and us to follow them in the achievement of their future projects.

Out of twelve people at the beginning, nine still have the aim of working with puppet theatre in the parks. Artistically, they have very different personalities, and are at very different levels, but I admire the work they do. A year ago most of them did not even know what a glove puppet was, today they build all they need, invent the stories and play in the parks. Possibly the work produced is not appreciated, but it cannot be denied that they have come a long way since the 26th of June 1996.

This crazy adventure guided by a team (Massalia, Friche System), is full of imperfections, of flea size leaps and giant steps. We build the training like a puzzle, to achieve the image we have in our minds, we

work at little pieces that slowly start fitting together. We still have a year to bring together all the pieces, to say that we chose the right path, to confirm that the work consists in doing, undoing and doing again, knowing that uncertainty will always be present up until the day one is in the parks in front of the public, and the meeting is good, full of children calling, and finally one is *oneself* with one's own work, proud of being its author.

Translated from French by Julia Varley

ALINE SOLER (France) was born in 1959. She has worked for eight years as an administrator for regional training programmes and two years with public relations for Théâtre Toursky. She is currently working at La Friche la Belle de Mai and producing sound and radio recordings.

MARIE-JOSÉE ORDENER (France) was born in 1963. She now lives in Marseilles with her two children. She has been working with puppet theatre since 1983 and since 1996 has directed the project *Guignol dans les squares* with Théâtre Massalia. From 1993 to 1996 she collaborated with Théâtre des Cuisines and Compagnie Sanvic.

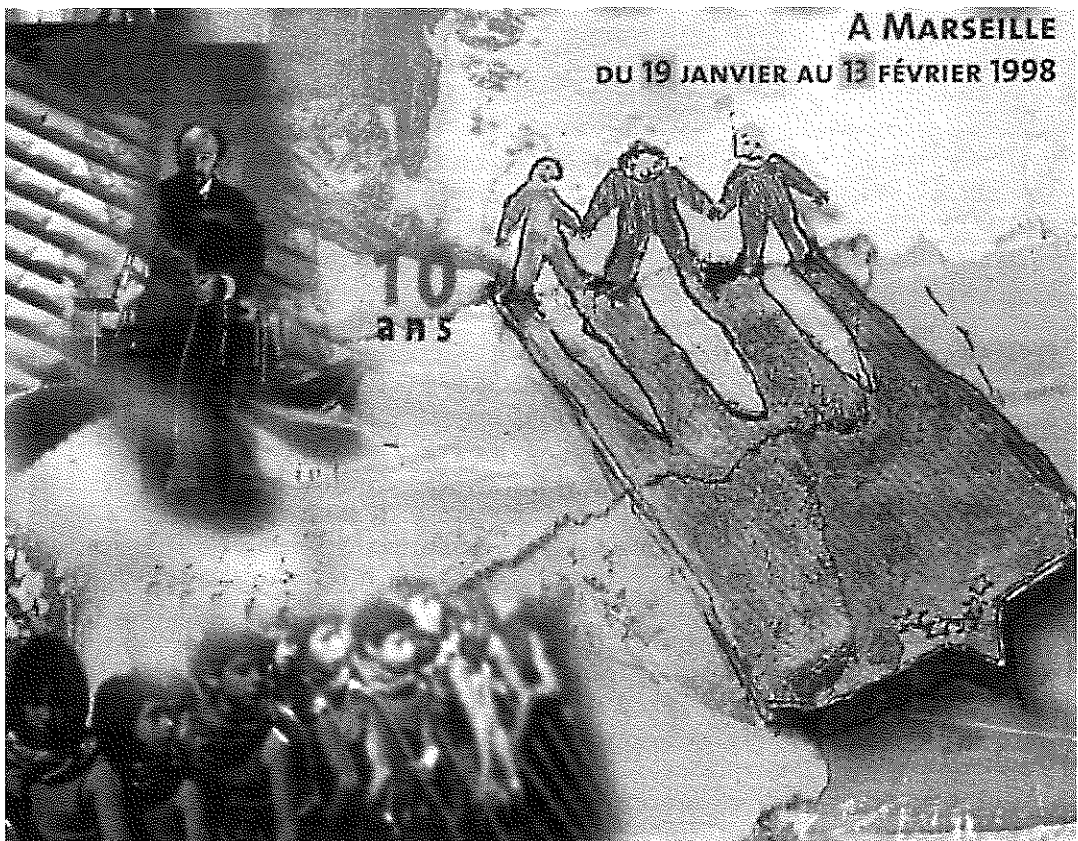


Illustration from a poster of La Friche la Belle de Mai for the tenth anniversary of Théâtre Massalia.