

Clean Clothes

The Berlin-based theatre group *Piquete* uses image theatre techniques to bring campaign issues onto German streets

Slowly, slowly the bodies are moving from the street towards a big table of clothes in the centre of a "stage" marked by a big plastic sheet on the ground, surreally accompanied by one of those romantic Austrian waltzes. The sign on the table reads "Summer Sale". When they have reached the table, the real fight begins: everybody struggles to grab a piece of red textile, examine it and try it on – all in slow motion. Second scene: the fashion show. The same actors using the same red fabrics can be seen as models on a catwalk, accompanied by the French MC Solaar's "Victime de la mode" (victim of fashion) rap. Suddenly someone grabs a microphone and tells the audience about the situation of *maquila* workers in Latin America, South East Asia and Eastern Europe – while the fashion show continues. Third scene: the *maquila*. Four women working hard on a long row of red cloth, to the metallic tick-tock rhythm of a big human clock, getting faster and faster. Beside them, their boss sits on a chair, reading a newspaper and examining their work from time to time. At some stage, a well-dressed woman appears with a microphone and gives a running commentary on the situation as if it was a fashion show in "Karstadt", one of the big German department stores. The rhythm gets faster and faster and faster till one of the workers breaks down and is replaced by another woman from outside. The work continues to the steadily accelerating rhythm which gets so fast that finally all the women break down. Fourth scene: again the fashion show and the music "Victime de la mode". Two of the *maquila* workers, until then still lying on the ground surrounded by the models, get up and tell their – authentic – stories:

When I started to work in the Nicaraguan maquila industry I was 15 years old. I had to leave school because I needed to work (...) I will never let my daughter work in the maquila industry. Look at me: I am 24 years old and I feel I have no more energy to continue. The maquila eats you up – and when you can't take it anymore they throw you out.

This is street theatre as part of the "Clean Clothes Campaign" (www.cleanclothes.org). The campaign is organised by coalitions of trade unions, human rights groups, NGOs, women's rights organisations and solidarity groups in ten European countries and aims to raise consumer awareness on the working conditions of the mainly female workers in the sweatshops and *maquilas* of the globalised textile industry. By mobilising the "purchasing power" of the consumers in the North, the campaign tries to put pressure on companies like Nike or Adidas to improve the working conditions of textile workers, especially in the "export processing zones" of Latin America, Eastern Europe and South East Asia, where workers' rights and social security have been dumped and only corporate power rules.

One of the organisations participating in the campaign is the German NGO "INKOTA-Netzwerk", a network of Eastern German solidarity groups and church initiatives. In 1999 INKOTA asked theatre practitioners – Fritz Letsch (Munich), Harald Hahn (Berlin) and Till Baumann (Berlin) – to meet a newly established group of theatre enthusiasts from Berlin and other German cities and to develop street scenes about debt issues and the politics of IMF and the World Bank. After two weekends of rehearsals and one weekend of street performances (just before the IMF/World Bank meeting in Prague in September 1999) the group decided to continue their work in Berlin and has been working and performing since, unfortunately only with its Berlin-based members.

Piquete means "sting" or "bite" and has several figurative meanings in Spanish (just think of the Argentinian *piqueteros* protesting in street blockades against the devastating neoliberal politics of their government and the IMF) – but why a Spanish name for a German street theatre group? Well, it is not exactly German, because since the beginning there have been participants from Nicaragua, Spain, India, New Zealand, Scotland and the USA – although the majority has always been German. But then it is also not exactly a Theatre of the Oppressed group, as the group works with oppressions and performs oppressive situations in public, but not necessarily their own oppressions. And indeed there is something peculiar about using Theatre of the Oppressed techniques for theatrical "solidarity work" as part of campaigns in the North in favour of the rights of people in the South. Nevertheless the group works a lot with Theatre of the Oppressed techniques, and above all with Image Theatre. The combination of expressive body images with a sound system and live percussion and with the newspaper-theatre-style use of text has proven to be extremely powerful in terms of attracting many people and raising their interest in the issue. The performances are always accompanied by campaign leaflets and information stands with campaign representatives ready to discuss the issues raised by *Piquete* and to make suggestions for consumer action – which can be carried out immediately, especially when the scenes are performed right in front of big shopping centres. These days *Piquete* is continuing to participate in the Clean Clothes Campaign, but also working on a much more German topic which couldn't be less global: German society after September 11, with its reinforced racism and new repressive laws in the name of "security". It was the desire of the *Piquete* members to react to what was happening around them, right on their doorstep.

Till Baumann / Harald Hahn