

Love? No, seeds in my heart.

By Gabriele Freyhoff¹

They left home as it was only full of rowing, because the father was always drunk, because beatings were raining down on them so often, because there was hardly enough to eat and one had to manage alone... they left for the street. The freedom of the street...so many things are happening every day, unusual noises during the night, no place to sleep... the pressure of the gang... always hungry. Trying to beg...and to steal...but being followed and getting caught. Beatings...and then the police: brutality, sexual violence, pressure...and always running, nothing to loose except life, one's own small thin body!

Fortaleza, a tourist paradise in the north of Brazil, 1 700 000 inhabitants, 1500 street children. They live in two groups: some in the centre of town, in the world of commerce, the chaos of traffic and the pedestrian areas. They beg, steal, run little businesses like cleaning windcreens, selling shopping bags, or they learn to read and write at the centre run by the 'Movement for Street Children'. The second group lives on the beach, begging, cleaning the tourists' cars and living from tourism: theft, small businesses and prostitution.

The social workers from the organisation 'Terre des Hommes'² approach them with caution.

Playing together, learning to paint, beginning to know one another a little, to communicate, to trust one another. The need to feel secure takes over! Would there be a place where I could feel at home?

A few children start to accept 'Terre des Hommes's' offer to take part in afternoon activities.

Capoeira³, football, woodwork and other crafts are on offer. Then after quite a long time they are given a chance to live with 'Terre des Hommes'. Boys and girls live separately. About 20 children and teenagers live in a house. They attend the local school, benefit from support classes and participate in spare time activities offered by 'Terre des Hommes' or other organisations.

After the International Biodanza Congress in Fortaleza in 1992, I started building a close relationship with 'Terre des Hommes', where I prepared the way for a weekly group with street children, a course that eventually took place over a year later.

It is that profound experience I would like to describe to you here.



¹ 1Biodanza facilitator and didactic teacher in Germany (lived in Brazil from 1985 to 1994).

² 2 A group of committed Brazilians who obtained some support from 'Terre des Hommes' in Switzerland. Today the group is an independent association continuing its work thanks to government funding.

³ 3 A mixture of combat technique and dance with songs and drum rhythms. African slaves created Capoeira during slavery, to keep their body in shape in a confined space.

The group:

I was still an inexperienced Biodanza facilitator. It was not always easy, but very moving. In the first half of the year I worked in collaboration with a colleague, Costodio Almeida. During the second semester, I led the group alone. During all that time, however, there were two other adults in the group, who had, like the facilitator, an emotional relationship with the children. During the first semester, the group was very big: 20 children, mostly boys. In the second semester we managed to reduce the number to 12 and to have an equal number of girls and boys. This proved to be very important. The children were between 11 and 14 and were therefore in the pre-puberty group. Except for two of the boys, they were all living at 'Terre des Hommes', the boys in one house and the girls in the other.

Up until that moment in their life, they had only experienced the constant threat of the street, characterised by violence and running away. And, they all had, girls and boys alike, precocious and twisted experiences in the domains of sexuality (rape, prostitution) and emotional life (rejection, beatings).

The Biodanza sessions were taking place in the Capoeira room, the biggest room near the boys' house. The girls were brought there by VW bus.

Our aims:

Our first aim was to reinforce the children's authentic identity, since for all young people, life during puberty is mainly about developing one's own identity. And these people had never experienced being someone, being accepted and loved.

In the course of our work, a few other secondary aims seemed very important. Among these some were linked to the line of vitality:

- to discover and develop the joy of life,
- to reinforce self-regulation in the body,
- to improve their capacity for fluidity.

Others were related to the line of creativity:

- to try different forms of expression,
- to find other possibilities of creative expression.



Others, to the line of affectivity:

- to establish and live emotional relationships,

- to experience reciprocity:
- to give and receive,
- to feel mutual respect,
- to experience friendship, including between girls and boys.

At the beginning, we had to lower our objectives a great deal as the group was newly built and did not have a relationship with me (us) as facilitator. To take our first steps we concentrated on three prerequisites:

- to form a group,
- to establish an emotional contact with the facilitator(s),
- to develop group rules.

Our experience:

Before starting the group activity, we had interviews with the teaching staff and youth workers from 'Terre des Hommes'. They also experienced the Biodanza technique in a session with us, without the children.

Then our group started. Every Tuesday night, the girls came to the boys' house and they gathered, full of expectations, in the Capoeira room. With the free space and the absence of strict rules they were making a racket. The boys were soon chasing the girls and the "flip-flops" they had been using to hit each other with had to be put aside.

We were confronted very quickly by the children's crude reality and observed that Biodanza was offering very few meeting points in that sense. The children found the music, the way of dancing marvellously...kitsch. Two worlds were meeting...Since we had not had the possibility to get to know one another before and to do interesting things together we used instead the time of verbal intimacy, the brief speaking moment before the Biodanza session. The children were not used to listening to each other. So we had to look for other ways.



They particularly liked painting, alone or in pairs, often on an open theme. This activity gave the children the chance to calm down and to enter into contact with their own self. Many children painted interesting pictures from the therapeutic point of view. Others were soon frustrated and tore up their or other people's pictures. A few were very talented at drawing but limited themselves to the symbolic representation of stereotyped figures. Each time, we felt the ambivalence of the

children between their wanting to be and their inability to bear it. Many activities started harmoniously but very quickly turned to chaos and destruction.



Very slowly, however, a group identity was created as they learnt to know and accept one another, through dancing as well as various games and activities. We celebrated each birthday with candles and cakes: the boys filled their mouths at great speed until it was ready to explode; the girls on the other hand, often kept a piece for those who were absent that night. With the pictures, the colours and their sketches of faces as a starting point, we talked about dreams, feelings or moods. Little by little, we found common rules for the group that were then finally accepted and respected by all. It was only after about four months that a sweet and emotional bond was woven between the children and ourselves: the basis of our work. I had never perceived as clearly the crucial importance of emotional contact. Without it, everything goes wrong.

Now, it was also possible to talk about the feelings in one's own body. The girls and boys drew a sketch of their body and described it or painted it according to their associations or experiences. Apart from a series of sexual boasting, mostly on the boys bodies (machismo), frightening things were obvious: the children felt mainly tiredness and pains in their body.

Each child found his or her place in the group: for example we told a story together where each one added a sentence. A drawn sociogramme came out of this too where each child was building his or her house, and from there, drew paths towards the other children, the ones he or she wanted to visit.

After this verbal phase (lasting about half an hour) we started to dance. In the course of our work, these vivencias too changed a lot. In the beginning, we were very occupied with keeping a good contact, avoiding power games and provocations. Mainly, we had to be very watchful about the fact that with Biodanza the lighting is lowered. The light was always being switched on or off, of course only for a joke and always at the wrong time.



Due to the children's short attention span, a session rarely included more than 8 or 9 exercises. Our enunciations of the exercises were also brief and focused mainly on the sequence of the exercise, illustrated with a vivid example from the children's imaginary world.

Particularly at the beginning, we proposed music and dances known to the children in order to reduce their feeling of strangeness towards Biodanza. The dance they liked and knew best that these youths would willingly dance together was of course the forró⁴. Some boys were experienced Break dancers who were proud of their art. They also loved the lambada, a fashionable dance at the time.



The children were very willing to participate in playful dances as for example the animal dances: monkey, frog, crab, elephant... For other exercises we found playful variations. So trust walking became more interesting using cardboard glasses (without any opening), which also facilitated the respect of the rules since keeping their eyes closed for a long time wasn't easy for them. In the beginning our strongest emphasis was centred on light activation dances, choosing few circles but frequent dances in pairs, as the children found it very difficult to keep a circle going for a whole track. It always led to childish behaviour and the circle broke or a child was hurt. On the other hand, dances in pairs are part of the North-Brazilian culture and reassured the children.

In our common weekly planning, we also observed that euphorising music and joyful dances always made the children hyperactive, and led them to a crescendo in their activity that became almost impossible to slow down. Because of this observation, we only proposed a light phase of activation, followed by a weak regressive curve with harmonising exercises like dances with hand contact, breathing lying down or an ecological nest (with more space at first as the children were worried about catching lice from the others).

⁴ 4 Forró is the most known and liked popular dance in the north-east of Brazil.



Most of the time, it was not possible to slow down the rhythm gradually, but rather in an abrupt way. Only then did the children feel calm and in contact with their own self, which often made some children very sad. Sometimes this led them to not participate in the following activity and they sat, apart from the group... We felt how much their agitation was a defence mechanism against painful feelings and so we put more focus on gentle regression exercises in a protected space.

At the centre of our work, of course was the reinforcement of the children's identity, of their corporeal feeling and their self-awareness. Dancing in the middle of the circle, singing the first name, walking in the circle, etc. were some exercises we used for the reinforcement of self-awareness. To this same end, we extended our activities beyond the weekly Biodanza session: we visited them for special occasions, for example The Capoeira 'christening' where each pupil must pass a little exam to obtain a belt. We also had individual interviews with all the children and we organised excursions. During the Biodanza evenings, we celebrated the birthdays of the children born in that month. All the children loved this ritual.



Another strong point of our work was the line of affectivity. In the course of the year, the children succeeded better and better in having and benefiting from soft body contact. With the group feeling appearing, the children started to embrace of their own accord. We often used the embrace during the final activation. Progressively, we then proposed other exercises we called massage: first, massage of the back, then also segmentaries in twos, communication circles, or caress of the hair. In all the exercises adult participation had a crucial meaning. The adults were first in line as the people the children referred to emotionally. As facilitator, I couldn't hold that role for 12 children. During the calm phase, the adults were also models that stimulated the children by example. In other

situations, the adults could devote themselves to a single child who still needed an adult bosom to calm him or her down.

The results:

By the end of the year my group had really made significant progress. The children developed a better corporal feeling.

They experienced a reinforcement of their identity, which enabled them to try out movement patterns and to reveal themselves to the others in the circle without making a show of it or clowning, as was the case at the beginning. Many children accepted new situations more willingly. They showed fewer stereotypes and more desire to learn. Some of them now were willing to learn the forro.

The whole group increased its capacity to flow. I myself was very impressed by the children's development in the emotional field. They showed more trust for one another (trust walking) and increased their capacity to give and take. They were now able to do things for one another. A few times we had a vivencia where the children gave presents to each other (a word, a phrase), an emotional exchange that was very difficult at first. They experienced the embrace as a natural expression of affectivity and sexuality and learned to exchange embraces instead of punches. I was moved as well by the exercises where the children were caring for one another (caress, massage), a little bit of love they experienced during that year and kept with them.



Obvious support made provocations increasingly superfluous and a stronger and stronger co-operation possible within the group, as was realised, for example, in the common drawings. The children felt at ease with one another. They confirmed this themselves, as the relaxation exercises (ecological nest) and the slow and soft exercises were among their favourites in the end.

The children were very sad when, after a year, I couldn't continue with the group. To say good bye was not easy. I took many drawings and moving letters with me to Germany. And when we later met, they often said they were missing Biodanza. The managing team and youth workers from 'Terre des Hommes' had also gained a very positive impression from Biodanza. On the whole, the youth workers noticed an improvement in the children's sleep on the evening of the Biodanza sessions, and a more friendly behaviour between the girls and boys. The manager described Biodanza as a technique that filled a gap in her conception, as she valued the quality of the group foremost. Biodanza supports interaction processes such as the self-regulation of the group (rules,

group feeling) and the process of co-responsibility which hadn't succeeded in the organisation up till then.



Personally and as a Biodanza facilitator, I often still think about my group. It was a form of very intense mutual learning, a giving and taking which encompassed my whole person. I was often brought to my own limits. My tolerance for frustrations and refusals was tested, as was my creativity. I was forced to overcome obstacles and difficulties. It was like the development of a bud from a seed: to experience the growing process of love for one another. A gift!