

Mkombozi

Empower. Engage. Enable.



Creative music theater...

Youth discover their talents with Cre8 East Africa

This past June, Mkombozi children and youth participated in an intense one-week training workshop, learning the art of “creative music theater” facilitated by a dedicated team from Cre8 East Africa. Cre8 is a non-profit organisation that organises art educational projects for children and youth in East Africa and the Netherlands, working from the entry point of the needs of the participating communities and organisations as they themselves express it.

Cre8 first started as the personal initiative of the Dutch social worker and dance teacher, Ben Hekkema, who, in 2004, visited Kisumu, Kenya, and spent time with children who lived under various challenging circumstances. Ben was inspired to create a network of dedicated and skilled volunteers in East Africa and the Netherlands that would combine social work with teaching artistic performance; this coordination of activities would aim to inspire the inherent “performer” within every youth, through partnerships with communities and socially oriented organisations. In speaking about his motivation for doing this work, Ben says “I found theater and dance to be an outlet for thoughts and emotions. There is such a thing as key moments in life in which you find yourself, and some of us get those from theater. My goal is to find people who are able to give children and youth a chance to develop this feeling.”

Participants of the June training included a mix of Mkombozi youth from the residential centre and the surrounding community, as well as street-involved youth from Moshi and Arusha. The week was a journey of exploration through different forms of dance, theatre, visual arts and filming. The participants were encouraged to show their talents, and then to build off the elements of performance that ignited their interest the most. Notably, the atmosphere throughout the week was heightened by the presence of a musical group from Bagamoyo, offering drumming and melodies to help the youth exercise during training hours. The end of the week culminated in an event which integrated the various training streams into a “storyline” - a vibrant show was performed in front of friends, family, partners and community members. Overall, even though some were sad that the week had come to an end, the youth were enthusiastic to show the audience what they had learnt during this project, which they named “the House of Talents”.

One of the primary aims of this joint effort between Mkombozi and Cre8 was to empower children / youth to educate society about challenges which prevent them from reaching their full potential, and about the opportunities that might be required for them to live that potential. Another aim was for young people with whom Mkombozi



Cre8 combines dance, theater, visual arts, film and social work to inspire and unleash the innate “performer” in every youth. This approach creates an outlet for thoughts and emotions...

works to build personal competency so that they may better deal with obstacles they face in their day to day lives - something that was realised in the following example which shows that music indeed can be an amazing and therapeutic outlet for some youth.

One of the youth participants, who is very interested in music, has for years been showing emotional and aggressive behaviour with others. His Street Educator has often given him homework in the past: to go and write down lyrics concerning the way he feels and to sing it out with all his energy. In fact, this has slowly allowed him to take the edge off his aggressive behaviour. Then, during the training week with Cre8, it became particularly apparent that music helps the youth to blow off steam. Although he spent the first day keeping to himself, by the end of the week he was gladly mixing with the rest of the group, showing a much more balanced personality.

Also, as Mkombozi invited a number of girls from the surrounding community to participate during the week, it became an interesting experience to watch them come out of their shells as the days went on. In the very beginning, the mixture of boys and girls was intended to create a dynamic group interaction, seemed to make the girls quite shy to step up. At the end of the week, however, it could be observed that these girls had dropped their shyness, believing that they could do anything they wanted.

Importantly, during their time at Mkombozi, Ben Hekkema and the rest of the Cre8 team observed things that distinguish the children who stay in the Mkombozi residential center in comparison to other children: they seem to feel safe, they speak up and they respect themselves and others. It is apparent that they have been encouraged by Mkombozi to develop their talents - a fact that enabled the training to take off way above the beginners level. Also, Ben says that "children who have lived in the streets seem to have developed a stronger survival instinct than other children - one that translates into an ability to distinguish between what is good and bad for them at the moment. They trust their instincts, and so do I. This made it easier for us to communicate since I don't speak the language."

Overall, the week with Cre8 proved to be an interesting cultural exchange as Mkombozi youth and adults from different corners of Tanzania, Kenya and the Netherlands worked together to spark and ignite the talents within each one of them.

At the end of the week with Cre 8, participants were asked to explain what kind of significant changes the project has inspired in them. This is what two of the youth had to say...

"To be confident. It has enabled me to have confidence in myself, to master the stage, and to not have any fear when I stand in front of people. I was not able to speak in long sequences, now I can do it perfectly. Before I was afraid, but Cre8 helped me to believe in myself, to have confidence and to discover different things."

■ Charles Godfrey

"I have learned that art can also educate the community through drawings, drama, dance, drumming etc. This has enlightened me very much as an artist. It is significant because in the future I can educate the world about things which are not the way they should be, such as the usage of drugs, street children etc."

■ Morgan Amani

