

The Fun of Language Teaching

CREATIVE / Peter R. Füeg, a secondary school teacher in Pratteln, has been writing English plays for his school classes for 20 years. This special type of teaching has been well received.

BY LORIS VERNARELLI

PRATTELN. The blue curtain opens slowly, the bright spotlight falls on the stage – two chairs, a sofa, a vase of flowers, a cassette recorder and a half-filled bookshelf make up the meagre set. Only the wild scattering of glasses and bottles on the floor breaks the order of this imaginary living room. After a brief moment, two chambermaids enter the scene and their dialogue cuts through the tense silence. The play ‘Murder At The Fancy-Dress Ball’ by Peter De Geeswell has begun.

If you don't know the author's name, you won't find much help in the encyclopaedia either. Behind the aristocratic-sounding English pseudonym hides a Swiss contemporary by the name of Peter R. Füeg, a secondary school teacher at Fröschmatt School in Pratteln. His job gives him a direct line to the actors, as they are the students in his progymnasium class.

An English and theatre enthusiast, he has been pursuing his profession at Fröschmatt Secondary School since 1979, and has always had the idea of putting on plays. However, Füeg soon encountered difficulties. ‘Either the existing texts were too difficult or they didn't appeal to me. So, I decided to fulfil a boyhood dream: I wrote my first stage play in 1985,’ recalls the 51-year-old from Pratteln. In the years that followed, he created three more plays and two revised (i.e. updated) versions – always in English.

For his students, it is important to relate to the present. ‘Murder At The Fancy-Dress Ball’ is a story that Füeg had already created in 1989. At that time, the civil war was smouldering in Northern Ireland, so the murder during the Scottish Horticultural Society's charity ball was politically motivated.

In the updated version, fundamentalist terrorism plays a major role. ‘I think it's important that my students can always relate to the current course of history. This helps them to find themselves in the narrative,’ explains the English, German and history teacher.

The limited language skills of a third-year secondary school class certainly present a particular challenge on the way to a stage-ready performance, since the 14-year-old boys and girls have only had one year of English lessons so far. To try to overcome this obstacle, Peter R. Füeg has been using the same approach for years: ‘The two-week intensive training has proven itself so far. In the first week, we use the compulsory autumn camp to work on the play linguistically.

The aim is to know your lines by heart by the last day of the camp. The following project week is then spent rehearsing at home in Pratteln. The performances are the crowning glory.

It's a great experience every time, although not everything always goes according to plan, the secondary school teacher reports. ‘This is the best way to teach a language. And the students learn that a great deal of effort can produce a respectable result.’

'Murder At The Fancy-Dress Ball' by class 3Pb: tomorrow Friday and Saturday at 8 pm in the Aula II of the Fröschmatt school in Pratteln.

Admission is free.

Translated from German

This text was published in the Basellandschaftliche Zeitung, Switzerland