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Building Social Bridges
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Role models

Austria





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Mercy Dorcas Otieno

Actress



Mercy during the recording of the interview (© uniT, Ayham Yossef)

Mercy Dorcas Otieno comes from Kenya and is 33 years old. She came to Europe after her graduation from school at the age of 19. First, she was an au pair in Germany. After having had some very difficult experiences there, she started looking for a new job and eventually ended up in Kapfenstein in Styria. The family that took her in has three children and runs a restaurant. An African woman in Kapfenstein is not an everyday occurrence, but Mercy immediately won over everyone with her frank character and sparkling energy. She helped with the children, the household and the restaurant too.



Mercy at the restaurant in Kapfenstein (© Langbein & Partner)

At first, she only wanted to stay in Austria for a year and then return to Kenya to study journalism and communication. However, after a year she felt she was just getting her bearings so she decided to stay longer. She wanted to pride herself on something upon her return to Kenya. Therefore, she went to Graz to take up studies. It took a lot of effort as Mercy had to master the university preparation programme first and take German exams. Coming from Kenya, additional exams in mathematics, history and geography were mandatory. Mercy cleared all hurdles and started studying sociology at the Karl Franzens University. At the same time, she had to earn money to make a living so she took on various jobs. Mercy worked as a nanny, as a cleaner, and realised educational projects at schools, to name but a few. Earning enough money proved difficult. But it helped that she was always welcome to take over shifts in the restaurant in Kapfenstein. That's how she managed to make ends meet.



Mercy at the restaurant in Kapfenstein (© Langbein & Partner)

When Mercy moved into the Afro-Asian Institute, an international student residence particularly committed to development policy and educational work, her formative years began. She played a major role in shaping life in the house and seized every opportunity to build up contacts. She hosted the Multikultiball, an event renowned beyondGraz, she became an integration ambassador for the ministry and more and more often was invited to a variety of events.



With the future Federal Chancellor Sebastian Kurz
(at the time of the photo State Secretary for Integration) © N.N.



With the later Minister of Health Rudolf Anschober (Grüne), here member of the government in Upper Austria (© N.N.)

Mercy also took part in art projects of the Afro-Asian Institute, started writing, telling stories from Kenya (e.g.: at the International Diary Day), picked up acting and featured in the project "Shops of Stories". She led a community arts project with 200 people involved in a small Upper Styrian town as part of a large art festival in 2010, where she left a profound impression.



„Tagebuchtag“ (© Afro-Asiatisches Institut Graz)



„Shops of Stories“ (© Wolfgang Rappel)

Gradually, the feeling of having found a new home in Styria set in. There was the family in Kapfenstein, Mercy's second home, there was a myriad of contacts. At times it seemed as if Mercy knew "everyone": politicians, artists, students, the African community.

Mercy began to explore herself more and more as an actress, became a member of Spieleclub at the Schauspielhaus Graz and was offered the chance to take on smaller roles there. Her first leading role was in a production by Drama Graz, a well-known independent group at the time. That was in 2012. Bit by bit she realised that she really only wanted one thing: to become an actress.



„Gott ist ein Deutscher“ (© La Strada Graz)



„Hello and Goodbye“ (© Wolfgang Rappel)

Wanting to become an actress in a country with ensembles that are whiter than white, where diversity in theatre is an empty word—an almost impossible undertaking. In addition, Mercy's German at that time was quite competent, yet not enough to hold her ground on stages. People in her environment had great doubts whether she would succeed in realising her aspiration. Mercy was not impressed. She began to work hard, rehearsing roles, trying to find her way in the language of 18th and 19th century poetry. After all, that's not easy when German is not your first language. She applied to the drama schools in Graz and Vienna. Both invited her to the second round. Then she decided on the Reinhardt Seminar in Vienna and the miracle happened: she was one out of ten who were accepted, chosen from hundreds of applicants. At school people were amazed at her boldness. At that time, in 2013, a film about the famous Reinhardt Seminar was being produced by the ORF, which accompanied the applicants on their way through the entrance examination. No one expected Mercy to succeed. When she made it through, the film had to be reshot. Mercy suddenly played a leading role in the documentary: she was the first student at the school with African roots.



Recital at Reinhardt Seminar (© Langbein & Partner)



Admission exam at Reinhardt Seminar (© Langbein & Partner)

It goes without saying that the road ahead was not easy either. Money was needed so that Mercy could afford to study, she was too old for scholarships. Thus it was back to working and harnessing all contacts to make a living. On top of it all, studying was hard work too. It's not easy to learn speaking German in a way that works on stage. But Mercy was incredibly diligent, she practised and practised and practised. That's how she managed to master her studies. You have to bear in mind that after the first year of studies, another selection process awaits you. In 2017, Mercy successfully graduated from drama school and immediately got an engagement. That was not a matter of course either: the ensembles continued to be whiter than white. The artistic director of Schauspielhaus Graz, Iris Laufenberg, dedicated and open-minded, brought Mercy back to Styria. She took on great roles. And it became quite clear: Mercy is Styrian and "we" are proud of her. In Kleine Zeitung, the most relevant regional newspaper, she once was portrayed as Styrian of the day. People were proud to know her. At the same time, the film "Mercy - a modern fairy tale" was shot to make her story known. It aired on Austrian television.

Mercy Otieno's artistic path has not yet ended, it is only just beginning. It led her to Bochum, where Johan Simon was putting together an international company: Mercy was asked to join and is still working there at the moment.

Some things are slowly starting to change in the theatre world. It is no longer the norm that women have to be medium height, petite, classically beautiful (whatever that means) and white. The desire to see other bodies on stage, corpulent, damaged, everyday bodies, has become too strong. Audience do not demand the white ideal anymore but seek reality.

Consequently, the visibility of people of colour is increasing. It is simply a matter of depicting more diversity, of reflecting the world as it is. This does not mean that it got easy for Mercy but that the exclusive world of the theatre has opened up a little and people like Mercy, equipped with almost infinite energy, slip through the crack, seize possibilities and thus work to change the world for the better.

In October 2020, Mercy was on television again. Johan Simon's highly acclaimed "Hamlet" production with Mercy Dorcas Otieno as Gertrud, the mother, was broadcast on 3SAT. It is almost as if a social utopia manifests briefly: everyone can do everything, origins no longer matter, the world is equally open to everyone. That is the secret message of Mercy Dorcas Otieno playing Gertrud. That is what she has been fighting for, for herself and for us.



As Queen Gertrud in "Hamlet" (© Schauspielhaus Bochum)

What helps her with all that? What makes her successful? It is her ability to approach people without shyness. These unintentional contacts from good times have always helped her to weather difficulties. For that it was always possible to turn to someone in case of problems. You then know that there are people who will support you without much fuss.

Her charisma, her energy and her love of life also make her successful. You just feel comfortable in her environment, there is always something to laugh about, her verve just takes you away. This is true on stage but also in everyday life.

Mercy's faith is very important to her. It helps her to overcome difficulties and continue. Her faith establishes a connection with her grandmother and thus with her origins. Her grandmother is still her role model, she often talks about her. This perhaps is also one of

Mercy's vital features: not to forget where she comes from. She manages to combine both worlds in which she lives. Her appreciation for the structures and opportunities in Europe have not led to a devaluation of her origins. She can see all we have here but also what we lack. This is one of the reasons why as a student she organised trips to Kenya that did not only lead to tourist hotspots but attempted to connect people from here with people from there and thus unite the worlds in which she feels at home.

"Mercy - a modern fairy tale"—I don't know if I share the perspective of the film title. Mercy's story is not a fairy tale; rather, Mercy is a person who has cut her own path with great commitment, who has dealt with all the obstacles along the way. What's more, it isn't a fairy tale because here in Europe Mercy did not experience paradise but simply a different world with different opportunities, and she seized each one of them.

Watch full self-portrait of Mercy:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2mRSDaLowHA>

<https://buildingsocialbridges.eu>



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