

# Peripeti

## **FIX & FOXY**



# Peripeti

Journal for dramaturgical studies

special issue – 2022

## **FIX&FOXY**



# Peripeti

© Peripeti og forfatterne

## Theme Editors

Erik Exe Christoffersen, Ida Krøgholt og Kathrine Winkelhorn

## Editorial

Janicke Branth, Erik Exe Christoffersen, Solveig Daugaard, Michael Eigtved, Solveig Gade, Storm Møller Madsen, Thomas Rosendal Nielsen (ansv.), Signe Nygaard, Cecilie Ullerup Schmidt, Laura Luise Schultz, Josefine Brink Siem.

**Layout:** Ivan Micic

**Cover photo:** Søren Meisner

The issue is supported by:



Dansk Skuespillerforbund



&

SPORTGOODSFONDEN

ISSN: 1604-0325

[www.peripeti.dk](http://www.peripeti.dk)

Peripeti

Afdeling for Dramaturgi

Institut for Kommunikation og Kultur, Aarhus Universitet

Langelandsgade 139.

DK 8000 Århus C

Redaktion: [thomas.rosendal@cc.au.dk](mailto:thomas.rosendal@cc.au.dk)

<b>Preface</b> .....	7
<i>By the Editorial Board</i>	
<b>Hostages of Me</b> .....	25
<i>By Tue Biering</i>	
<b>What Have We Really been Up To?</b>	
<b>Ethical, Social and Artistic Enquiries</b> .....	39
<i>By Jeppe Kristensen</i>	
<b>1. Interviews</b>	
<b>Pretty Woman Walking Down the Street</b> .....	45
<i>By Solveig Gade</i>	
<b>Encounters, Relations, Popular Culture and Representation</b> .....	55
<i>Conversation with Tue Biering by Solveig Gade</i>	
<b>Excursion to Youth Land with Jeppe Kristensen</b> .....	61
<i>By Ida Krøgholt and Erik Exe Christoffersen</i>	
<b>My Deer Hunter</b>	
<b>Interviews with the Cast and Creative Team</b> .....	69
<i>by Erik Exe Christoffersen, Ida Krøgholt and Kathrine Winkelhorn</i>	
<b>FIX&amp;FOXY's Poetics, Method and Organisation</b> .....	107
<i>By Exe Christoffersen, Ida Krøgholt and Kathrine Winkelhorn</i>	
<b>2. Articles</b>	
<b>The Europeans</b> – .....	121
<i>By Mads Thygesen</i>	
<b>Against All Odds</b> .....	131
<i>By Erik Exe Christoffersen</i>	
<b>The Management of Audience Discomfort</b> .....	139
<i>By Laura Luise Schultz</i>	
<b>Love Theater: Intangible Conflicts</b> .....	155
<i>By Jeppe Kristensen</i>	
<b>Contemporary Art, Representation and Remediation</b> .....	171
<i>By Erik Exe Christoffersen</i>	
<b>World Theatre and Theatre of the Moment</b> .....	187
<i>By Jeppe Kristensen</i>	

<b>3. Essays</b>	
<b>FIX&amp;FOXY's Distribution of Management</b> .....	<b>195</b>
<i>By Ida Krøgholt</i>	
<b>FIX&amp;FOXY's Representation Strategies</b> .....	<b>203</b>
<i>By Anne Liisberg</i>	
<b>4. Reviews</b>	
<b>Pretty Woman Ltd. in a container at Halmtorvet</b> .....	<b>209</b>
<i>By Monna Dithmer</i>	
<b>Parsifal from Copenhagen Central Station, tracks 11 &amp; 12 to Brøndby</b> .....	<b>211</b>
<i>By Monna Dithmer</i>	
<b>Gold Rush. NyAveny</b> .....	<b>213</b>
<i>By Monna Dithmer</i>	
<b>Rocky! The Left-Wing Theatre Ghetto's Auto-Knock-Out</b> .....	<b>215</b>
<i>By Solveig Daugaard</i>	
<b>Land without Dreams, 2018.</b> .....	<b>219</b>
<i>By Erik Exe Christoffersen</i>	
<b>AVATAR ME, 2020</b> .....	<b>224</b>
<i>By Kathrine Winkelhorn</i>	
<b>Dark Noon</b> .....	<b>228</b>
<i>By Thomas Rosendal Nielsen</i>	
<b>The European Slaughterhouse</b> .....	<b>233</b>
<i>By Erik Exe Christoffersen</i>	



Youth. Photo: Morten Abrahamsen



Parsifal. Photo Søren Meisner

# Preface

*By the Editorial Board*

We have followed FIX&FOXY for 15 years. During this time, the company has produced around 25 performances, demonstrating in an original manner how theatre as a medium can address and investigate difficult issues such as diversity, representation and spectator participation without losing audience and artistic impact. FIX&FOXY has had a relatively wide range, nationally and internationally, and with this publication, we wish to summarise, reflect on and discuss the experiences gained in this framework. Through interviews and analyses of performances, we focus on themes and forms that are characteristic of FIX&FOXY's works and processes. With this publication, we therefore hope to present and clarify how the company, with a special kind of creativity and artistic understanding, breaks the usual boundaries of theatre and shows in often unexpected ways what theatre can also be. We ask questions such as: How is the theatre medium used? How does FIX&FOXY express themselves? What is the approach to actors, theatre space and performance locations? What compositional structures stand out? How does the theatre relate to the contemporary? What does FIX&FOXY want to contribute to the art field?

With questions like these, the publication will hopefully open for exchange and discussion of FIX&FOXY's particular theatrical form, poetics and ethics.

FIX&FOXY was formed in 2008 by Tue Biering b. 1973, director from Statens Teaterskole (the National School of Performing Arts) 2000 and Jeppe Kristensen b. 1975, Master in Dramaturgy. Jeppe Kristensen was employed as dramaturg at the Royal Danish Theatre 2005-2008 and Tue Biering was employed at the same place and managed the experimental stage at Turbinehallerne (the Turbine Halls), Turbo Town from 2004-07 in collaboration with Christian Friedländer - both as artistic directors. Kristensen and Biering began their collaboration with *Europæerne* (The Europeans) and *Come on, Bangladesh, just do it!* (The Royal Theatre), and this was a kind of beginning of FIX&FOXY, which was established in connection with *Pretty Woman A/S* (Pretty Woman Ltd.) in 2008. Both left the Royal Theatre and continued as FIX&FOXY until Jeppe Kristensen left the theatre in 2017 to become a professor at the University of Agder, Norway. Since then, Tue Biering has continued FIX&FOXY.

FIX&FOXY is without a permanent stage, and this opens for partnerships with among others Betty Nansen Teatret and Revolver. As a director, Tue Biering is also often employed at other theatres both in Denmark and abroad.

Since 2008, FIX&FOXY has created around 25 performances in which they deal in different ways with theatre as representation, power structure, aesthetic composition and expose the relationship between actors and spectators. Several times, the theatre has been favoured by theatre critics with nominations for the Reumert Award, and in 2022, the Bikuben Foundation entered into a 10-year partnership with FIX&FOXY. The first 3½ years, this is supported by a grant of 10. mio. kr. (1.4 mill. Euro). The intention is to expand and strengthen the organisation and to have the opportunity to work on developing international performances and new formats within the performing arts in a long-term perspective. Today, the company is run on a daily basis by artistic director Tue Biering, producer Karoline Michelsen and international producer Annette Max Hansen. A special artistic team is assembled for each production.

## A Little Background

In 2004, the Artistic Director at The Royal Danish Theatre, Mikkel Harder Munck-Hansen, hired the set designer Christian Friedländer and the director Tue Biering to “smash the framework” in the Turbine Halls with theatre on time and canned beer for 20 kroner. In the theatre’s annual report for 2006, the occupancy rate is around 50, and a whole new target group of spectators aged 20+, who are not accustomed to theatre, has attended guest performances, debates and nightclubs. Friedländer & Biering call themselves *caretakers* of the old power plant with at least one monthly theatre concert, power reading, debate session and perhaps a midnight performance. A basic premise is that the world is neither unambiguous nor easily accessible but must be represented in its complexity. The reality you sympathise with and understand, and the one that you oppose, repress or do not understand, are equally important to represent for FIX&FOXY.

**KONTRAKT**

Denne kontrakt (Kontrakten) indgås mellem:

**SUPERFLEX**, Blågårdsgade 11b, 2200 København N ("SUPERFLEX")  
og  
**Det Kongelige Teater**, August Bournonvilles Passage 2-8, 1017 København K ("Det Kongelige Teater")

I henhold til denne kontrakt forpligter Det Kongelige Teater sig til, i alle forhold vedrørende Turbinehallerne, i perioden fra og med den 1. Marts 2007 til og med den 31. Marts 2007 ikke på nogen måde, - det være sig direkte eller indirekte samt på skrift eller tale - at anvende følgende ord eller kombinationer, hvori disse ord indgår:

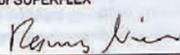
• Teater	• Billet
• Skuespiller	• Spille
• Forestilling	• Prøve
• Scene	• Premiere
• Instruktør	• Publikum

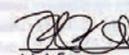
Denne kontrakt omfatter hele Det Kongelige Teater, herunder dets ledelse, ansatte – såvel direkte som indirekte – og såvel fuldtids-, deltids- som læstansatte.

I tilfælde af en parts misligholdelse af denne aftale, kan modparten gøre misligholdelse gældende og kræve erstatning, kræve godtgørelse, herunder for krænkelse af rettigheder samt imødegå enhver krænkelse og misligholdelse i form af fagedforbud.

Enhver tvist, som måtte opstå mellem parterne, afgøres ved de ordinære danske domstole og baseres på gældende dansk ret.

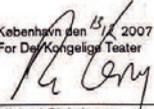
København den 13/2 2007  
For SUPERFLEX

  
Rasmus Nielsen

  
Jakob Fenger

  
Bjørnetjerne Christiansen

København den 13/2 2007  
For Det Kongelige Teater

  
Michael Christiansen  
Teaterchef

  
Det Kongelige Teater  
Postboks 2185  
1017 København K

**SUPERFLEX**

7:

*Kontrakt mellem kunstgruppen Superflex og Det Kongelige Teater, marts 2007*

To give just one example of the interdisciplinary collaboration with other art forms, we can mention that the Turbine Hall invited the artist group Superflex as artistic curator in order to change theatre habits and ways of speaking. A contract was signed in which 'theatre' and other words like 'actor', 'ticket', 'director' and 'premiere' were banned for a month. What actually came out of this experiment is probably impossible to summarise, but it is an example of a cross-artistic interaction in which some of the conventions embedded in theatrical thinking are obstructed.

Eventministeriet (The Ministry of Events), which has collaborated with FIX&FOXY about several performances at the Royal Danish Playhouse, was established in 2008 as a replacement for Turbo Town and in a similar way created a special reality with rehearsals lasting a few days, and where light, sound, props, sets and costumes could be reused items or just simple markings.

It was a condition of production that the performances were 'unfinished' and often had an improvisatory character based on chosen sets of rules and frameworks, which is a form that characterises several of FIX&FOXY's productions.

### **Is There a Poetics?**

Looking at FIX&FOXY's performances, it is tempting to ask: Is there a coherent poetics, that is, a particular view of art, articulated by FIX&FOXY, that becomes evident through the company's approach to theatrical production?

As a piece of theatrical craft, each performance is unique and different. The participants are both professional actors and non-professionals and the production will often highlight their personality, physicality and allow their vulnerability to show through. Typically, a familiar fiction – often a film fiction – is staged in a way that investigates and challenges the original work. Now and then, the audience is involved in the performance as actors, and often effects from other media than theatre are used. Several of FIX&FOXY's performances are not set in usual theatre spaces, but in locations such as a container on Halmtorvet, in a car in Odsherred, in a shop or on the harbour in Thorshavn, Faroe Islands, and in this way, the reality of the performance itself is emphasised. However, director Tue Biering will not be attributed a particular method:

*I'm always attracted to what stands out and is different, and in that context I'm always very careful not to form one particular method. I totally run away when I feel a pattern starting to stand out. Partly because I'm bored, but also because in my training in 'the methods of the masters', I found that my own stuff was getting poorer. Actually, what I spend the most time on is checking how things feel. Twenty years ago, I would probably have sniggered at this and insisted that the work emerges from thought, but today I am in many ways marked by the realisation that feelings and thoughts are interwoven phenomena, where you understand things with your sensuality and that the registers cannot be separated...*"

Ej blot til lyst (*Not for Pleasure Alone*). Interview 21 May 2018 by Matthias Hvass Borello.  
<https://kunsten.nu/>

Biering's approach to directing is to create a certain distance from reality, which makes it appear in a surprising and sensual way that provokes reflection. At the same time, an affective relationship is created as the spectator identifies with the circumstances of someone else. Empathy is a means of access to the understanding of someone else's culture, but can ossify as prejudice, and this is what FIX&FOXY wants to prevent by producing different ways of observing and different points of view. In continuation of this, FIX&FOXY is concerned with how other than professional actors can

contribute to a representation of the contemporary, in which cultural identity and power relations are brought into focus. This is not a social experiment or theatre that demonstrate solidarity with specific vulnerable groups. Rather, the basic premise is to provoke a discussion that expands the aesthetic possibilities and forms of representation of the theatre medium. The participants are not expected to take over and assume a decisive role in relation to the final work. They provide the material that creates the representational effects. The theatrical situation is reflected both in terms of the different identities of actors and spectators, cultural traditions and the power relations between them. The theatre can be a space of conflict and disagreement between spectators, and the aim is to counteract any tendency to cultivate familiar and normative truths.

FIX&FOXY does not use a specific dramaturgy, and often fragments of a classical narrative dramaturgy are applied to a well-known story, such as *Pretty Woman A/S* (Pretty Woman Ltd.), which in a new variation of the story tries to disrupt the audience's perception. The new work is both recognisable and something quite, quite different. The spectators recognise the original, and with the chosen actors as prostitutes in the example of *Pretty Woman Ltd.*, a juxtaposition of the real and the fictional is created. The two levels of reality – the actual prostitute and the fictional Pretty Woman – are present at the same time. Theatre always has this duality, as actors are real and at the same time create a fiction, so that the audience can forget reality by glimpses, without the actors themselves disappearing completely in the process. FIX&FOXY consciously work with this duality between the role and the personal actor, which allegedly increases the dramaturgical complexity of the works. Tue Biering substantiates this:

*Our work is motivated by curiosity and a wish to produce complex narratives through playful, entertaining and accessible formats, while at the same time challenging prejudices, preconceived ideas and misconceptions we have about each other and the world around us. We want to involve society and address the times we live in, by engaging our audience and telling stories about the people who create our society. We invite people on stage, who are rarely presented or represented in dramatic art, because we believe that we can make a difference when people meet face to face. We have worked with mentally and psychologically challenged people, children, prostitutes, refugees and homeless people. At other times, we stage performances with professional actors – sometimes we do both.* (<https://fixfoxy.com/om/>)

In the works where FIX&FOXY involves the physical and mental experiences of the actors, as in *Pretty Woman Ltd.* and *My Deer Hunter*, it has the effect of making the work not only 'belong' to the theatre and the director, but also giving ownership to the participants. Biering's rehearsal strategy is often to let the actors work on developing the text and arrangement from the very beginning of the rehearsal process, to create a basis for a shared ownership. This is a way of meeting and creating the reality of theatre, tangible and concrete, but at the same time staged and arranged. The rehearsals for the performance in *My Deer Hunter* developed into a complex dramaturgy, where different voices mixed, complemented and contradicted each other. This opened for productive questions such as: What is the mediality of theatre, and what is an actor, a director or a dramaturg? The framework is expanded in close interaction with the director. In that sense, the director becomes more curating than directing, without giving up on the performance as (a work of) art.

There, is also a particular ethics associated with FIX&FOXY's transparent works, where the spectators experience both the fiction and its creation. Jeppe Kristensen substantiates this in an article in Peripeti.dk.

“The ethics behind our performances is no more complicated than a few rules of thumb:  
1: Our theatre work is about creating a good experience for the participants. This applies to all the participants, who of course contribute at very different levels. If the performances do not make our lives a little bit better, there is no point in making them – and they will not be good either.

2: We do project theatre. The work on a show starts one day and it ends one day. Everyone involved knows that – and that is what makes the work relevant. Between the two dates, we are all colleagues, working professionally to create a performance together. We are not a social project for anyone. That is precisely what makes our participants have a good experience.

3: Behind the specific themes of each performance lies a larger project. We want to have as much inclusivity and diversity in our lives as possible.

4: Our biggest ethical challenge is to make good theatre. We do not possess the solution to the issues we make theatre about. Our work is therefore not about producing a ‘motor’ for our opinions. The real work consists in creating performances that get to the core of the problem. It is not our role to make theatre that pleases the audience. Nor is it our job to produce performances that display our respect for the actors. The greatest ethical ambition we can have is to make good performances. That is where the respect for the performers lies.”

(Jeppe Kristensen, <https://www.peripeti.dk/2011/02/03/om-anstændighed/>).

In short, FIX&FOXY’s poetics must be seen in continuation of both the company’s ethical stance and the artworks that continually expand the territory of the theatre. For FIX&FOXY, the purpose of art is to make inclusive, human and complex art that addresses and involve the contemporary without falling into political correctness. This is the starting point of and the driving force behind the company’s continuous theatrical experiments.

## **Themes and Content**

This anthology covers many aspects. Some performances are treated in several articles, but from different perspectives. Of course, we have endeavoured to avoid repetition, but certain repetitions may be necessary in order to express different perspectives. Many articles revolve around theatre as acts of representation.

What does it mean to represent and what does art represent? These are complex issues because, besides being concrete like a theatrical performance, a work also has a referential function. That is, it represents a kind of otherness, a fictional universe that can say something about ‘us’, ‘reality’ and the contemporary. A work also represents an artist’s role, a mode of production, a poetics as a way of thinking about art, and thus also an intended effect in relation to a given statement.

Representation is one of the characteristics of our cultural civilisation, which can be both seductive, liberating, limiting and repressive. Representation is a reduction of the complexity of reality that contributes to creating a form of overview, distortion or clarity in relation to reality. There can be great insight in representing others, an event or a conflict, and there can be important knowledge in being represented by someone else. Representation is the central function of theatre, many would argue, and an actor’s main task is precisely to play roles, to ‘be someone other than him- or herself’ – and thereby representing. Current debates about identity and representation, called identity politics by some, are part of a kind of feedback with theatre can contribute to

problematising theatre's representation of identities and realities. This must be seen in the context of postcolonial critics who blame the blindness of the white Western privileged to cultural heritage and in the continuation and representation of it.

When working with representation in art and theatre, complex reality is reduced to visual images, linguistic constructions, forms of movement and gestures, summarising knowledge in a single expression. Reductions can be offensive and insulting if they more or less blindly manifest a hierarchy, a power relation, a pattern, and they can be misleading, as when a complex reality is described in black and white explanations like good vs. evil or us vs. them. FIX&FOXY aims for art processes play with representations that break down simple binary oppositions of the world and take theatre beyond political correctness. So instead of a patronising director's raised finger, the works seek to enable the spectator to make their own reduction or construction. The question is of course whether FIX&FOXY can avoid being coloured by its own privileges in this game. They probably cannot, at least it cannot be ruled out that the attempts to avoid condescending paternalism might tend towards a reversed political correctness, as FIX&FOXY likes to lash out at their own audience, the privileged left-wing segment – which like FIX&FOXY is presumably part of the cultural elite. What is interesting is that unlike mainstream theatre, FIX&FOXY are masters at shifting representations, as when South African actors are whitefaced and perform the white man's conquest of the Wild West in *Dark Noon*.

What FIX&FOXY's theatre points out is that as a spectator you are always positioned and never innocent. When it is possible to keep spectators, despite the fact that the average spectator will often feel criticised and trapped in uncomfortable roles and positions, it is probably because one is very well entertained and can never quite calculate how the work will position and play with the standpoints and identities of the players and spectators.

FIX&FOXY's spectator positions are discussed in several articles, as spectators are often positioned in challenging ways that can evoke pain, pleasure and discomfort. Specifically, FIX&FOXY has used all possible placements of spectators and experimented with spectator participation as listening witnesses, as perceptive co-players and as hostages in a revealing game, just as many different spectator spaces have been used.

### **Is FIX&FOXY Postdramatic Theatre?**

The concept of the postdramatic was launched by the German theatre scholar H.T. Lehmann and one might be tempted to think of the postdramatic as postmodernist art that is beyond the authority of the dramatic text. However, FIX&FOXY has not given up the dramatic remains open to what is needed in a given project. Therefore, it is perhaps more appropriate to speak of FIX&FOXY as contemporary art that relates pragmatically to various artistic devices and increasingly integrates digital media such as light, sound and projection in new ways. Theatre is no longer necessarily limited by the presence of spectators and actors in the same time and space, and FIX&FOXY persistently continues to explore new digital possibilities.

### **Is FIX&FOXY Contemporary Art?**

Contemporary art reflects a number of trends in theatre: cross-mediality, participatory orientation, expansion of the concept of actor, conceptualisation, inclusion of new materials, medialities and performance spaces, new relationships between spectators and stage, and an awareness of expression: i.e. that conditions of sender and receiver are incorporated in the address of the work. This means that identity is a central turning point in relation to the theatre's scenic and artistic identity, but

also the spectator's identity. Identity is also a practice and an art theoretical perspective in relation to the future.

Jeppe Kristensen concludes his article in this anthology with the following reflection on the future prospects for theatre:

*The lack of perspective, the loss of the future (which is also basically the meta-analysis of the world art and world theatre of my generation) is almost impossible to bear. It is also immensely difficult to give form. Loss of future on a global scale, and the parallel non-clinical depression is the great taboo of contemporary theatre. To me, this perspective is quite paralysing and inspiring at the same time. It is an elementary, essential part of our world that we have not yet managed to give form. For a theatre company that has, in a way, created an image of being able to cope with a lot, this is a large remaining dark area. It is my hope for the future – for FIX&FOXY, kindred spirits or newcomers, that this part of contemporary life will at some point be given form and conceptualised. Not in order to fix it, but because there are quite simply limits to what contemporary art and contemporary theatre can be asked to fix. Without this realisation making us less relevant. (Jeppe Kristensen, 2022).*

What is the challenge for the theatre of the future? Kristensen formulates a central question that is linked to the lack of (obvious) perspectives on the global (theatre) situation. It looks as if large parts of the Western world are in the process of dismantling the democratising institutions of which theatre is a part. The emergence of a more or less aggressive and conservative nationalism/populism seems to dominate many countries and contributes to making theatre's experimental art forms difficult. Populism first of all creates polarisations between country and city and between the elite, art (especially contemporary art) and the people. As a whole, this polarisation helps to discredit and throw suspicion on art and culture. It leaves a tension in the relationship between diversity and conformity, and the question is how it is possible to relate both productively and critically to populism without underestimating "the people". This is the dilemma to which FIX&FOXY have dedicated their investigations, which is important at a time when the context and network necessary for the theatre in the encounter with its audience are under pressure. It is manifesting itself on several fronts as a culture battle and as a veritable war against democratic values of enlightenment such as freedom of expression, recognition of minorities, recognition of what is different. In other words, many of the things that FIX&FOXY has helped to make visible and to produce. According to our analysis, FIX&FOXY is a theatre that tells contemporary political stories, points out disagreements and opens the eyes to differences, while at the same time, through its works, the company is able to establish a non-polarised unity and a theatrical community. The dramaturgical approaches to this form patterns that we have tried to bring together in this anthology.

## **Contents of the Anthology**

The anthology is divided into 5 sections.

**The first section** consists of FIX&FOXY's artists' reflections.

*Hostages of Me* by Tue Biering is from 2022. *What Have We Really Been up to? Ethical, Social and Artistic Investigations* in FIX&FOXY's performances by Jeppe Kristensen is written in 2014.

The two articles express a kind of artistic self-reflection on FIX&FOXY's work.

Biering considers the theatre as a hostage situation. He describes the beginning and the background, when in 2007 he and Kristensen were dissatisfied with their work at the Royal Theatre, but together they decided *not* to say goodbye to theatre, as a small spark of ambition for something new had been ignited. They dreamed of being a company that stood out, was something different and yet a *cool cat*. The German director, Frank Castorf, had said in an interview that he thought theatre should be “politisch aber sexy”, and with this exemplary slogan, they formed FIX&FOXY, which became a name and a description of and a tool for people who want to have fun while building things you have right at hand. With FIX&FOXY, they wanted to think theatre alongside activism and art, and with a great willingness to take risks, they wanted to be a company that brought together a new group of artists each time, challenging and investigating new formats.

Kristensen describes in his article that it was only with the collective name FIX&FOXY that they began to discern an overarching project in which they in each individual case could rethink all the elements of the theatre, including the institutional framework of which they themselves are a part. The article is written after the first years of work, and it makes a coherent suggestion of ‘*who we are*’. Kristensen outlines a field of artistic inquiry that FIX&FOXY has worked with and he attempts to assess this work, which also becomes an ethical evaluation (First published in *Peripeti* 21, 2014).

**The second section** consists of interviews. Solveig Gade’s first interview with FIX&FOXY is from 2009: *Pretty Woman Walking Down the Street*. Gade interviews Kristensen and Biering about the performance, which sparked public debate. *Pretty Woman A/S* (Pretty Woman Ltd.) was performed by a handful of female prostitutes along with various politicians, social workers, former prostitutes, theatre critics and journalists and the audience, who in one way or another helped generate texts, statements and rumours about the performance (First published in *Peripeti* 11, 2009). Gade’s second interview picks up the thread in a new conversation with Biering from 2022: *Encounters, Relationships, Popular Culture and Representation. Conversation with Tue Biering*. The ambition here is to draw a portrait of FIX&FOXY’s practice, but also for more theatre historical purposes, to use this to identify some central themes in contemporary theatre.

*Excursion to Youthland* is an interview from 2015 with Jeppe Kristensen by Ida Krøgholt and Erik Exe Christoffersen. It is about the performance *Ungdom* (Youth), which utilised several elements of the music festival and had the character of a rite of passage from child to adult. *Youth* was a threshold space where the audience visited the young people’s tent camp, and in the interview Kristensen describes the work of creating ownership for the project where the young people participated as co-developers of the performance’s different spaces (revised extract from *Peripeti* 27/28, 2018).

*My Deer Hunter. Interviews with the Cast and Creative Team* is an interview edited by Exe Christoffersen, Ida Krøgholt and Kathrine Winkelhorn. The performance and rehearsal process are an investigation of a group of PTSD-affected veterans, their history and the consequences of their war participation. Fragments, lines, objects, video sequences are recorded during the performance and generate the montage of the performance. *My Deer Hunter* presents a reality without hiding the medial and theatrical construction and in this way comes into being in the encounter with the spectators, who sit on both sides of the stage. We try to get around the whole theatrical production’s role distribution.

Finally, the editorial board is responsible for an interview with Tue Biering, *FIX&FOXY’s Poetics, Method and Organisation*. Here, Biering goes behind the scenes of the performances and

talks about the principles and theatrical vision that have guided FIX&FOXY's creative and theatrical strategies throughout the theatre's activities.

**The third section** is articles on performances seen from particular perspectives:

In *The Europeans. A Post-Dramatic Approach to the Classics*, Mads Thygesen, in continuation of Hans-Thies Lehmann's ideas on post-dramatic theatre, tries to show how the production uses the classics as a tool to intervene and interfere in a current historical and political context. The dramaturgy of *Europaerne* (The Europeans) was developed for the Royal Theatre in a collaboration between Jeppe Kristensen, Benedikte Hammershøi and Tue Biering, who also directed, while Christian Friedländer designed the scenography. The basic idea was to perform a montage of works from the European drama canon (e.g. Euripides, Aeschylus, Shakespeare, Schiller). Common to the works included in the montage was that they all had European wars as their dramatic focal point. In the article, Thygesen analyses the *The Europeans* to discuss how the seeds of FIX&FOXY's poetics and conceptual thinking are laid in this early performance from 2005.

The article by Erik Exe Christoffersen *Tragedy and Statistics* is about the performance *Mod alle Odds* (Against All Odds, 2019). It is a representation of today's youth as they are statistically likely to look in the future. The question is, how is communication created, what means the performance uses and what dramaturgies are employed? Is it a documentary and "scientific" representation of the young people, a subjective self-presentation as the young people see themselves, or is it FIX&FOXY's fictional staging of the young people. The article's answer is that it is a combination and that there are different views of the young, who are observed from different positions.

Laura Luise Schultz writes about the approach to the spectators in various performances: *Managing the Audience's Discomfort. FIX&FOXY's Practice of Political Confrontation*. Schultz points out that a central device in FIX&FOXY's political remediations is their sophisticated engagement with the audience through varying degrees of direct or indirect audience involvement. Inspired by international groups such as Gob Squad and Rimini Protokoll, among others, FIX&FOXY have developed their own, at once understated yet confrontational way of writing the audience's role into the performances. This sophisticated *casting* of the audience is, according to Schultz, absolutely crucial to the understanding of the nuances and complexities of the performances' overall statements as in *Viljens Triumf* (Triumph of the Will, 2012), *Rocky!* (2018), or in the western pastiche *Dark Noon* (2019). Drawing on Jacques Rancière's concept of the liberated spectator, Schultz discusses how the theatre balances the schism of theatre modernism between emotional involvement and critical consciousness-raising of the audience in a risk-taking negotiation and challenge of audience participation in the remediation of *Triumph of the Will*.

The article *Love Theatre: Intangible Conflicts* by Jeppe Kristensen takes as its starting point what ideas that a Copenhagen theatre audience might have about a Thai prostitute and sex tourism. The article describes FIX &FOXY's trip to Bangkok to cast a Thai prostitute to play the leading part in *Love Theatre*, who would be interested in going to Denmark for a few months to develop and play the performance with her as the only actor on stage. The performance was to be based on her own life and experiences as a prostitute (revised extract from Böhnisch, S and Eidsaa, R (eds.) University Press, 2019).

The last two articles are about FIX&FOXY as contemporary art: *Contemporary Art, Representation and Remediation* by Erik Exe Christoffersen emphasises the strategy of remediation as a broader trend in contemporary art with threads back to readymade and conceptual art as a strategy. In Christoffersen's view, remediation is not just a question of using film as a starting point

for staging. Remediation is a form of painting over of a work, where the re-presentation itself has a dramaturgical function as a rethinking of a material, and where the re-mediation itself gives off meaning, whether different social groups are brought on stage or the spectators themselves are part of the remediation.

*World Theatre and Theatre of the Moment* by Jeppe Kristensen is based on a personal view of the complexity of the contemporary and draws a thread from FIX&FOXY's beginnings as a theatrical variant of contemporary art to Peter Osborne's analysis of what contemporary art is today. Osborne specifies a number of criteria for art in order to categorise *contemporary art*.

**The fourth section** consists of essays that address some principles of rehearsal strategies:

*FIX&FOXY's Distribution of Management* by Ida Krøgholt is about the process itself. Krøgholt calls the working method *distributed facilitation*, where the actors facilitate each other and where they contribute to building each other up and develop an awareness of where they are looking from when they observe. This creates a *theatrically aware community* and a *cruel optimism*.

*FIX&FOXY's Representational Strategies* are treated by Anne Liisberg based on the questions: Who may we represent? Who is never represented? In the Bikuben Foundation's art salon *De repræsenterede* (The Represented), actor Troels Thorsen played "Tue Biering" and as moderator he asked the questions. The salon took place at Teater Republique's small foyer stage, Reaktor, on 21 May 2019 and touched on the problem of representation, which has only intensified over the years.

**The fifth section** is selected reviews of performances that for various reasons are revisited.

## List of Performances

### **Europæerne (The Europeans) 2005. The Royal Danish Theatre**

The performance was a collage of classical European drama dealing with war, beginning with Aeschylus. The classical conflicts were translated into everyday problems and played out in a garden. The performance was interwoven with quotations and situations from modern politics, blurring the distinction between classical and modern. At the time of the performance, for the first time in a very long period, Denmark was at war with Iraq and Afghanistan.

### **Come on, Bangladesh, just do it! 2006. The Royal Danish Theatre**

This performance was an interpretation of Johan Ludvig Heiberg's *Elverhøj* (Elves' Hill, 1828) in the Turbine Hall with Z,,, a reference to NIKE: *Just do it*. The play was performed by actors, who were allegedly brought from Bangladesh as cheap labour and *cast* as well-known Danish actors: Mads Mikkelsen, Ole Ernst, Paprika Steen. They performed in Danish wearing wigs, white make up and correct costumes. In addition, Danish actors such as Thomas Corneliussen, Henrik Jandorf and Ellen Nyman appeared. *Elves' Hill* was thus outsourced, and the performance showed the process with video clips from live research in Bangladesh and rehearsals in Bengali and English with the hired actors. One of the points was that the audience was never fully aware of the reality of the work of the "underpaid" actors and whether they really saved so much money, that it was possible to invite the audience for drinks and pizza. A global labour market policy was so to speak presented at the same time as a critique of a national representation of Danishness.

**Pretty Woman A/S (Pretty Woman Ltd.) 2008. In a Container on Halmtorvet**

This performance was a remediation of the Hollywood film *Pretty Woman*. For each performance, a street prostitute was bought to play Julia Roberts' part, while the professional actor, Anders Mossling, played Richard Gere's role. The performance created a productive doubt about the relationship between fiction and reality and between the intentionally staged and the accidental.

**Dollars (FO) 2009. Faroe Islands**

The series was shot as a video remake of 7 episodes of the TV series *Dollars* in the Faroe Islands with Faroese actors – it took place in 14 days and was recorded in 7 different locations in the country. *Dollars FO* was a performance about drama and passion in everyday life, about feeling like a star and about solidarity across religious, political and social divides.

**Friends 2010. NyAveny**

A live theatre performance and sit-com recording in front of a live studio audience. Here a group of asylum seekers from asylum camps around Copenhagen took part in the roles of the six friends of the TV series.

**Guldfeber (Gold Rush) 2010. NyAveny**

This was a remake of Charlie Chaplin's film and had a spastic, dyslexic, second-generation Muslim immigrant in the leading role as the vagabond in the mountains of Klondyke who, against all odds, ends up scoring the gold and the girl.

**Parsifal 2011. Copenhagen Central Station, tracks 11 & 12**

A production of Wagner's last great work about the decline of culture as a traveling opera. A performance that took the opera audience from Copenhagen Central Station to the suburban housing development Brøndby Strand Parkerne.

**Verdens bedste forestilling (The Best Show in the World) 2011. Edison, Betty Nansen Teatret**

The performance was developed in collaboration with the 15 actors who were on stage. They are struggling with the attempt to make the world's best performance. From best beginning to most touching ending, from birth to death, from extreme banalities to grand highlights: an attempt to include everything, in just the right way, before it is too late. The performance was a co-production with Glad Teater (Glad Theatre), a theatre school for actors with disabilities.

**Vær dagens drama (Drama of the Day) 2012. Performed at different locations in Copenhagen.**

A high-tension drama about love, dreams, evil, jealousy and revenge. The spectator watches an everyday situation and random people to a soundtrack that tells the stories of these people, the unspoken lines and their internal dramas.

**Sex og Vold (Sex and Violence) 2012. Co-production with Husets Teater**

The performance was about the perverse nature of the media's entertainment approach to abuse and tragedy. Without delicacy and morals, sex and violence and real misery are presented. The



Friends. Photo: Per Morten Abrahamsen

stage is populated by five giant dummies, who make themselves available for basic research into the obscured areas of the human soul. They are ready to go to any lengths to entertain their audience.

### **Viljens Triumf (Triumph of the Will) 2012. Disused DSB (Danish State Railways) building, the Pump Station**

The performance was a remake of Leni Riefenstahl's film from 1935 *Triumph des Willens*, about the Nazi Congress in Nuremberg in 1934. This was reproduced scene by scene, with the audience in the roles of the German people. Scenes were shown as they were shot, and the audience thus saw themselves and each other as staged in the framework of the Nazi Congress in Nuremberg.

### **Et dukkehjem (A Doll's House) 2014. Various private homes. The Royal Danish Theatre**

Ibsen's drama was performed in homes belonging to married couples, who agreed to the arrangement, though without knowing that they were to appear in the play as Nora and Helmer. They were guided by three actors playing Rank, Krogstad and Mrs. Linde and were given selected lines while elements of their private lives were interwoven. *A Doll's House* has been performed in local versions in various countries, so far in Danish, Swedish, English and Norwegian, and a French version is on the way. Produced in collaboration with Nationaltheatret (The National Theatre) in Oslo and The Royal Theatre in Copenhagen 2014. On tour in Denmark 2015-2017 in collaboration with Teatergrad. English version in collaboration with Theatre of Europe.

### **Ungdom (Youth) 2015. Theatre Republique**

In the large theatre hall, an artificial beach with 90 tons of sand and a tent camp with 35 brightly coloured festival tents and a swimming lake with 15,000 litres of water had been created. The performers were around 30 young non-professionals who met individually and collectively with the audience in small tents and drew them into a kind of youth ritual.

### **Love Theatre 2015. The Pump Station, Copenhagen**

The performance took place in a hotel room with room for 10 spectators. The stage room was built for the purpose and fully furnished with a large double bed with a mirror in the ceiling, a couch, a fridge and with a Jacuzzi in one corner. Here Ping Pong from Thailand, a prostitute in her early forties, politely and kindly welcomed the audience dressed in ordinary Western clothes. She performed a series of scenarios with the spectators, getting selected members of the audience to play along.

### **Det store ædegilde (The Big Feast) 2015. Dansehallerne**

The performance allowed a group of welfare recipients to try out and comment on upper-class life as it is portrayed in the film, *La Grande Bouffe* by Marco Ferreri. Eight welfare recipients are visiting an elitist French art film. They explore an abundance of food, sex and existentialism. Why do the rich eat so much? And why can't they find a way to live? Our prejudices about each other become a picture of modern life with all its aspirations and meaninglessness.

**Velkommen til Twin Peaks (Welcome to Twin Peaks) 2016. Various locations in Odsherred**

The performance was inspired by the peculiar universe of David Lynch's TV series from 1990 and was performed in Odsherred with locals as actors. In 8 cars, local citizens drove the audience around the region to meet, among others, the woman whose son has been in prison for murder, the Greek, the Bastards, the horse girl, the people with the China shop and many more.

**Lampedusa Cruise 2016. Copenhagen Harbour**

A sailing trip on board Alhadj Djuma, an 11 meter long and 3,80 meters wide wooden boat. In 2013 it left Egypt bound for the Italian island of Lampedusa with 282 passengers on board, mainly from Ethiopia and Eritrea. The tour in Copenhagen Harbour included food, music and harbour bath, along with the refugees' accounts from the crossing. The disparity of the play is the contrast between the harbour cruise and the refugee route to Italy.

**Landet uden Drømme (Land without Dreams) 2018. Co-produced with Eventministeriet (The Ministry of Events)/The Royal Danish Theatre.**

On stage is, a woman, she comes from the future to save us from ourselves. We see the future as a dystopian nightmare of natural disasters, geopolitical meltdowns and robots taking over our emotions and social relationships. She begins to tell the story of the future as we wish it to be.

**Rocky! 2017. Co-produced with Husets Teater**

Freely adapted from the 1976 film *Rocky* starring Sylvester Stallone: about the loser who rises up and against all odds triumphs over his own inferiority and social inheritance. But what if it is the rest of us, our values and existence that must be defeated? What if we end up as the losers?

**Mod alle „Odds (Against All Odds) 2019. Co-produced with Betty Nansen Teatret**

The performance is a representation of today's youth as they are statistically likely to look like in the future. There is no classical dramaturgy, no plot and no fictional characters, but 22 young people, who are selected to represent the youth. Does free choice really exist? (Performance of the Year, Reumert 2019).

**Dark Noon. En afrikansk western om os selv (Dark Noon. An African Western about European Migration) 2019. In collaboration with Revolver and Republique**

In a village built on red clay soil with a saloon, a gold mine, a railway and a church, seven South African whitefaced actors perform a western with cowboys and Indians, gold diggers, missionaries and gunfights. *Dark Noon* is about abuse and lawlessness, with whores, bank robbers and sheriffs from the Wild West. During the process, the South African actors involve the audience in the construction of an entire film set while they are videotaped and can be seen in close-ups on a big screen.

### **My Deer Hunter 2020. Edison/ Betty Nansen Teatret**

Four war veterans struggle to return to society again. They talk about the war and the return home fraught with PTSD, shame and lack of self-confidence, all the while filming and questioning each other. The film *The Deer Hunter* is the basis for the performance.

### **Avatar Me 2020. Co-produced with Teater Nordkraft**

This is a personal 1:1 live performance. For 45 minutes you live someone else's life somewhere in the world. The performance is a "first-person", live-streamed experience where you influence the actions of another person. The spectator is placed in unfamiliar surroundings and meets unfamiliar people.

### **Stalker 2021. A podwalk for two in a place of your choice**

The performance is loosely based on Tarkovsky's cult film *Stalker*, 1979. The spectator is on a journey into the ZONE – a forbidden deadly and mysterious area. At its centre is THE ROOM – a place where all your dreams come true. But only the lost can pass through the ZONE and the only one who can lead you to the ROOM is the wanderer STALKER. STALKER is the voice in your ear. With your phone and earphones, you can wander into your innermost and deepest consciousness every evening at 9 pm, anywhere with an internet connection. And maybe, if you follow all the instructions, your greatest wish will come true. It is an outdoor walking performance lasting about an hour.

### **Vi de 1% (We the 1%) 2021. A co-production between FIX&FOXY and Revolver**

The rich live in ghettos often only interact with others who share the same culture and values. They place their children in special schools and only want to contribute sparingly to the community. FIX&FOXY invites real rich people on stage where they talk about the vulnerable position of being extremely wealthy and having distanced themselves from the rest of the surrounding society. Finally, the lower classes knock on the door.

### **Authors**

**Tue Biering**, director and co-founder of FIX&FOXY.

**Erik Exe Christoffersen**, Associate Professor at the Department of Communication and Culture - Dramaturgy. Aarhus University.

**Solveig Daugaard** PhD-student in Literature, Media History and Information Cultures at Linköping University, where she is researching Gertrude Stein's trans-aesthetic reception.

**Monna Dithmer**, External Lecturer at Roskilde University and reviewer at *Politiken*.

**Solveig Gade**, Associate Professor at Department of Arts and Cultural Sciences, Theatre and Performance Studies. University of Copenhagen.

**Anne Liisberg**, reviewer and co-editor of *Isscene*.

**Jeppé Kristensen**, Professor, University of Agder, Norway. Dramaturg and co-founder of FIX&FOXY.

**Ida Krøgholt**, Associate Professor at the Department of Communication and Culture, Dramaturgy, Aarhus University.

**Thomas Rosendal Nielsen**, Associate Professor at the Department of Communication and Culture, Dramaturgy, Aarhus University.

**Laura Luise Schultz**, Associate Professor, Department of Arts and Cultural Studies, Theatre and Performance Studies, University of Copenhagen.

**Mads Thygesen**, dramaturg and former rector of the Danish Performing Arts School.

**Kathrine Winkelhorn**, has for a number of years been responsible for the Master's Programme in Culture and Media Production at Malmö University and is chair of the Copenhagen International Theatre.





## Artist's reflections

Hostages of Me

# Hostages of Me

*By Tue Biering*

Hi. I don't know who you are. Nevertheless, it interests me who you are.

I assume that if you are reading this text, you are interested in theatre, and that you probably work with theatre. However, from this point I do not know any more.

Let me make it clear that I consider you as my hostage. Of course, not in a dangerous sense, but I get a hold on you, and we are going to spend some time together. Right now, I have no power over you. You can stop reading and never return to this text. In the theatre you have a harder time to escape. Of course, you can still close your eyes and, but you can't go anywhere. I also want to make sure I get your attention, and so I entertain you, I make sure you curiously keep your eyes and ears open and focused on what is happening.

## Prologue About an Ending

I'm sitting with my colleague Jeppe at Hotel Opera in Copenhagen. Our refuge when we need to get away from our work at the Royal Theatre. We sit huddled together in some big leather chairs and look blankly into the air. We're saying goodbye to theatre. The year is 2007.

At least that's how I remember it. We have lost the courage to believe that theatre can make a difference. That with our many good intentions and theatrical gestures we can move some of the many things that we think are blatantly wrong when we look around us.

Right now, we are concerned that people are still being traded as bodies for others to buy and be sexually exploited. We both live in Vesterbro, a former workers' district of Copenhagen. Daily we pass prostitutes and trafficked women standing on the street that leads down to the Central Station. We would like to do something about it, but we are not social workers, we are not politicians, we are just awfully naive theatre-makers.

The most natural thing for someone like us would be to do another show where we would use researched material about trafficking, let some actors represent prostitutes and tell their story. That might make a nice show, but it would be another show that could confirm to all of us that something is wrong, and someone must do something, and then it will be forgotten again.

We're saying goodbye to theatre in despair about the fact that all the things we have done in the past didn't really make a difference, didn't really leave a mark, didn't leave any kind of turmoil. We want to be activists, but we don't know how. I remember it as a very long pause when nothing really happens in the small reception with thick carpets at the Hotel Opera.

This is not entirely true. One show stands out a bit from the back catalogue of feel-good-no-harm shows. We did a show the year before *COME ON BANGLADESH JUST DO IT!* (2006). On a trip to Berlin, we talked about how we were both taken by Naomi Klein's *No Logo*. A book about out-sourcing, about how Western world companies exploit cheap labour in Third World countries and save up to 90% of production costs. Money, which instead is used for massive marketing and creating megabrands. Inspired by the motto of one of these megabrands, "just do it!", we got the idea that we would like to outsource ourselves. We wanted to outsource the most well-known and used product from our own shop, which was the Royal Danish Theatre. The drama *Elverhøj* (The Elves' Hill) from 1828 by Johan Ludvig Heiberg is in my opinion not a very great piece of art, but it can rightly be called a crown jewel of Danish theatre. It is the most performed Danish play and

## Hostages of Me

known by most Danes. With *Elverhøj* under our arm, we travelled to Bangladesh, and together with a consultant we found a team of Bangladeshi actors.

We signed contracts with them for a salary that was 10% of a Danish actor, gave them a Danish language course to teach them how to say all the lines in Danish and then went home again. Six months later, four weeks before the premiere, the Bangladeshi team arrived in Denmark. They were dyed white in the face and given costumes from the Royal Danish Theatre's stock. As we had saved a lot of money, we could now treat the audience to free drinks during the performance, give them cash, and order pizza for those who wanted it. At one point in the show, it was announced that the audience had the opportunity to oppose the show and demonstrate in the street. Some nights most audience members ended up out in the street demonstrating while the show inside continued to play; on other nights, few people wanted to do without the drinks, pizza and cool cash.

The show generated a lot of publicity, stirring a debate whether it was morally responsible to let Bangladeshi actors go on stage for a tenth of the salary of the other employees? The highlight for me was when a newspaper expressed its sincere concern that all Danish culture in future would be outsourced and produced in the Third World.

A year later, at the Hotel Opera, it is perhaps the performance *COME ON BANGLADESH JUST DO IT!* that gave us back some courage and faith in theatre again. That performance had given us some new concepts and tools. "Just do it" was a principle of allowing theatre to enter some of the structures that it would point towards. Another discovery was to let the audience become part of the problem. That they were unable to point at others without pointing at themselves.

With those two principles, a new idea began to grow. We would let the audience buy a prostitute to play theatre for them. At the same time, we would let a prostitute represent herself, instead of letting an actor be a stand-in.

The idea was simple, but from here, as usual, everything got much more complicated. We had a pretty strong concept but were struggling to figure out what the material should be. What should the audience look at, what role should the prostitute whom the audience helps to buy, play? We looked in the literature and in theatre texts for scripts in which the purchase of sex is part of the story. There are many, but the problem was that the material is not very well known, and we needed something recognizable, something that our concept could lean on to. The film *Pretty Woman* (1990) should have been obvious, but it was more of a coincidence at the bottom of our list. For us, it was the first time we used a film as a direct model for a performance. Nevertheless, it made sense right away. *Pretty Woman* is one of the films, most people have a relationship with, and most of us can play scenes of it in our inner cinema. A laughing, mostly carefree Julia Roberts who may be a prostitute, but is mostly a romantic, fun-loving girl who can loosen up a grumpy and disillusioned rich man in the form of Richard Gere.

We built our own little theatre out of shipping containers in the middle of the prostitution area in Copenhagen. Inside, we furnished the hotel room that is the main location in *Pretty Woman*.

From the first day of rehearsals, it was incredibly effective to let Vivian Ward, Roberts' character from Hollywood blockbuster fiction, meet the reality version: prostituted women, usually with severe abuse problems and a hefty background of sexual abuse. With great help from a former prostitute, we assembled a large cast of diverse women, who were all given a single rehearsal in which they learned to use an "in-ear" system in which an actor told them everything to do and say. Ironically, most of the women involved loved the film *Pretty Woman*. Some of them even had started out as prostitutes because they had seen that film.

Every night, one of the women, together with a small team of actors, re-recorded the scenes from *Pretty Woman*. Moreover, every night after an hour, she left our theatre to continue her life on the streets.

We had a strategy of running the story about our show exclusively in one big newspaper, but it was revealed, so a tabloid paper suddenly ran a full-page article about dubious theatre artists buying prostitutes for state money. After twenty-four hours, journalists from all Danish media called, and soon CNN, BBC, German press etc. followed. We found ourselves well in the role of the villains and chose not to comment, and the story continued. Politicians also began to take a stand on it. Some stated that it was irresponsible and that it was exploiting and exposing weak people who were not able to choose for themselves.

When we told the women involved about this description, they were furious, they didn't want to be seen as weak or as unable to choose. They chose several times a day in some much more transgressive situations. They were tired of well-meaning protectors talking down to them.

One of the women involved told me that what hurts most is someone like me, passing by someone like her on the street and pretending she doesn't exist.

What she said was quite crucial, and ever since, has been the background for much of what we later came to do. In many following performances, we turned our gaze on people we don't normally look at and forced ourselves to look them straight in the eye.

With *PRETTY WOMAN INC.*, we felt that we had created something much bigger than theatre. We didn't have much space for many audiences in our small interim container theatre. However, an incredible number of people knew about the production, since it was discussed in all the media for weeks, and most of them had to decide whether it was ok to buy another human being – in this case to play Vivian Ward, in a theatre performance. It was an absurd and interesting discussion, which exposed the issue of prostitution in a distinguished way.

We hadn't changed the world, but we had regained the desire and belief that we could create some encounters between the audience and some of the people we rarely notice in real life on a stage.

### **Interlude – The Fix**

So, we weren't saying goodbye to theatre after all, as a little spark of ambition for something new had been lit. The baby needed a name too. We dreamed of being a company that stood out, was something different and yet a cool cat. The list of ideas for names has been lost, but I remember that for a while we seriously considered calling the company "Taxpayers Pay" or "Deadly Nunchaku". Luckily, we became more concerned with finding something to describe how we worked. The German theatre director Frank Castorf said in an interview that in his opinion theatre should be "politisch aber sexy". That sounded a bit like the task we were on. We wanted to help change things, fix things but preferably, in a way that was cool that was easily accessible. Therefore, FIX&FOXY became both a name and the description of some tools we wanted to use. A bit like the name of a Do It Yourself store for people who also want to have fun. We saw it as theatre you can build at home, out of the things you just have on hand in a child's room.

With FIX&FOXY, we could do what we couldn't do anywhere else. Where we could think theatre, activism, art. With great willingness to take risks and without fear of failure.

We wanted to be a company that brought together a new group of artists each time, challenging and exploring new formats.

The year was 2008, and now FIX&FOXY had come into being.

## PART I

### Popular Culture as a Shortcut

Another experience from *PRETTY WOMAN INC.* that was to have a big impact on us was the realisation how effective it was to work with a movie-plot that everyone knew. To be able to speak into a fiction that was so much a part of our collective memory. We had been used to working with theatre texts but had to realise that film has far greater recognition with people.

The TV series *Friends* is familiar to most. It is perhaps the world's most watched sitcom. In addition, many generations have an almost friendly relationship with the six people who, over ten seasons, sat in some pastel-coloured apartments in New York and tried to make their lives work. In turn, we have a hard time connecting with the people sitting in asylums all around us. People who, like Rachel, Chandler, Phoebe, etc., are also waiting for their lives to make sense. The only thing I knew about asylum seekers were documentaries and press articles, where they were mostly depicted in black and white photos, deeply traumatized and blank in their gaze. Was it possible to create the same close connection with asylum seekers than with the characters in an American sit-com – and maybe even create the feeling of being friends with them?

With a large cast of asylum seekers, we every night for a period created a new episode of *FRIENDS - THE ONE WITH THE ASYLUM SEEKERS AND SOME REJECTED ONES* (2010). We created a studio with cameras and sets from the familiar locations from the series. The audience was instructed by a host to be the live studio audience for the live recording of the day. The cast, who came from the Middle East, parts of Africa, Eastern Europe, and Asia, had four hours of rehearsals that day for the evening's episode, while each night new famous Danish guest stars arrived to play smaller roles. It was recognizable and safe for the audience to be in the *FRIENDS* family, and we could sit and laugh at their silly harmless problems with friendships, work, boyfriend troubles, and cable TV. All played by a cast of people with backgrounds in war, persecution, extreme poverty, etc.

It was fun to make, and it was great to see the performers freed from their daily meaninglessness. To laugh with them and get to know them was one thing, but the fact that they took a detour into our consciousness through a silly popular cultural classic, which had made the distance between us smaller, was outright fantastic.

### The Uncomfortable Encounter

We had now turned to pop culture classics from Hollywood, and we'll continue the work of making the distance to some people we don't know shorter. We've also become obsessed with seeking out the things we don't understand that we wonder about. At the same time, we also want to start challenging some of our own prejudices.

It's easy enough to despise the sex tourists who go to the other side of the world to find something they cannot find here. Nevertheless, the question remains: what are they looking for, and is this maybe even something that I need in my life?

*"I will do anything to make you happy"*

### Ping Pong, LOVE THEATRE

We wanted to give the audience an airplane ticket to Thailand and let them follow in footsteps of a sex tourist. We sat and calculated the numbers and were convinced that the arts foundation probably did not see the same good idea in it as we did. The alternative was to buy and move a small part of Thailand to Denmark. After some research and Skype conversations, we went to Thailand and did

some casting with Thai sex workers. Among those castings was Ping Pong who had served many thousands of different clients and remembered them all. She could tell stories in detail about the sad ones, the love-seekers. The ones who just wanted to be allowed to draw her or the backpacker who only wanted to play guitar and sing for her. She told me that her work was largely to help people, to make them happy.

After some difficult fighting with the Danish immigration authorities, Ping Pong arrived in Denmark a few months later and, using things we had bought in Thailand and acquired from hotels on the trip, we painstakingly reconstructed a hotel room from the research photos we had taken at the sex workers' workplaces. We even recreated the temperature, humidity and smell of Thailand in the room. Like a little closed capsule of Thailand.

For the performance *LOVE THEATRE* (2015), there was room for ten audience members who sat against one wall of this hotel room. Ping Pong took the stage and told a story each about ten different Western European clients she had had. Each audience member was individually invited on stage and staged as one of these customers. They were given the lines that the customers had said to her in a re-enactment of situations that were awkward, touching, violent and loving. All situations were born of Ping Pong's deep understanding of finding what would make that person happy.

A phenomenon one might think repulsive was given a different perspective, and perhaps one could even identify oneself, as a spectator, with some of those Ping Pong had met.

Audiences have always, somewhat naturally had a role in our performances. We were now gradually specialising in creating encounters between audiences and people they only thought about in clichés and stereotypes. An encounter that would seem uncomfortable at first, but that we made easy to step into, and fun to participate and empathise with.

It became clearer to us that creating encounters have been the essence of our work. Something that is very special to theatre, and something we came to take further.

### **The Triumph of The Will**

It is called the World's Greatest Movie. The most beautiful film in the world. And the world's most dangerous film.

Today there is no doubt that Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph des Willens* from 1934 is Nazi propaganda. It is harder to admit that it is also insanely beautiful. It was a great inspiration for Hollywood. Both Walt Disney and the Cannes Festival celebrated it at the time. We wanted to find out if one can love a film and its beauty when it also carries a political message that had disastrous consequences.

We wanted to recreate *The Triumph of The Will* scene by scene. To rediscover the fascination and enthusiasm that once existed for the film that since has been hated and banned. At the time, we had a cast of four actors, but shortly before the start of rehearsals, three of them dropped out because they had received better offers. Now we had one actor, one live producer, two camera operators and a film that originally had one million people in it. It was clear that this one actor needed help. He wasn't going to be able to do it on his own. He would need help from the audience.

Now we had to be particularly creative, and this turned out to be a lucky turn, because our first idea probably had not been not so good after all.

At the beginning of the show, the actor explained to the audience that he wanted to recreate *The Triumph of The Will*. Using miniature models, the first scene, a flight through the clouds to the city of Nuremberg was filmed live. The audience saw what was being filmed on a screen. However, already in the next scene there was a problem. Many people had to face the political delegates. The

## Hostages of Me

actor asked if the audience would help him. It was very simple, because they just had to get up and move away the benches they were sitting on. They just had to look at the actor and greet him as he walked by. One actor's helplessness in the face of such an overwhelming project naturally made everyone want to help. With the right camera angles, we saw the scene being created, and we saw ourselves standing and waving, interspersed with the arrival of Hitler, Göring and the others in turn, all personified by the actor standing in front of a green screen. It was funny and very harmless. Now a scene with even more people arrived, and everyone again willingly helped. Over 3 ours the audience joined in as Hitler Youth did gymnastics, storm troopers marched in formation, there were night scenes of cosying up around a bonfire, where there was beer drinking and campfire singing. All to create the right images for the film, admire the aesthetics of the images, and recognise the joy and camaraderie they must have felt at the time. Towards the end, the actor brought in a big wagon full of boots and all the audience members put on started marching in different formations. We now experienced how great it is to march in step, to do something together, to find that common ground. We completely lost touch with the real context. Finally, we sat down again, and now we were partly an audience for the last part of the performance, and partly delegates sitting in the final part of the Nazi Party Congress in Nuremberg, watching the historic speeches of Hitler, Göring, Speer, and others. At this point, we clapped and cheered when told to do so. For we were carried away and wanted to do good.

With *THE TRIUMPH OF THE WILL*, we recreated not only the images of the film but also some of its manipulation and the infectious joy and enthusiasm of doing something together.

You are getting an idea of the audience being repeatedly taken as hostage and lovingly challenged in various encounters with others or themselves and led to new places. Right?

At this point, we still called it “experiences”, but later we realised that it is “empathy”. The audience should not sit at a distance and experience. They need to get close, get in and empathise.

### **The Outskirt**

You are now in a car. You're driving around in the dark in a landscape you've never been in before. Your driver and your three other passengers don't say much. After a long pause, the person driving you deeper into the darkness begins to talk about his relationship with a character in *Twin Peaks*.

We wanted to do a show about how we view people who are on the periphery of our mental landscape. If you go and ask a random person where you can find some slightly crazy types, the “different” ones, they will always have an idea of where that is. It might be the neighbour, it might be the next town down the road, or the crazies on the far side of the country. Moreover, if you went to those “crazies” and asked them the same question, they would most likely have a pretty good idea where the “crazies” lived, too. In a few cases, they might even point to themselves, but I haven't seen that yet.

We wanted to take the audience to an area where there was a general assumption that slightly crazy people lived there. Using David Lynch's cult horror series as a recognisable reference, we wanted to find *Twin Peaks* in an area of Denmark.

If I asked you, which character you are in *Twin Peaks*, you would be able to find one. If you couldn't, then in a short time I could do it for you. Because like so many other good shows, there is a great diversity and a great representation of different types and personalities. Therefore, it wasn't hard to find a large cast where everyone could identify with one of the characters from the series and with some of the themes.

There was the criminal investigator, who had worked in the police for thirty years solving murder cases. There was a young guy, who, like Laura Palmer, lived in a transgressive and searching youth culture of sex and drugs that her parents knew nothing about. There was the psychiatrist, who had worked with psychopathic killers and had a case with someone who ate his own girlfriend. There was the mother, who constantly worried about her daughter when she wasn't home, and there was the couple who lived in a haunted house. Moreover, there were many, many more.

As the audience, you were gathered in an old assembly hall. You were there with thirty-one other people, as eight drivers arrived. One of them would choose you, and together with three other audience members, you were then driven somewhere. Maybe you had a young driver who told you during the drive that he had been in twenty-three car crashes because he often drives drunk. He told you that two of his other friends had died in traffic accidents in the area. After twenty minutes you were dropped off somewhere in the dark and told to go and ring the doorbell of the house in front of which you were standing. You were invited into a unfamiliar person's house. Here you might meet someone, who told you about what it's like to be the "nutcase" in town. To be bullied in the community. You'd be served damn good coffee and watch the collection of birds being gathered here. After twenty minutes, you were let out into the darkness again, and picked up by a different driver. Another person, another story from this person's life. For three hours, you were alternately picked up, driven around and dropped off in a new place. You met a whole lot of people with stories you could never have imagined. Over the course of a long evening, you slowly began to feel part of the area and its people.

Even if you didn't know the series *Twin Peaks*, you would feel like you knew it after experiencing the show *WELCOME TO TWIN PEAKS – EIGHT CARS IN A REMOTE AREA OF CIVILIZATION* (2016). In addition, maybe your mental frontier had been moved a little bit.

## **PART 2**

### **Turning Point**

Bored? Does it make sense to get into all these performances? I have not given you the more complex concept of the performances, but I hope a pattern begins to emerge. We don't have a method. Every time we do a new show, it's like building a new machine. There's a big difference between inventing logistics for eight cars to fit together in seconds and casting a Thai prostitute and convincing the authorities she's not taking work from Danish actors. However, it's always a lot of practical work, a dynamic process, and every time we try to fix it in a foxy way. And even though we do not have a method, something is recurring. Uncomfortable meetings, audience participation, and then something unexpected always happens at some point.

Moreover, right now at this point in the performance of the shows, a turning point is needed. In the performances, it's usually a new person who arrives, or a confession that turns everything upside down.

### **I Have Lied to You All**

We've done many shows that are inclusive, that put on stage the people we normally never want to see or who we hide away from. I've seen myself as a very inclusive person who wants to hug everyone. Nevertheless, I've been lying all along.

There are people whom I can't accommodate, whom I don't want in my theatre and, whom I have deftly avoided looking in the eye, preferring to caricature and parody from a distance. I am

not at all the inclusive person I claim to be, and I now find myself standing in my own blind spot. The artist who feigns the role of the inclusive one.

We had been keen to do performances with all the other people. Put them on stage and let them tell their story. Now it was our turn.

*ROCKY* (2017) was a show about the artist and the self-professed humanist who loves to cheer on the losers. An actor stood on stage and explained about his love for the movie *Rocky*, because he loved the stories about the losers being able to stand up and against all odds win our respect and love. However, what happens when the losers don't want our love? When they are tired of being props in a story that is always being written by us who have appropriated the right to write.

*ROCKY* is the performance of the artist's self-staged inclusiveness, which is challenged when a loser like Rocky becomes right-wing and ends up a politician. It's the left-wing's nightmare that the cuddly doll ends up striking out and ends up in power. It is the artist's nightmare to lose all privilege and speaking time, and to watch powerlessly as the world turns to the right and these Rockies take the stage.

In *ROCKY*, the actor ended up hanging himself from a chain. Like a dead pig, upside down, he hung there, as a final self-staging as the victim. At least he was able to assume the privileges of playing the role of the loser.

Until that moment, it was a performance where the audience could shudder to empathise with the story of *ROCKY*, but the performance ended with another scene, as a member of the Danish People's Party entered the stage and described how she experienced the performance and how she perceived the world. Here, Rocky became reality, and here the theatre was visited by those we in FIX&FOXY and most of the audience have never embraced.

### **The Statistical Machinery of Destiny**

Destiny has always preoccupied humans. Whether a thread of life has already been spun, a higher power has laid the cards before us. Today, there are other words for it: inherited privilege and environment-promoting capital. Statistics have shown us unequivocally that our societies are arranged so that we can predict our children's future with a high degree of probability, based on their socio-economic background and the geography in which they grow up.

Most of us know these statistics, and we can intellectually relate to it. However, how can we translate it so that we can feel the inequality in the numbers?

*AGAINST ALL ODDS* (2019) was a performance where twenty-two children aged eleven or twelve, with the statistically representative breadth from upper class to lower class, took to the stage and acted out their personal statistical future lives. At first, we had to know all of them. They acted as individuals and moved in and out of the statistics of children aged twelve. Who has learning difficulties, who sleeps badly at night, who has parents with economically difficult backgrounds, who spends a lot of time with his family, who is mentally challenged? All of these and more are factors used to predict their future destinies.

The second part of the show followed the brutal scenarios of the statistics, and it followed them as different social groups and as individuals. Those who run straight through the education system and are guaranteed a place in the job market, those who end up in drug addiction and crime, those who end up in unskilled work, and those who never find a step or anything to hold on to and end up at the bottom of society. With cynical calm, the statistics push them through their lives to

their last day when, one by one, they lay down on the stage, some early, and some late. In the end, twenty-two statistical fates were left behind, each with their own possible future.

It was hard not to be moved, outraged and powerless. In this case, the audience was relegated to the role of spectator with no opportunity to jump up and make a difference. There were no extenuating theatrical circumstances.

### **The Scar**

You've probably long since discovered that there's not been much feel-good no-harm drama so far. A journalist once told me that every time you go to see our shows, it feels like you're being beaten up. That it can be quite hard and take a long time to recover from it.

It's certainly not our intention for you to be afraid of us. However, we do want to scar you. Not a real scar, of course. Nevertheless, we like to think of creating something that remains. Like when you look at a scar and it brings back strong memories and a clear recollection of how and when it happened. It must hurt to go in and see our performances. It must leave a strong impression.

### **The Representation of Us**

On stage are seven South African actors. They will tell a story about migration. About how hunger and poverty force millions of people to flee their homes and countries to seek their fortune in a foreign land, where wealth and opportunity exist. They are on stage looking at us; they might look like someone representing the many migrants fleeing into Europe from northern Africa, away from hopeless poverty in the pursuit of a better future.

The show began with all seven of them painting their faces white, because *DARK NOON* (2019) was not about them, it was about us. *DARK NOON* invited the audience into the story of how millions of Europeans from the 1850s fled to the promised land of gold and honey. About how desperation and a prospectless future drove them into a mad rush towards an unknown destiny.

It's the story of the West, told like a Western. On a vast stage of red, dry sand, we followed people who, through imagination, built a city and created a dream of something better, a dream that may grow bigger than the man who dreamt it.

A year before, we had gone to Johannesburg to find a cast for the show. We had gone with the idea of doing a show about the Africa that we knew little about, but which had nevertheless been very much on our minds all our lives. We wanted to assemble a team of actors who could tell us the story of Africa, in their own way, but with a simple conceptual framework. They would tell it in a Western narrative, based on the idea that the dramaturgy and characters of the Western cinematic genre are easily recognisable and readable, and a way of creating a relationship with something so far away.

After assembling a team of amazing players with our co-director-choreographer Nhlanhla, we did several workshops exploring the relationship between South African society and the universe of the Western. There were many things that made sense, but I had a sneaking feeling that I was reproducing a character I didn't like. Here we came and asked them to tell us about themselves. Like it has happened many, many times before. "Tell me a story from Africa."

After a few days with that feeling, I started a trial by hesitantly introducing the idea that instead of telling their own story, they should tell my story. I was quite unsure if this was the wrong thing to suggest, but it immediately seemed that everyone was relieved. The team of actors agreed that it was the first time they had been invited to play "the others". A new energy and work that became much more interesting began.

## Hostages of Me

It was very satisfying to reverse the power relationship, and it was interesting to see how the reverse representation opened a whole range of possibilities. That through the representation of “us” by others we might become wiser about ourselves.



Dark Noon. Photo: Søren Meisner

Unknowingly, it became apparent during the process that Western films had had a great personal impact on all seven of the South African performers. The performance ended with each of them telling about their relationship with Westerns. Most of them grew up with American Western films as a very dominant genre, and which introduced guns into the poor townships. Real guns were handled as you had seen the cowboys do on TV.

There was suddenly a deeper reason why these seven people with a bitter acquaintance with the genre created a Western about us, for us.

### **Catharsis**

*“I’ve been told by my psychologist to hide the keys to my gun cabinet when I feel like this...”*  
(War veteran in My Deer Hunter)

It was supposed to be a time machine. We wanted to film a group of soldiers before they were sent to war. Film them going to war, and then a few years later put them on stage and let them talk to their past selves. The idea of creating a conversation across time between a self that doesn’t yet know what was going to happen, and a self that was in the future after having participated in a life-changing situation, was fascinating. When the concept was conceived, Denmark was participating

in the war in Afghanistan, but when we were about to cast, Denmark was coming out of the war. In a fit of artistic narcissism, you could almost wish we had continued being at war. Although we could wish for more influence on political decisions, it wasn't exactly the battle it made sense to win.

We had to change our concept but wanted to keep the idea of the time machine, so we chose to reverse time. Instead of talking into the future, it might be possible to talk into the past.

The idea was to let war veterans who were injured to look back in time and try to recreate the person they were before their lives were shattered. We contacted quite a few veterans, but most of them we spoke to revealed that they were deeply damaged and living with PTSD, which often made them live in isolation from other people and highly incapable of standing in front of an audience. For a long time, we didn't have any cast and it seemed impossible to accomplish.

After several times losing heart in the project, someone finally wanted to take part and set out to revisit the past and meet the person they once were.

Using the film *Deer Hunter* as a dramaturgical template, they talked about their lives before the many shows, about the thoughts and ambitions they had. The mission and the things that made them later break down and be broken. Moreover, about the long walk they had gone through to recover to be able to move on. It was not possible for any of them to recover completely again, a realisation that had been the biggest and most painful one.

The performance was very different from what we had imagined. We had feared it would be another show about war, but it became much more. It was with *MY DEER HUNTER* (2020) that I first understood and experienced, what catharsis in the Greek tragedies is capable of. That by watching and empathizing with the violent pain and existential collapse of others, we are cleansed.

## **Becoming The Other**

The pandemic has obviously affected us, and has had profound consequences for our work at FIX&FOXY. In the time before, we had talked a lot about starting to use the digital possibilities that were available to be in touch with other people around the world. We had grown tired of travelling and didn't think it suited our climate footprint either. Was there a way we could work internationally without having to move around the world?

At the time, there weren't that many platforms. Skype, Google and Microsoft had developed some options, but they didn't seem that useful, and I must admit I sat and waited for something to happen to make technology more readily available.

Then the pandemic came, and we all had to adapt and become digital super users.

We created *AVATAR ME* (2021), which is, in all its simplicity, a 1:1 digital performance where you become, for a moment, another person in the world. You got a link and now you sat in front of your computer, and on your screen, you control another human being, who was live at this moment somewhere else in the world.

You were a woman in Johannesburg, South Africa, and could not go outside your door, but you had to go shopping. Alternatively, you were born a man in Brazil but took female hormones and found yourself being chased through the streets by people shouting derogatory and threatening language.

Several audience members said they experienced something more intimate and present than they had ever before experienced in the theatre.

Similarly, I feel I have a close connection with everyone in the cast after weeks of rehearsals, not knowing if I will ever meet them in real life.

### **The Ultimate Encounter**

Over the years, we have worked on all our blind spots. We have invited everyone on stage.

We have worked with the vulnerable, those who rarely get a voice, those who are overlooked, and also those with whom we disagree.

However, there are some who someone like me always sees as the bad guys, the ones who are to blame for the way things are. Those who have created imbalances in the systems. We have created many representations of them, but never met one of them ourselves or given them a place on stage. They are very exotic and keep to themselves or with others who look like them. They are the very richest in society.

We wanted to do a show about how exposed a position it is to be rich. We would invite the rich in and announce our many images about them. Every night a very rich person would come on stage. Some own thirty million kroners, others more than a billion. What they all have in common is that they don't want to appear in public in the media, but they want to step onto a stage and meet an audience at eye level and talk about their experience of being particularly privileged and distanced from the rest of society.

In *WE THE 1%* (2021), an actor engaged in a choreographed dialogue with the rich, trying to make them live up to our notions of rich people. An installation of the world of the rich was built around them, with designer furniture, lobster, champagne and symbols of the upper class. In the end, the rich were caught up in our imagination of them. However, it turned out that the rich are also people for whom one can feel sympathy, and so the situation was exacerbated when a homeless person entered the stage. A meeting between society's poorest and richest is a very rare encounter, and we can see how uncomfortable the situation became for the rich. Later, more homeless people, drug addicts, criminals, indebted people arrived. They intruded the stage and eventually took over the rich men's territory, removing everything before our eyes and before the eyes of the rich. Meanwhile the actor speaks the line, "people like us love to see people like you being dragged through the ringer and brought down to the level of the rest of us."

We've got what we wanted, and we've happily watched. Until a live video from Moldova flashed up on the back wall. Here, a family sat in a kitchen and now started asking the audience how we feel about being much more privileged than them, about being among the 1% richest in the world and about, how we would feel about losing our privileges.

The performance was once again not about those on stage, but about the audience, who were now put in the uncomfortable position of being the privileged ones.

### **The Last Act**

Now the show about the performances with people you may have never met before is ending. In addition, like all these performances, there is no real ending. There is no moral. The hallmark of all the performances is that you, the audience, are left with more questions that you must answer for yourself.

We may have given you a problem. Something you're struggling with. We call what you find yourself in, right now "the last act". The one that plays out from the moment you leave the show and continues for the next few days or years.

### **Epilogue of a Beginning**

Having created performances with people in Bangladesh, Thailand, South Africa, Moldova, Brazil, Malaysia, India and elsewhere, it is clear to us how essential it is to create encounters with the world.

## Tue Biering

Right now, we are facing a new beginning where in future productions we will collaborate much more with other international artists and people whom we have never met. We believe that an outlook to the world will give us an insight into ourselves, and that with this insight we shall understand many of the great challenges of the future.

We hope to continue to challenge ourselves and our audiences. Then we will challenge the way we see each other and our own place in the world.

We believe that theatre has no boundaries.

### Introduction

FIX&FOXY is an international company based in Copenhagen, Denmark. We would like to see ourselves as a place where different artists meet and create new, different ideas about the world and the people in it. With *HOSTAGES OF ME*, we want to invite you into our history and to give you a front row seat to some of our performances, because everything we think is closely connected to our history and our practice.

---

**Tue Biering**, director and co-foiunder of Fix&Foxy

---

Translation: **Annelis Kuhlmann** and **Peter M. Boenisch**

---



The Big Feast. Photo: Søren Meisner



## Artist's Reflections

What Have We Really been Up To?

# What Have We Really been Up To? Ethical, Social and Artistic Enquiries

By Jeppe Kristensen

FIX&FOXY is a name for the collaboration that Tue Biering, myself and a large number of other artists have had over the past nine years. Initially, the collaboration was not intended as a unit of any kind. We have created a number of theatre projects, each of which we have had a strong desire to realise. It is only gradually that we have begun to bring them together under the collective name FIX&FOXY, and we are still reluctant to talk about an overall project. We are interested in making performances where in each individual case we have the opportunity to rethink all the elements of theatre, including the institutional framework and ourselves. However, as we approach ten years of work, it should still be possible to come up with a fairly coherent idea of 'who we are'. To outline an artistic field of enquiry in which we at FIX&FOXY have worked and try to assess it.

## An Ethical Experiment

It will necessarily also be an ethical assessment. At the moment we are manipulating our audience to be Nazis in the performance *Viljens Triumf* (Triumph of the Will). We have shown prostitutes to a paying audience in *Pretty Woman A/S* (Pretty Woman Ltd.). We have performed a xenophobic opera in one of Copenhagen's most troubled social housing estates, in *Parsifal*, we have made Faroese participants act out all the prejudices about themselves in a soap opera with a completely unlikely star status as the only payment, and we have let actors with disabilities spaz through and exhibit their dreams in *Verdens bedste forestilling* (The Best Show in the World). Can this ethical experiment with other human beings be justified?

In our own answer to the question lies – I think now, long after the fact – a somewhat baffled attitude that everything is already a great ethical experiment anyway. Surely, we cannot be supposed to treat each other the way we do? When we made *Pretty Woman Ltd.* in 2008, it was accused of being unethical. The quite simple basic idea of the performance will be familiar to many. It took place in a small provisional theatre hall that we had set up on Halmtorvet in Copenhagen. Every evening we used the entrance fees to pay one of the neighbourhood's street prostitutes to play the role of Julia Roberts as a street prostitute. The woman was given an in-ear speaker, which gave her instructions and lines to perform a more or less accurate reconstruction of the original film, with Anders Mossling as Richard Gere. The performance was accused of exploiting the participating women and exposing them. We did not agree, we thought we made a very balanced and friendly production. But probably the most important thing is that these women were already being exploited and exposed in their daily lives. How can being in a theatre performance be worse than working as a drug prostitute? The ethical question of whether we can justify what we do therefore makes more sense to me if it is rephrased as: what comes out of letting ourselves give theatrical form to the ethical experiments that reality perform on us, like little guinea pigs; and what kind of theatre work do we then engage in? In other words, what kind of aesthetic enquiry, dramaturgy and acting should we try to create?

### **Cardboard, Tape and Video Cameras**

Our performances have come to appear quite similar, even though they have each been the expression of very different ambitions, and have been experienced very differently. In *Pretty Woman Ltd.*, the film is recreated using simple means. There are ping pong balls in the bathtub. The snails in the French restaurant are made of wine gum. We do a bluescreen recording with a blue sheet as a background. Something similar occurs in a lot of our performances. In the Faroese version of *Dynasty*, the actors are equipped with cheap wigs and costumes consisting simply of lapels and cuffs glued to their own clothes. Their own homes are transformed into oil mansions with self-adhesive Greek columns and two-dimensional cardboard flowers and fireplace. In *Triumph of the Will*, the audience stands with tinfoil shovels and marches around in rubber boots from the store Metro that have to pass as Nazi leather boots. In retrospect, a picture emerges that we have explored the minimum limits of what is required for a reproduction. Or perhaps rather, what the nature of a reproduction can actually be. Another aspect of the aesthetics we have explored in relation to the reproductions is that of practice. It is always apparent in our performances that a production is taking place and also, in most cases, how it is carried out. The scenographies therefore often consist of a 'set', which, as described above, can be quite cheap and minimal, surrounded by a production area that is pragmatic. Here there are camera operators, cables, computers, backs of set pieces, editors and, in some performances, an entire Foley workshop to create the soundtrack for the recordings. While the layers corresponding to the fiction of the original works have been playful, bordering on the silly, these technical layers have been no-nonsense professional spheres.

### **Reflection without Statements**

In this way we have tried to create performances where the illusion and the creation of the illusion have been present at the same time, and equally visible. In the theatre (or wherever our performances take place) there is a clear fictional game going on which, in order to give meaning to the performance, we must involve the audience in. In *Triumph of the Will*, for instance, we ask the audience to re-enact and relive the 1934 Nazi Congress in Nuremberg, without having prepared them for it. Most people come to the performance expecting to be an ordinary audience, and in the first part of the performance, that is what they experience. They sit on benches set up like in a cinema, facing a screen. In front of the screen is a small model city and all sorts of elements that can be filmed. Our lone actor, Anders Mossling, introduces his desire to recreate Leni Riefenstahl's film because it is so aesthetically beautiful that it makes him happy. His camera crew then sets about recreating the film shot by shot. Shortly into the film, however, the problem arises that the film involves an incredible number of people. Mossling wants to recreate the film, but he cannot do it alone. He therefore asks the audience to help him by acting as a background for the film as a crowd receiving Hitler. From then on, the audience becomes participants in the creation of the film, until finally they play the absolute leading role as the masses in Nuremberg. Throughout the whole performance you know that what you are doing is politically and intellectually wrong, but the experience and the feeling is that it is fun. There is no point in the performance where this dilemma of reflection and experience is resolved. The performance ends without a moral or a message. I have a very private perception of what the performance is about. To me, it is about how difficult it is to know what is good and evil when you are part of a context larger than yourself and with manipulative forces. I do not think it exonerates Nazis, but it asks me questions as to what larger historical movement I am part of without knowing what it entails – a comfort fascism, for example, that makes our generations tacitly accept all the unpleasantness and imbalances in the world if

resistance requires lower living standards and growth? But that is my completely personal experience of the performance. The political and debating element of the performance lies in avoiding any kind of message in the uncommented interaction between the technical level and the fiction.

### **Double Plots in Metafictional Performances**

In performances such as *Triumph of the Will* and *Pretty Woman Ltd.* where a high degree of control and an element of unpredictability in the interaction between actors, non-actors and the audience create the performance, the actors have a major task. Our performances often have a double plot. One is, for example, to tell the story of the sweet prostitute or Parsifal's experiences in the vicious Arab world, while the other is about 'making it happen'. In *Pretty Woman Ltd.* we borrow a story from the original film. It is the story of a street prostitute who does not really belong in the environment, who is sweet and charming, who meets a reserved rich man, and then through a series of funny scenes she gets him to put his reservations about her and the world in particular, behind him, and then we can start to see her and feel something for her. In the performance, we try to make more or less the same thing happen: through a series of funny scenes (also on the theatrical level) to make the audience see the woman performing in front of them and start to feel something for her. We do not stage it in such a way that we control what the audience should feel, but we very deliberately stage it in such a way that the audience is compelled to put their reservations behind them. Something similar in *Triumph of the Will*. Here we borrow a situation where the ordinary people visiting Nuremberg enjoy taking part in a community (which is politically suspect, but it is part of Riefenstahl's work that, for naive or propagandistic reasons, it does not show in the film). In the performance, we turn the making of the film into the common project that the audience is manipulated to take part in and have fun being part of. An essential part of Anders Mosslings work in *Triumph of the Will* is to make this group feeling materialised.

### **Process**

In these performances, our actors must feel equally comfortable playing a role, communicating with the audience in such a way as to create an equal relationship, taking care of one or more non-actors who are not trained in performance situations, and at the same time managing the development of the performance in such a way that this secondary plot unfolds. In our work, we have wanted to make this happen by creating performances that suit the actor. We assign a lot of responsibility to the actor in terms of creating situations, lines, and technical solutions. We also expect our actors to contribute to solving conceptual challenges. At the same time, we see it as part of our job to organise the performances in such a way – conceptually, technically and procedurally – that they could not be played by any other actor. Occasionally, some of our actors feel that they are given so much room to fulfil their task that it seems as if we do not care at all. Of course, we do. But in rehearsals we observe a lot. We have no wish to dictate the performance to our cast, and believe it is best created by the actors and other cast members as much as by us. We are by no means clever, just stubborn, curious and always in the process of discussing what kind of performance we are making. In most rehearsal processes, therefore, the free feeling the actor has had in developing the performance changes to a strict regime towards the end, when the created material has to be structured into an actual dramaturgy. Certain lines – usually opening, transitional and closing lines – are rewritten countless times in order to place the absolutely right code words in the absolutely right places. This is the only method we have to guide the audience through the two parallel plots and make them give each other meaning.

### **Real Fictions**

We have not always made reproductions. This is not the case, for example, in performances like *Parsifal* or *The Best Show in the World*, which are important for my understanding of what we do. Fictional games, on the other hand, have always been part of our work, as far as I can see. I think this is partly a matter of taste, perhaps a certain shyness towards the theatre's traditional fiction contracts. But it certainly also has to do with the fact that this is where we have found a situational opportunity to explore meaning. Not only through the story being told, or the aesthetic devices used to tell it, but also through the situation in which the audience, the actor and others are placed as the story is told. In retrospect, it is quite clear that in these performances we have both employed metafictional strategies and insisted on either stepping into a real context (in our site-specific performances) or drawing this context into the theatre (in our person-specific performances). It is as if the fiction and the play with the production of fiction has only been interesting to us when the real aspect of the issue has been represented in the fictional play. One could say that we have explored the possible effects of giving an ethical issue a metafictional form where one of the fictions is that the real is also present in the performance. We are not making a philosophical point that the real does not exist or anything like that. We are just aware that what we put on stage is theatre, and that everyone who performs is an actor in their own way, whether they have training or not. There is a very big difference between what they can do and what they cannot do, and, first of all, there is a very big difference in the story they carry. We have started to look at the reproductions, as well as the metafictional staging of classics and original works we have made, as shared games that take place between all participants – actors, audience, technical team and Tue and me as senders.

### **... and Fiction-Based Reality.**

I think that one of the things we have achieved by giving theatrical form to everyday ethical problems is to create some very special encounters between all of us who are involved. Even if you arrive at the performance as a member of the audience, you somehow always become – depending on how we have organised the situation in which you enter the performance – a participant on an equal footing with the actors and performers. This is also why pop culture narratives have played such an important part in our performances. They are a kind of modern classics – not old, but collective stories that contribute to forming our shared view of the world. A story like *Pretty Woman Ltd.*, in our experience, contributes to shaping our image of prostitution, no matter how silly it is, and, incredibly, this is also true for the prostitutes themselves. In a complex society where it is difficult to know everyone, we fill in the gaps with stories, be it in a straightforward relationship to the harmless and idyllic as in *Pretty Woman* or to the demonic as in *Triumph of the Will*. I think it is fair to say that one of the premises of FIX&FOXY's theatre is that we see fiction and reality as two intertwined phenomena. And the exhilarating thing about this mix, and about working with theatre as a meeting place, is that these narratives actually feel changeable.

### **Conclusion**

Our investigations of the cardboard-and-tape aesthetics and the visible production apparatus, of the metafictional strategies – including the fiction called reality, and of the particular form of acting that creates a dialogue between audience and actors, are thus concerned with how to give theatre meaning from some basic elements: taking advantage of the fact that we are in the same space, taking advantage of the fact that we tell stories, and taking advantage of the fact that theatre is perceived as meaningful play. We have tried to situate our performances in the world and to make

their context an essential part of the meaning-making process in order to place the audience in a situation where – without any statements from Tue's and my side, I hope – the dilemmas of our world can be experienced and reflected upon in a social space. We have rarely experienced that spectators have withdrawn from participating in these ethical challenges. We have tried to make them accessible to everyone and to make them rewarding to participate in by focusing on humour and communication. And our experience is rather that we all more or less need to be part of these ethical experiments. Otherwise, the great ethical experiment we call reality will seem out of our hands. It is a stimulating and rewarding game to participate in. But it also requires that we as creative artists commit to creating entirely new performances each time, rethinking the basic framework of the theatre to create situations where – in order for the audience to experience performances with the same attitude – we remain curious and unprejudiced (This article was previously published in *Peripeti*, 2012).

---

**Jeppe Kristensen**, Professor, University of Agder, Norway. Dramaturg and co-founder of FIX&FOXY

---



## Interview

Pretty Woman Walking Down the Street

# Pretty Woman Walking Down the Street

By Solveig Gade

In the autumn of 2008, a theatre performance took place in a container on Halmtorvet in Copenhagen. The performance sparked a fierce public debate, and long before the official opening date, it had expanded its stage area to the media. The performance was called *Pretty Woman A/S* (Pretty Woman Ltd.), the directors and conceptualisers were Tue Biering and Jeppe Kristensen, the set designer Christian Friedländer and the actors Egill Pálsson, Anders Mossling and Nanna Bøttcher. Moreover, a handful of female prostitutes participated in turn – and, one might add, various politicians, social workers, former prostitutes, theatre critics and journalists, the audience and then all the rest of us who, in one way or another, have helped generate texts, statements and rumours about the performance. The concept behind *Pretty Woman Ltd.* was, in all its simplicity, that the two directors chose to stage selected scenes from the popular 1990 romantic comedy *Pretty Woman* in the container at Halmtorvet. Instead of Richard Gere and Julia Roberts, however, the Swedish actor Anders Mossling and a number of different female prostitutes from the area around Halmtorvet could be seen in the roles of the wealthy business-man Edward and the engaging prostitute Vivian, who ends up with the famous Prince Charming.

Biering and Kristensen – with the help of a former insider from the milieu – had established contact with the prostitutes in the year leading up to the performance period. In the weeks before the premiere, the team had rehearsed the scenes so that the prostitutes could enter into the performance unprepared and play the leading role by having their lines delivered by earpiece. The container was modelled on the interior of the film's main location, a smaller version of a penthouse hotel suite, and separated by a glass pane the audience could experience a 'real' prostitute playing the role of both the fictional character Vivian and the 'happy hooker' described by the social cliché. During the performance period, each night three or four of the participating women would appear in a caravan adjacent to the container and, in consultation with Nanna Bøttcher, decide which of them would be on stage that night. For their part, the audience was told that the money they had paid for the evening's ticket went to cover the amount that the evening's selected prostitute would have earned if she had been working the streets instead of performing in the theatre. Hence the name of the performance, *Pretty Woman Ltd.* – in the same way as in a limited company, the audience had to "invest" in the prostitute and thus take an active part in a study of how much money can really buy.

Tue Biering and Jeppe Kristensen have previously been known for their ability to create both challenging and thought-provoking concepts together. In the performance *Come on, Bangladesh, just do it!* they hired five actors from Bangladesh, guided by Danish actors, to perform the Danish national treasure *Elverhøj* (Elves' Hill) at the Royal Danish Theatre. However, with a declared ambition to test the possibility of transferring the mechanisms of the globalised labour market to the art world, the Bengali actors were paid only about one tenth of the salary received by their Danish colleagues. Thus, within the framework of the Danish national stage, Danish cultural heritage was deftly paired with some of the issues raised by globalisation in relation to the question of not only the relationship between the 1st and 3rd worlds, but also art and business.

In *Pretty Woman Ltd.*, Biering and Kristensen similarly approached a precisely defined problem by taking as their point of departure a specific locality – the newly renovated area around Halmtorvet – and some of the discourses that contribute to structuring the public image of the "woman's oldest profession", including the romanticisation of the profession that the film *Pretty Woman* can be said

## Pretty Woman Walking Down the Street

to represent. By pairing a site-specific strategy with a discourse-specific one, so to speak, Biering and Kristensen with a focus on the issue of prostitution effectively shed light on the boundaries that determine who counts and who does not, who is visible and who is invisible, in the so-called Danish public sphere. This question seems grotesquely urgent precisely in relation to the area around Halmtorvet, where trendy café and gallery visitors with sunglasses on their foreheads literally have to edge their way past illegally immigrated prostitutes from all over the world, who, like ghosts from the once infamous Halmtorv, stubbornly insist on maintaining their territory, even though it has been invaded in recent years by entrepreneurial artists and traders.

As mentioned, *Pretty Woman Ltd.* sparked a heated public debate, with not only theatre insiders, but also politicians and social workers passionately voicing their unassailable opinions on the project. And the media willingly joined in the spectacle, which one almost has to look to the German action artist and director Christoph Schlingensiefel to find for similar examples of. For, as with Schlingensiefel, it was not possible to sit back in a comfortable consensus of being “on the side of good” in relation to the project. On the contrary, not only as audience, but also as an ordinary newspaper reader, you were thrown back on yourself and forced to critically reflect on not only the project and the questions it raised, but also your own automatic pilot attitudes about aesthetics and ethics.

### **Conversation with Tue Biering and Jeppe Kristensen**

*About six months after the containers and caravan have finally been packed up, and the media storm has subsided, I seek out Biering and Kristensen for a talk about how the ethical and aesthetic questions raised by the project look from a distance. We start by talking about why it was important to the two authors that the project took place within an artistic framework, and what they see this setting as adding to the issue that, for example, an opinion piece in a paper would not be able to do in the same way.*

Jeppe Kristensen: To start with, we have a professionalism that makes it natural for us to make theatre about this issue instead of writing a letter to the editor about it. Nevertheless, you could say that the thoughts we had at the very beginning about the kind of slave trade that takes place today, that is trafficking, perhaps seemed a bit like a letter to the editor. But the process and the movement away from the letter to the editor, which began when we started working with the theatrical framework and the actual encounter in the theatre hall rather than with lectures or teaching, was determined by much more than ourselves. All the input we got along the way helped to move the project to where it ended up. And here the important thing was not a particular political conviction, but what happened when we were present together in the room.

Tue Biering: When Jeppe and I started talking about how important we thought it was to address this issue, I was completely discouraged by the idea that we should get a playwright to write a story about prostitution, which we then had to get some actors to play. It wouldn't be satisfactory for us to approach it in that way, and I might be moved by such “theme performances”, but they actually very rarely tell me anything new, because we all read the same newspapers and the same books, and we all watch the same documentaries. So the idea was to see if we could find a format that could create some ripples and provoke some discussions in a different way than what you can, roughly speaking, do with these “themed performances”.

Jeppe Kristensen: When you work in a “problem-orientated” way, as we did with for instance *Pretty Woman Ltd.*, there is a danger that you end up like another parasite sucking blood out of one problem after another, and that the only thing that really happens is that afterwards you can feel like a good and artistically responsible person who has “done something about a problem”. In relation to this project, there was the additional danger that – if we made it as a “theme performance” – we would just end up preaching to the already converted. At some point the idea came up that if we made a performance that included the abusive nature of prostitution – we buy a woman to do something – then suddenly there would be something at stake. We couldn’t quite figure out exactly what, but we could sense that in that way the performance would not only mean something to those who came to see it, but also to those who didn’t, and in that way, it would have a life outside the theatre.

*What considerations did you have about the physical setting of the project – a container on Halmtorvet?*

TB: When we did *Come on, Bangladesh* a few years ago in the Turbinehallerne at the Royal Danish Theatre, we found that people had a lot of pre-programmed ideas about what they were going to see, and this meant that their reception apparatus was kind of disturbed by a certain idea of what theatre is. An idea that made them not very keen to go along with the rule we set for how the story of *Elves’ Hill* could be told. So by moving *Pretty Woman* out of the theatre and into a container on Halmtorvet, we were in a way free of these very pre-programmed expectations, because we knew that the audience couldn’t possibly say, “Ok, now I’m going to go and see some ordinary theatre”. The idea of the containers had been in our heads from the beginning, but at first we preferred to do the project in Skelbækgade in a disused car repair shop and then in one of the many hotel rooms in Istedgade. But when the car repair shop was demolished, and the hotels didn’t want anything to do with us – which is perfectly reasonable because we wanted to question a problem that they themselves are part of, but don’t want to be associated with in public – we ended up with our starting point: these three containers, which quickly turned out to be just right. The containers were easily accessible, and when we found used condoms and needles around them the day after they were set up, we knew we had made the right choice. Instead of being a conspicuous parasite, we had become part of the organism around Halmtorvet.

JK: Impractical as we are, at one point we also considered building a huge glass box so that people could look in from outside and see what was going on inside the box. This was to bring out the conceptual dimension of the project, which was that *Pretty Woman Ltd.* was not only played out for those inside the box, but also for those who were outside it. In a way, we are in a perpetual conflict with our relationship to theatre. We often talk about how we’re about to do something that takes place in a gallery, and how it’s important that it’s seen as art and not as theatre, because in that way it will be a different framework of understanding that will define the way the project is received. But on the other hand, we are super happy that we are not in a visual arts context, because it is somehow much more liberated than what we need. We need to have some boards to play against.

*What do you mean when you say that there is a greater degree of liberation in the visual arts?*

TB: Well, in the visual arts, there are virtually no limits to what can be art – you’ve kind of tried everything and anything is possible. And because we perceive the world of visual art as free from

## Pretty Woman Walking Down the Street

a lot of dogmas, in a way we really want to go there. On the other hand, we knew that if we were to create any kind of reflection about *Pretty Woman Ltd.* – if the project was to have any kind of effect – then we had to stand by the fact that it was theatre. Because in the theatre world, the first reaction would be “but you can’t do that”, while in the visual arts world, people would probably say “well, yes, it’s just art, because everything can be art”. And in that way, the liberation could become a pretext for doing nothing.

*You must have had a number of ethical considerations in connection with the fact that you sought out and then staged a number of prostitutes as if they were some kind of ready-mades. Can you say something about the considerations and precautions you took before, during and not least after the performance had been realised?*

TB: At first a concept had been born that we didn’t really know how to realise. So we started by talking to a lot of people who were familiar with the milieu in various ways, including some staff from Reden, a former police officer who used to be in charge of contact to the prostitutes on the street and the 3F network. Later we got in touch with Tiller Lorentzen, a former drug prostitute, who thought the project sounded fantastic and like something she would have liked to have been involved in when she was working on the streets herself. Somehow that became our guarantee to go ahead with the project. Through Tiller, we gradually made contact with several of the women, who themselves compared their profession to acting in the theatre: “Normally, you have to stand and smile at a customer and say he’s the most beautiful person you’ve met today, what lies and deceit! Acting is part of my life, so to be on a theatre stage in front of an audience with an earplug is just great!” For us, however, it was very important to ensure the safety of the women who were performing and to talk to them about how they felt about being in this situation where people were looking at them. During the rehearsal process, we started letting people into the room quite quickly so that the women could get used to the situation, and if it made them feel more comfortable to wear a wig or say their lines in English, we did that. In that way, it was a gradual development, where the concept was constantly dynamic.

JK: Yes, we were always ready to shift the concept. Of course, the decisive ethical bar was the women themselves – whether they wanted to participate. It was an all or nothing requirement, and for us it was crucial to make a performance that the women wanted to participate in. The performance we ended up making was one that the women were comfortable with, and apart from being as super cool and good as they were, they were obviously aware of what they were doing when they were in the room.

*The glass pane that separated them from the audience also acted as a kind of protection for the women, didn’t it?*

JK: Actually, it was almost mainly the audience that was protected by the pane, because what they were experiencing was clearly very intense for them. But the pane also had a conceptual dimension; it signalled an exhibition box, and in that sense, there was a duality at work throughout the project. On the one hand, it was an extremely tough project that had an element of abuse and violence in it, but at the same time, we tried to carry out this very tough project as gently and caringly and accommodatingly as we possibly could. Incidentally, several of the women involved said that

they loved having a place where they could, if not speak from, then at least show themselves from different sides than the social fiction they are normally seen through.

*Did you ever have to interrupt any of the performances out of consideration for the women?*

JK: There were some rehearsals where we had to do that, and there were also some playthroughs where we thought, no, that simply won't work, she's in too bad a state to continue. But by talking to Tiller, we reached the conclusion that sometimes there are ethical boundaries that you have to disregard. I mean, you shouldn't see the fact that the women are under the influence or have withdrawal symptoms as a problem, because that's how it is; they are almost always under the influence, and they have psychological problems and have been standing out in the rain for four hours. So yes, sometimes you became extremely anxious from looking at the conditions and daily lives of these women. But that doesn't mean that you have to censor yourself out of it, because those conditions and that daily life are part of the real world – we just don't normally have to deal with it. As for the part of your question that concerns what happened afterwards, that's probably the question we've been asked most often. In the beginning we thought a lot about it – whether we weren't just giving the women a sweet, and that it was all much worse afterwards – but gradually we got disgusted with that way of seeing things. You would never say that to you or to me: "You're not allowed to have a good experience, because you'll miss it afterwards." What strikes me as the real problem in relation to these women is that they are not allowed to do anything! They can't get to feel too good, because then they'll just feel bad afterwards. I still get angry when I have to talk about this, because it is simply such a degrading way of talking about other people! As Tiller said: "They also know that it's only Christmas Eve once a year". But having said that, we are still in contact with them, and that is because the part of the project that was about stopping to see them as part of the social fiction called prostitutes and starting to see them as ordinary people has been successful. So that's why we still have contact and go out for a meal once in a while, with the reservations there are because these women have to earn a hell of a lot of money all the time! In terms of a more specific follow-up part of the project, we did some extra performances at the end that people paid a lot of money to see, which we put into a fund that could help Tiller move on with her ideas of setting up a women-only rehab centre. The problem is that many of the drug prostitutes have a traumatic relationship with men, for good reasons, but since the rehab centres are only able to see them as drug addicts, there are only treatment centres for both genders. And you probably don't go to them if you are afraid of or traumatised in relation to men.

*As for the critics, many of them described Pretty Woman Ltd. as "reality theatre" and several of them went on to assess that the project as a piece of theatre was "boring", "helpless amateur theatre". In your view, does the term "theatre of reality" make sense in relation to the project? And what happens to the assessment parameters when you distinguish between, for example, reality theatre and theatre?*

TB: I actually find it extremely difficult to take these reviews seriously, because a large part of the Danish critics work with a very narrow definition of what theatre is. For many of them, theatre is something that has been written by a playwright and is recited by some actors after they have rehearsed it with a director for 6-8 weeks. And anything that doesn't meet that definition is then called performance or reality theatre. All of a sudden there are a lot of concepts in play, and I think that's hugely problematic. I've been called up by a lot of students who say they're writing a

## Pretty Woman Walking Down the Street

paper about “reality theatre” and wonder if I can explain to them what it is. I feel a bit like: Well, I have no idea what reality theatre is! And by the way, I don’t do reality theatre – I do theatre, that’s it. But as I said, that’s the definition most of the reviewers use, and sometimes it really becomes unintentionally comical. For example, one of them wrote in a review that there were “authentic bodies” in the performance. The next day, actor Anders Mossling turned up and proclaimed that he too was an “authentic body” and a “real human being”. Let’s face it: when you put something into a theatrical setting, and when someone sits and watches it, it becomes fiction. The prostitutes who participated were part of the fiction, just like the actors were. As I see it, it’s much more interesting to expand the concept of theatre and explore how much it can really encompass, rather than working with meaningless distinctions between theatre and reality theatre.

JK: Reality theatre is a sad concept in every way. And if you use it as a parameter when you go to see a performance like *Pretty Woman Ltd.*, it will all become about whether something is “real” or not, instead of about being present with other people in a space where a story is being told. When you go to see Nicolas Bro play Hamlet, there is something similar at stake as there was in *Pretty Woman Ltd.*: Bro brings a story about himself and looks a certain way that makes you think “no, he can’t play Hamlet. Hamlet has to be a handsome, blond young man”. In this way, the idea of Hamlet and Nicolas Bro activate each other. It is the same device we use when we pay prostitutes to play a prostitute in a Hollywood film. Because yes, these are “real” prostitutes, but these women are at the same time mediums of a fiction, a social fiction, which is kind of spread throughout society, and I would argue that there is something dynamic in connecting this fiction with the fiction called *Pretty Woman*. Besides, it has been liberating to make a performance that is a mixture of art, social contribution and community work, and therefore could not only be assessed as good or bad theatre in the reviews. It has been a relief that the ongoing reflection on and evaluation of the performance has also taken place in interviews, blogs, letters to the editor, etc. and that there has have often been much broader assessment parameters here than we have met with the reviewers.

*You problematise – rightly, I think – this distinction between “reality” and “unreality”, which often creeps into the discourse on art and theatre, working in the border zone between and challenging the unambiguous use of categories such as fiction and reality. But at the same time, it was very important for you to emphasise that the women were “real prostitutes”, when the reviewer in the Børsen thought he could reveal that they were Swedish actors. Why? And didn’t you in this way end up in a strange valorisation of “the real” yourselves?*

TB: There were many good reasons for that. The first concerned credibility: At the time when Wredstrøm (*Børsen’s* critic, ed.) made his so-called disclosure, we had spoken to about 50 journalists, and it was important to us that they did not lose confidence in us. Another thing was that this whole “disclosure” was permeated by an incredibly condescending idea that of course these “whores” – as the women were referred to – could not act in the theatre. They couldn’t possibly have the resources to do so! Another reason was that if you could think that “well, it was just a publicity *stunt* that they were prostitutes”, then you could sort of relax again and think of the project as *safe play*, as something that was in no way associated with any kind of risk.

JK: Yes, and the whole layer of reflection in the project is of course about everyone instinctively being extremely provoked by the idea of buying prostitutes for acting in a theatre. But then 10

seconds pass, and then you can think about why you're not outraged that some people are being bought for sex 15 times a day. This question you carry with you, even if you haven't seen the performance, but it would be lost if it turned out that it was just a bunch of actors playing theatre.

*It struck me that on one particular point you have seemed a little undecided about your role: on the one hand, you come up with this extremely provocative concept, which you must have known would create a stir, and on the other hand, Tue, in an article in Politiken called "7 døgn med Tue Biering" (7 days with Tue Biering), you seem genuinely morally outraged that the majority of critics and journalists refer to the women as "whores". This indignation surprised me, and actually seemed to me to contradict the premise of the project, which surely is precisely that it should not be possible to adopt a position that claims a monopoly on truth and goodness.*

TB: That's true. Up to the premiere, we had a clear strategy that we shouldn't take a moral position on anything, because then *Pretty Woman Ltd.* would be perceived as a moral project, and we weren't interested in that. But the 7-day thing with me in *Politiken* was probably a kind of after-reaction, and at the same time we knew that it was most likely the last chance we had to say something where we ourselves made our personal views known. One of our dreams with the project was from the beginning to gain some dignity for these women, and one of the things that the women we talked to emphasised strongly from the start was not to be called whores, but prostitutes. And we took the opportunity to communicate that. It was not to appear moralising towards the journalists, but I can see that from the outside it can seem a bit like "hey, there's been a shift". In retrospect, I'm actually incredibly glad that this part didn't take up more space, because it's absolutely true – the performance could easily stand on its own.

*Finally, do you think you achieved what you wanted with the performance?*

TB: Because the concept was so dynamic, the performance actually worked its way in a completely different direction than what we had originally intended. From being a social, political project about putting trafficking of women higher on the agenda, it ended up being about taking seriously the basic narrative of *Pretty Woman* about a meeting between and the mutual transformation of two people. In relation to the audience, it became about taking the people who came by the hand and preparing them for this encounter.

JK: In relation to the prostitutes, the performance also ended up very differently from what we started out with. From being about using the individual prostitute as a tool to change the situation of "the prostitutes", as it might sound in an early project description, it was the meeting between the individual woman and the audience that became the important thing. You could say that the performance ended up containing a fundamental duality: on the one hand, it was driven by the idea that "any prostitute can be bought into any version of *Pretty Woman Ltd.*", but at the same time, the woman's gradual transformation – in front of and together with the audience – from the social cliché of a "prostitute" to a human being was at the centre.

TB: Actually, I think that *Pretty Woman Ltd.* was a huge confirmation to us of what theatre can do. Because in this case, at least as we see it, it really made sense to put some people together in a

## Pretty Woman Walking Down the Street

closed space for a certain period of time, because in this way you were actually allowed to take the time it takes to meet each other and change – together.

---

**Solveig Gade**, Associate Professor, Department of Arts and Cultural Studies, Theatre and Performance Studies. University of Copenhagen.

---



Pretty Woman A/S. Photo: Per Morten Abrahamsen





# Interview

Encounters, Relations, Popular  
Culture and Representation

# Encounters, Relations, Popular Culture and Representation

*Conversation with Tue Biering by Solveig Gade*

*Tue Biering, the last time I interviewed you was in 2009, a few months after you and Jeppe Kristensen had ignited the theatre debate in Denmark with Pretty Woman A/S (Pretty Woman Ltd.). Since then, FIX&FOXY has worked consistently to further develop the format that formed the basis of the performance – a format in which you typically involve a group of reality experts to shed light on a controversial issue, while at the same time directing the spotlight at the audience. Either by involving them physically in the performance or by pointing to them as part of or perhaps even complicit in the problem the performance is about. But first,, tell me, what term are you actually using? Are you talking about “reality experts” – I know you don’t like the term “reality theatre”.*

I don’t really have a name for it. I call it casting or the best possible cast for whatever you’re doing. It’s about what you want to do with the project. Sometimes I need people who have experience of being traumatised by war, like in *My Deer Hunter*. In other cases, like in *Vi de 1% (We the 1%)*, I need people who know a lot about being super rich or super poor. And in still other cases, I need people who are good at being actors. That was the case with *Dark Noon*, even though the original idea of the cast was to get someone who knew something about immigration from Africa. But because I sensed that with that kind of cast, I would end up reproducing a narrative about the poor immigrant from Africa, I decided to try and get the very best South African actors instead. I felt like: “Imagine if you made a cast where people sat in Copenhagen and thought: Fuck, they’re so cool! You won’t find anything like them in Denmark.” That would be the best possible way of reversing the balance of power.

*Back to the question about the format: For almost 15 years now, you have been working on developing how to spotlight various issues – and create encounters with the audience – by working with casts that have particular experience with a given issue. FIX&FOXY has been criticised several times, perhaps especially with Pretty Woman Ltd., for being unethical because you involve “vulnerable people”. Can you say something about this and also about the most crucial insights you’ve gained over the years?*

We have been lucky to have a very steep learning curve from the beginning, and I think the most important insight came already in connection with *Pretty Woman Ltd.*: that we can neither offer a social nor an educational space. There are many others who are better at that than us. However, we can offer an artistic space. And that space can be a fantastic place to be when you’re used to being in social and political spaces where a certain identity – such as “vulnerable” or “exposed” – is imposed on you and you’re treated according to the rules that apply in these political and social spaces.

Because an important part of the ambition with *Pretty Woman Ltd.* was to challenge some of these stereotypes about prostitutes, Jeppe and I had decided that prostitutes should take part in the performance. But at the same time, we were afraid of the ethical issues and weren’t sure how to go about it. So we contacted various organisations, including Reden. They advised us to contact Tiller Lorenzen, a former drug prostitute who has been a consultant on a large number of projects

related to prostitution. She also knows the women around Halmtorvet, where the performance was to take place, very well. For us, the meeting with Tiller was quite crucial – it was what made the project possible. In addition to being able to make contact with the women and tell them about the project, she was able to push Jeppe and me when we were most afraid and reluctant to deal with issues and say: “No one needs you to come in and pose as feeling sorry for someone and afraid to talk about uncomfortable things. Because when you behave like that, you create distance. You are already pushing some people away from you. These women are so tired of being seen as someone to be looked after. These women face some crucial life choices every day, and therefore you shouldn’t think that they are not capable of deciding whether they should be part of this project or not.” I think we talked to you about this already back in 2009. But that’s actually one of the biggest realisations we had already then, and we’ve used it ever since: You can always give an invitation to another person and then let them decide for themselves whether they want to accept it or not. It doesn’t do anyone any good not to invite them because you don’t think they are capable of deciding for themselves whether or not to participate. Having said that it is of course important that you show great attentiveness and sensitivity towards the person you are inviting. So, the most important insight is probably that it is an *artistic* space that we can offer our participants – with all the possibility of ambivalence and uncertainty that it holds.

Another insight is the importance of working with a consultant in the field. Having a Tiller who can nudge you and say “You’re moving within a very small area right now. You might as well go out and explore it all. And if you end up somewhere that’s problematic, I’m there to tell you to go back again.” Having a consultant with us is a way of ensuring we have a working space. Because then I don’t have to go around all the time being scared shitless of doing something wrong and ultimately ending up doing a performance that doesn’t matter because I’ve put a lot of limitations on myself along the way.

A third insight or realisation is that theatre has the character of an encounter and that the very special thing about theatre is: that we are together here and now – whether it takes place in a physical space or in a digital space as in *Avatar me* – and that this means that a real meeting and a real exchange can take place. Because if that meeting doesn’t take place, then a clear risk in the way I work, is that I may end up exposing people. That it can become a bit like: “Well, now we’ve been through these and these problems – what other vulnerable people are out there?”

### **The Vulnerable**

*Yes, when we last spoke, you and Jeppe yourself talked about the danger of ending up as a parasite sucking blood out of one issue – and for that matter also population group – after another. How do you try to take precautions against that?*

*Well, I am constantly suspicious of myself. In recent years, for example, I have asked myself if I have a tendency to always focus on the people we call “vulnerable”. And maybe I do, but then the next question must be, who are the least vulnerable? Perhaps the rich? There is at least one narrative that says so. But I want to challenge that narrative because in reality there is also something vulnerable, almost shameful, about being one of the most privileged. At least here in Scandinavia, if you have to stand on a stage and talk about how extremely rich you are, which is what happens in the performance *We the 1%*. For a while now, I’ve also been interested in exploring my own vulnerability and my own privileged position. The performance *Rocky* is an attempt to put myself on stage. Because my own conceitedness and self-*

*righteousness should clearly have an introspection. Especially because my inclusiveness is not very inclusive when it comes to people I disagree with politically, like some of the right-wing politicians who appear at the end of the performance.*

*How much do you include input from your cast in your performance concepts? Are the concepts conceived and finalised in advance, or do they change along the way?*

*Well, it's crucial for me that the people on stage are aware of what they are part of – that it's 100% transparent. That they're not there because it's cool to play theatre, but because they want to participate and become part of a performance and a certain statement. And that they realise that this statement can be complex, and that they don't necessarily have to agree with it. At the same time, they must want to participate in the dialogue that the statement generates. So you could say that the concept is something that is thought out in advance, but at the same time it is important that some people are brought in who, by virtue of their background, professionalism and material, can play into and nuance the issue that the performance revolves around. It makes me smarter to work with people who have experience-based knowledge about what we are working with! But having said that, as a director, I am naturally in a curatorial role where I have to maintain focus, say no to ideas and make choices so that we can create a performance that is communicative and good, and that the audience will listen to and which may even change some perspectives for them. Over time, I have learnt that you have to be very clear about this from the very beginning. You have to signal that I am the leader, and we are in a structure where I am the one who decides, and where some things are just not negotiable. This is a theatre performance and not a plenary event we are doing! But at the same time, it's important that I don't put words in people's mouths that they can't identify with. It's important that they stand on stage as "themselves". But at the same time, they are not only there as "themselves", but also as representatives or incarnations of some of the social fictions that exist about the prostitute, the rich, the poor etc. So there's a duality at work that I want to bring out: at the same time as there's a person on stage talking about her own experiences, I want you to see that there's a person standing there assessing her role.*

## **The Popular Cultural**

*This leads very well to my next question, which is about your rather consistent device of exposing, but also using various popular cultural genres and formats as a kind of dramaturgy or motor in your performances. The Western genre, Hollywood films, sitcoms and propaganda film are just a few examples, and what they all have in common is that they implant certain archetypes – or social fictions, as you say – in our collective memory: the lonely cowboy, the happy hooker, the friends who never age etc.*

*Jeppe and I have talked over the years about the necessity of having a cushion to play against. It's like when you play billiards – if there's no cushion to hit, the ball flies away. A genre can be a cushion to play against. Also because genres provide aesthetics, dramaturgies, characters and cultural narratives that tap into more general matrices and ways in which we humans understand ourselves and each other. The choice of genre is typically based on the fact that this particular genre can do something in relation to the issue we are working with. When we worked with asylum seekers in the performance *Friends: The One with Asylum Seekers and Some Rejected Ones*, for example, we chose the sitcom format and the *Friends*-series based on the idea that it would be the radical opposite of the way the story of asylum seekers is typically*

*told, both in the media and in art. Those black-and-white, emotionally appealing documentary images from the reception centre Sandholm, which sometimes actually have an almost dehumanising effect, even though that was not the intention. Instead of reproducing that aesthetic, we chose to recreate the Friends-universe on stage and have the cast re-enact the characters' lines. At the same time as there was a clash of universes, the limbo-like waiting position that both asylum seekers and those Friends-characters who never really grow up can be said to be in was brought to a head. In Pretty Woman A/S, we confronted the romantic comedy and the fiction of the "happy hooker" with the reality of a number of prostitutes around Halmtorvet. And in Dark Noon, we wanted to use the Western genre, which has a pretty clear definition of good and evil, as a lens to explore the image many people have of Africa as a lawless place. But when we started making the performance, I quickly realised that this was all wrong. It became: "Don't you want to tell your story through a genre in a way that I have decided". So instead of migration to Europe from Africa and elsewhere, the performance came to be about the migration of Europeans to America, told through South African actors in white face. In this way, Dark Noon is an example of how genre as a device can also help to challenge us and make us aware of our own blind spots – because the choice of genre helps to push the issue we are working on to its extreme.*

*Another great thing about working with popular culture and readymade fiction is that many people actually have a relationship with the films and series we use. Today, very few people really have a relationship with Brecht, Moliere and Shakespeare. But there are people who have seen a film like Pretty Woman more than 50 times! This means that as a theatre director, you can speak into the relationship that exists between the audience and the fiction you are staging. In this way, the conflict in the performance will not only be played out between wills on stage, but also between the preconception you as an audience member come with in relation to, for example, a particular film and what takes place on stage. That is very interesting to work with.*

### Representation

*One of the most talked about topics these days is representation. This applies not least in the theatre. Are there limits to who can represent whom, and should we at least reflect on the position (of power) from which we represent others? Where do you stand in relation to this discussion, and are there any of your previous performances that you don't think you could have made today?*

There are perhaps some of my previous performances that I wouldn't do today, but that doesn't apply to FIX&FOXY where there has been an awareness of our position as senders and a desire to put ourselves at risk. When we transferred Chaplin's *Gold Rush* to the stage with Amir Becirovic, a spastic, dyslexic, second-generation Muslim immigrant, in the role of the 'wretch' hoping to find gold in the mountains of Klondike, it was not just a comment on Hollywood's ability to ridicule certain characters – such as hopeful but unlucky gold diggers – while encouraging the audience to *feel* for them. The performance was also a comment on the artist – on ourselves – who insists that everything must be "real" and not "as-if". In the performance, for example, Amir experienced a series of "real" acts of abuse – he was set on fire, he was hypothermic, he was forced to eat a shoe – but in the end, he got both the gold and the girl. In this way, *Guldfeber* (Gold Rush) commented on our role as artists, constantly balancing on the edge of ethics. And I think it illustrates very well the playful approach and suspicion we have in fact always had towards our role as artists.

## Conversation with Tue Biering by Solveig Gade

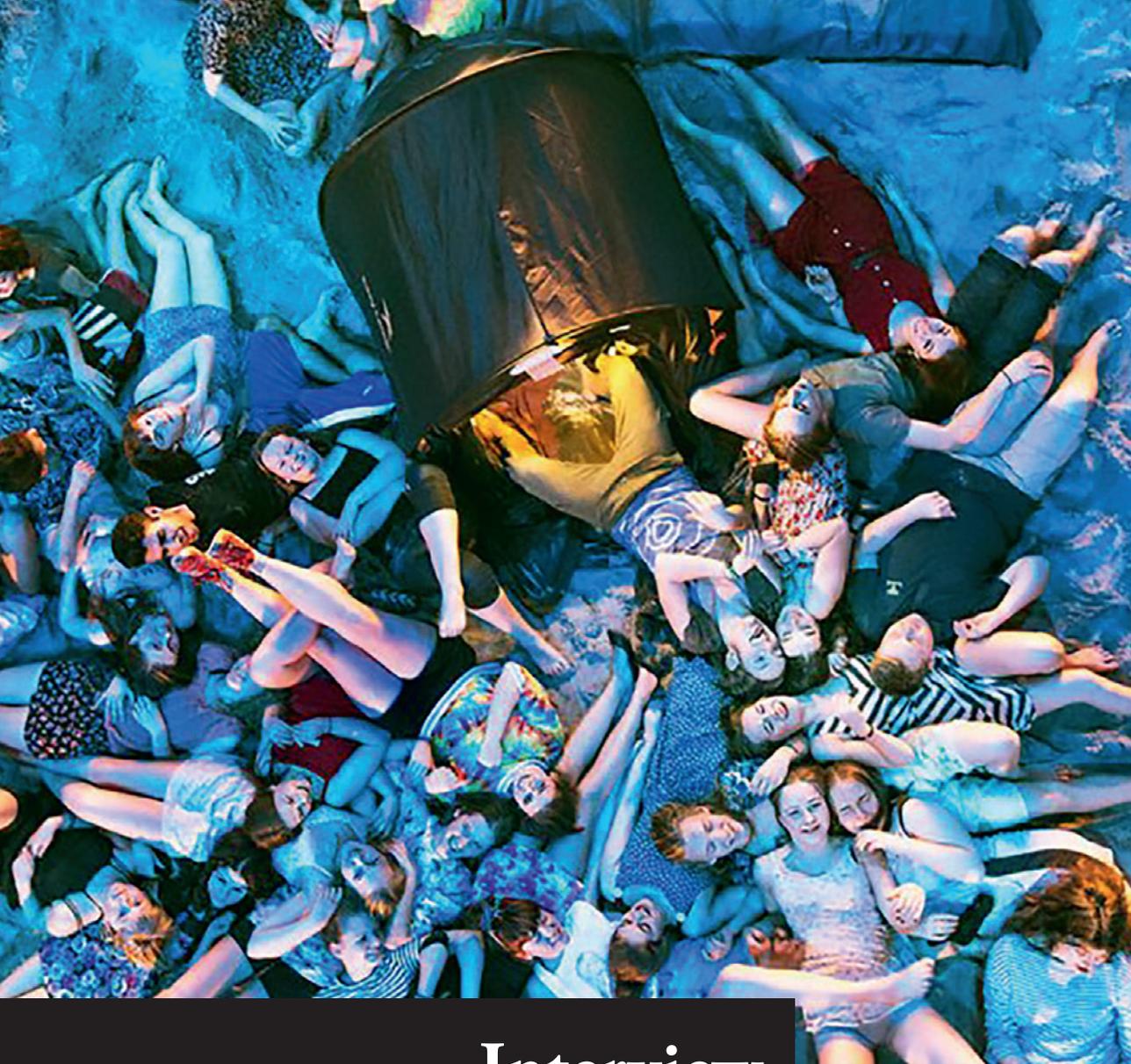
In relation to the conversation about representation, which is very much in the spotlight these years, it is important, and it brings our professionalism to the centre. Because our field is about representing others who are not necessarily like yourself. At the same time, you have to reflect on the position from which you represent – is it a powerful position or is it rather a powerless position? That makes a difference. But it's not easy, and in many ways I'm confused about what to think. I hope that together we can have a reflected examination of aspects of representation.

Because what is happening right now is that people don't dare to enter the space where these issues are discussed. I meet many colleagues who are afraid to be part of that conversation, but we have to be! We have to be brave. Because there is a lot of potential in being able to represent others and something other than what you are. You learn a lot from seeing yourself and others represented – that's why we read books and watch films and theatre etc. It is important that we continue to explore the potential of representation. While at the same time being aware of our own blind spots and how we may be unconsciously reproducing stereotypes about other people. Over the last five years, I have become more aware of challenging myself. But I will continue to create images that people might find a little offensive. Otherwise, you end up with those indifferent performances that simply fail to create the encounter, which to me is the crucial thing in theatre.

---

**Solveig Gade**, Associate Professor, Department of Arts and Cultural Studies, Theatre and Performance Studies. University of Copenhagen.

---



# Interview

Excursion to Youth Land with Jeppe Kristensen

# Excursion to Youth Land with Jeppe Kristensen

*By Ida Krøgholt and Erik Exe Christoffersen*

Fix and Foxy's *Ungdom* (Youth, 2015) has the character of a transition from child to adult identity. The stage is a strange mythological space. It takes place at Theater Republique, where an artificial beach with 90 tons of sand, a tent camp with 35 colourful festival tents and a bathing lake with 15,000 litres of water had been created in the large theatre hall. Around 30 young participating non-professional performers meet the spectators in a kind of youth ritual. Some scenes take place in small tents, where a few spectators are invited into a dialogue with a young person, other scenes take place in slightly larger tents or in groups around a campfire, and finally there is an overall party. The performance is an installation, an interactive exchange and a theatricalised meeting between generations.

The performers take on the role of themselves and enter a rather intimate contact with a few spectators, which is in itself a particular challenge. The young performers and the spectators are inscribed in a delicate balance between reality and fiction. What is unusual is the exchange, contact and encounter itself, without playing the usual youth clichés. The young people appear as vulnerable, transparent. Is that what they are? Or is it a projection of our own dream of youth?

On arrival, you change clothes. In the foyer there are shorts and summer dresses for the audience to wear. The theatre has promised that the hall will be summer warm. It creates a special cheerful atmosphere when the spectators meet each other in summer clothes and bare feet, as if we were on our way to a water world. It creates a sense of community among the spectators, and you wonder what role you are going to play.

The spectators are slowly admitted into the space. There is a small lake that you can walk through or cross via a bridge. Some people in shorts just walk through the knee-deep water. The floor of the theatre is filled with sand and there is a large tent camp with trees and observation towers. In the centre of the room there is an open space where the spectators position themselves, slightly disorientated because it is semi-dark and it is difficult to see who is who. I am quite unsure, until suddenly a young girl of about 17 comes up, takes me by the hand and asks me to join her in her tent. It is a bit of a transgression to be invited into a young girl's tent equipped with various blankets, pictures, animals and books.

## **The First Meeting**

She already has a guest, and she asks us what we like and dislike. I say, for example, that I like to smoke before going to bed, and it turns out that she does too. Suddenly there is a loud, ominous sound and a flash of light as if it were thunder. She changes the subject and reads from various diaries by the light of a torch: the first kiss was not much fun, nor was the first fuck, and when she was mad at her mother. Again sound and flashes of light interrupt the scene and she changes the subject.

In the "black" book, it appears that she has had anorexia and her weight was down to 36 kilos (76,3 pounds). She shows us how she counts calories and how much she is allowed to eat. We ask her for details but are interrupted again by the sound and the flash of light. She asks us to brush our teeth and then to make up a story about a little elephant. She shows letters and drawings hanging from the ceiling, talk about depression and hospitalisation. I see that she has wounds on her arms

and legs, and she tells us that she has cut herself. She shows us the picture of her grandmother's cat and of her father, whom she has not seen, but whom she will probably seek out one day. She knows he lives in Svendborg. The picture is torn but pasted back together again.

After about 20 minutes, where we have also been lying down and holding hands, we go to a slightly larger tent where we meet two female friends, each of whom has two spectator guests with them. We talk about being drunk at a party, travelling, intimate shaving and what clothes they should choose for the party. My friend takes off her blouse and, at my suggestion, puts on a white t-shirt. We go on to the party and suddenly it is in full swing. Everyone is dancing with everyone else, and there is a round dance, and we have a party train. I am wearing a giant rabbit mask so I cannot see anything, but I am being led and guided by my young friend. She suggests we sit by the lake with our feet in the water and talk more about the future. She wants to go to Africa, and I tell her about my experience of this, for me, somewhat frightening country. We move on to a campfire. It is about to be "night" and I am taken by the hand by a new young person. We lie in a big pile and have our hair stroked and look at the moon. Then I am invited into a new tent. This time the sound and the flash of light are longer and more frightening. Does it herald a natural disaster, an earthquake or just a scary future? The young person is scared and worried, she says. How can you bring children into the world when there are so many worries? I tell her about my children and the problems and worries that do not diminish over the years. She takes me by the hand, and we lie down outside on a blanket and look up at the stars, talking openly about dreams and the future.

*Youth* is autofiction, and young people talk about themselves, and that is what you react to. It is a meeting, but tightly staged. What the participating actors come up with is not necessarily the truth, but it seems credible in the meeting. The self-narrative is installed in a theatre frame: Republique, which is an established theatre. The young people are unique and exceptional, but youth life itself also appears as a general metaphor for an uncertain and fluid part of life. The part where identity is particularly uncertain, fragmented and appears as an open choice to be tested.

*Youth* also points to one of the crucial problems facing young people today: the lack of community overburdens the individual subject, who is pressurised to cultivate individual success, self-control and originality. This creates a fear of failure. *Youth* is a representation of the possibilities and impossibilities of community. The performance itself becomes a kind of exchange between the role and the personal identity, which emerges in its imperfection, vulnerability and humanity.

It is morning and the sun is rising. It is a marvellous sight as the whole of one of the back walls becomes one big sun. The morning mist is in the room and slowly we rise and the young people point to the exit, which the spectators drift down towards. When we leave the room, the young people are left standing in the sand, abandoned. I want to run to my first friend and say goodbye, but I just wave, and she slowly waves back. Is she in another world? At the exit, I turn round again and see the young people standing like statues. There is no applause, and no one bows to mark the end of the performance.

### **Fiction and Ritual**

The whole performative event had the character of a kind of ritual. The young people are themselves, but they are also "storytellers". My young friend read out various texts she had presumably written herself, showed pictures, clothes and teddy bears and was the narrator of her story. At the same time, she is here and now: She held my hand firmly and determinedly, and her authority created trust so I surrendered completely to her specific proposals for action.

The encounter and the interaction tight and compressed. We follow an evening and night until sunrise. Time is divided into sequences where something threatening returns and foreshadows future catastrophes and ultimately death. The exit suggests to me that the young people are leaving this *now*, the present, which we are already losing.

The camp has the delimited character of fiction. The young people are acting subjects, they take charge, take on responsibility and calmly and authoritatively direct the spectators, who (in my case) could be their parents.

The communication between adults and young people is a kind of inversion. The young people are the authority, and we follow along as “ignorant”. The tent camp is a borderland and a passage or transition between childhood and adulthood, where the process and possibilities are open. It is limitless and a particular field where one is neither one nor the other, but in a kind of transition and dissolution (like a drunkenness and “blue Monday”): we can try out a variety of identities and mutually see each other.

### **Identity and Identification**

As a spectator, I was “young” and “not young”. I could identify with the young person, I wanted to party and go all out, but at the same time I was also in the role of an adult and older. Should I explain to her what I think she should do and help her with her problems? Should I ask her for advice about my difficulties with my children? Who was I in her eyes? Who is the teacher, and who is the pupil? The most important thing is almost what her hands tell me, creating trust, a sense of uncertainty and the necessary yet sad goodbye.

It feels like a mutual exchange. Of course, I cannot say whether I have made a concrete difference to “my young friend” or to the performance, but I see it as a form of theatre of the future, where the actors engage in a kind of exchange with the spectator.

### **What Do the Young People Say?**

17-year-old Astrid Haugensen and 19-year-old Jonas Slotorub are both high school students and performers. They know that they have to share their private thoughts and experiences with the audience every night:

*“The day I went to the casting I had just broken up with my friend, it was a very crazy day and perhaps I saw it as a kind of therapy”.*

*“I feel like I have a very special relationship with the person I’ve had inside my tent, precisely because I’ve given so much of myself – and because they’ve given so much back. In fact, I have thought about that person for a long time afterwards and imagined what it would be like to meet that person in real life. (...)”*

*“For us, it’s a special opportunity to talk to someone who is perhaps more experienced and can give advice, but who you don’t know and will probably never see again. It can trigger some new thoughts – and the 60-year-old will hopefully come out of the performance with a sense of having been young again.”* Quoted from Trine Munk-Petersen, *Berlingske* 29 January 2015. <http://www.b.dk/kultur/ungdommen-den-fantastiske-og-frygtelige#>!

*Youth* creates freedom and potentiality, but also a sense of loss, because we will never see each other again. Young people talk about themselves to strangers they do not know. That this is probably

related to the security built into the dramaturgy. In addition, a special group culture has been established that also meet outside the theatre and has introduced new symbols of community.

*Youth* can be seen in the light of recent attempts to combine art production, user-oriented strategies and pedagogical development work, leading to experiments with new audience forms, participatory culture and new ways of consuming theatre. There is a responsibility both to the young people and to the spectator in this community. This can be described using Rancière's concept of the "emancipated spectator":

*"What is required is a theatre without spectators, where those in attendance learn from as opposed to being seduced by images; where they become active participants as opposed to passive voyeurs."* (Rancière 2014, 7)

Rancière establishes an analogy with the pedagogical relationship, where he believes that the role of the teacher is to close the gap between his own knowledge and the student's non-knowledge.

*"In pedagogical logic, the ignoramus is not simply one who does not as yet know what the schoolmaster knows. She is the one who does not know what she does not know or how to know it. For his part, the schoolmaster is not only the one who possesses the knowledge unknown by the ignoramus. He is also the one who knows how to make it an object of knowledge, at what point and in accordance with what protocol."* (Rancière, Jacques. *The Emancipated Spectator*. London: Verso UK, 2014.)

The spectator is not simply ignorant because of the lack of narrative and lack of central focus. The polyphonic universe can inspire the formulation and development of the spectator's own fairy tales where they can verbalise their own experiences. *Youth* does not point to a specific knowledge but establishes a relationship where the spectator activates his or her own agency and composes narratives in words, images or movements. This is reminiscent of the model that Jacques Rancière calls ignorant learning.

## **FIX&Foxy's Work with Youth**

### **Interview with Jeppe Kristensen**

*How did you choose the performers?*

We wanted to do something that could be interesting for a bigger theatre, and we had talked to Republique and had the possibility of a big space that could be used for something grand, and we also had a dream of some interactive theatre. What should we look for and pay attention to? The casting consisted of exercises that we had worked with before. They had to tell stories to each other in pairs with a few headlines. It could be funny, sad or for instance describe a change. We asked them to tell these stories in a line, not their own, but the ones they had heard, as if they were their own. What came out of that was fantastic. We realised that it wouldn't make sense for us to choose who to include. It would be completely wrong.

*How had you made contact with those who had come?*

It was through adverts in the newspaper. We decided to say that anyone who wanted to could take part and it wasn't up to us to decide. The work consisted in creating a space that was interesting for them to be in. A rehearsal space that made them want to come and make friends and tell stories, to look for something they could be happy with and that we could watch as spectators.

*It wasn't a particular problem or theme?*

No, not at all. The normal hierarchy was turned upside down: we have privileged children and working-class children, and it was quite clear that those who felt that they could normally handle everything they had a challenge with the performance. Because they didn't have as much to say, and it was easier for those who had had various problems.

*How did the process take place? Is it the individual participant who chooses? Where did you process the stories?*

Very little. It was a long process from September to February with individual days and weekends. Most of it was about working together to find out what kind of performance it was and then two weeks to make it. Something that was very important was the idea that someone takes you by the hand and leads you.

*Is that something you have rehearsed?*

With us, it's typical that we don't stage through rehearsing, but we develop it by understanding why we're doing it. For a long time, our rehearsals consisted of us turning up and sitting in a circle and telling each other what we had done since the last rehearsal. It took a long time. An hour. And then we said: Now we'll split into two teams. One team will have the premier of the performance in five minutes, and the other team will be spectators. We went outside, and when they were ready, we came in and watched a performance that was their improvisation. We worked like that for months, watching and talking. Some things have been included in the performance. For example, the big hug scene on the floor. We're making lights for it, but that's their suggestion. We had a feeling that it would be impossible to time the performance: we couldn't teach them cues, so we did a lot of exercises. 50 young people walk around and have to stand still at the same time and then walk around again at the same time. Exercises where they lay on a blanket. Where nothing happened, and if something did happen, they were to use it as an impulse.

*What about themes? I experienced a conversation about intimate shaving, which was interesting to participate in with the young people. How tightly structured is it?*

I hardly know, I haven't been involved in everything. We also asked about casting, which scenes should be included in a performance about youth. And we welcomed suggestions. We had ideas ourselves, of course, but not any that were more important. We kept asking: What do you think should be included? The themes they suggested first were: We are busy, Facebook, homework.

## Excursion to Youth Land with Jeppe Kristensen

Things that take up space, but that was not what remained. It was more: How do you get a girlfriend? Why do you get drunk?

There were 50 people who had never met each other. And you couldn't skip a step and go straight to "now I give myself completely". But we got to the point where they were telling crazy stories. Up until two weeks before the premiere, we had a performance that consisted of admitting the audience into a room and then they improvised for two hours. They were in a tent camp and we had sound and light that created moods that they had to react to. There was this stress sound, there was a romantic sequence, but they weren't allowed to do what they did the previous time. The rule was that they had to meet new people. That's how it was until shortly before the premiere. We had a rehearsal audience and it was difficult because all of a sudden there were a lot of people in the room who were kind of drifting around and didn't know where they belonged.

We changed that to a tighter structure. In the first part, they all talk about themselves and childhood memories that they bury and talk about first memories such as the first kiss. The second part is preparation for the party. Here they get the spectators to tell them about their excesses. Then there is the party, which is a joint improvisation that is completely planned so that they know what they are going to do. Here they can change spectators if they need to. There is a chaos scene that ends in a pile of people. Then there is a night scene of anxiety, fear, dreams, and finally a wordless sunrise that ends in a farewell. The space is divided into a tent, where you talk about the body, and a room underground: the coal cellar, where you talk about sadness and fear. By the lake, emotions are shared. The hut in the tree has the theme of the unique or particular. In the pee tent is where you talk about scoring. The spaces create structure, and the young people were able to draw the spectators into these spaces. There is also an area where you can get rid of a spectator with whom it doesn't work. There were usually two spectators for each player, and they were responsible for a certain number through the performance, although they could be changed.

*How does sound work?*

Sound marks shifts in dramaturgy that players can react to. Apart from the party, it's soundscapes of birds, the sound of night and sounds that set the mood and follow a 24-hour period as background music. It prevented everyday small talk and the sound was used to change scenes. We tried without sound. But we discovered that many spectators just wanted to talk about themselves. If the performance was too much on the spectators' terms, it was a bit uninteresting. The sound was a form of dramaturgical control.

*Did the performers or the spectators sometimes break out of the fiction?*

Many rehearsals revolved around what to do with the spectators who do not accept the fiction. Some spectators might ask: How many kilos of sand are there? Do you know each other? It became uninteresting. So the young people had an emergency script they could pull out if they got a talkative spectator who asked: Is it exciting to be involved? They didn't have to answer that.

It was a practical problem to get everyone in. It could take 10 minutes. So some had long awkward pauses, but it gave an interesting tension and it made sense. But I didn't find that the players said too much. It was important that they had chosen to do so themselves.

We wanted to recreate some of those memories you have where something amazing happened at four o'clock in the morning. It only happened this one time and it was amazing. The tents, the water, the bare feet in the sand, the sound and the light was getting the spectators there in a hurry. I think it happened quite a few times depending on the relationship between performer and spectator. I don't know if some spectators left the performance, but some sat off to the side and watched. There were actually some young people who became romantically involved during the performance.

---

**Ida Krøgholt**, Associate Professor at the Department of Communication and Culture – Dramaturgy, Aarhus University.

---

**Erik Exe Christoffersen**, Associate Professor at the Department of Communication and Culture – Dramaturgy, Aarhus University.

---



Lampedusa Cruise



# Interview

My Deer Hunter

# My Deer Hunter

## Interviews with the Cast and Creative Team

by Erik Exe Christoffersen, Ida Krøgholt and Kathrine Winkelhorn

*My Deer Hunter* (2021), performed at the Edison, Betty Nansen's annex stage, is a documentary staging and almost an anthropological study of a group of PTSD-affected veterans based on a dramaturgical approach to their history and the consequences of their participation in war. Like any anthropological research, the process is a dissecting investigation of the lived life that is taken apart, fragmented and documented as narratives, choreographed movements, videotaped facial expressions and action elements. Fragments, lines, objects and actions are put together and become the montage of the performance. The reconstruction preserves the lived life of the performers on stage, but is also an artificial work on its own terms, addressed to the spectator.

The trick here is double: the veterans are themselves while at the same time being characters in the performance. The performance presents a reality without hiding its medial and theatrical construction. In doing so, it creates an affective space where there is a slippage between subjective and collective perception and between reality and staging. The performance simply comes into being in the encounter with the spectators sitting on both sides of the stage.

It is reminiscent of Odysseus' ten-year journey home after the Trojan War, and the four veterans describe a difficult and almost impossible return to a changed home. *My Deer Hunter* is inspired by the American director Michael Cimino's 1978 film *Deer Hunter*, about the aftermath of the Vietnam War and the traumatisation of individual soldiers. The four actors are Sara la Cour, Jonas Hjorth, Nikolaj Stokholm and Palle Würtz.

### The Current Art of War

Denmark sent troops to Afghanistan in 2002. The political decision has been the subject of continuous debate. Was it the right decision? What kind of war were we participating in? Especially after the end of the war and the recapture of the country by the Taliban, the justification of the participation can be discussed. Did it reduce the risk of international terrorism? Has it promoted freedom and equality in Afghanistan?

How has this participation in the war been portrayed in theatre? Solveig Gade, dramaturg and associate professor of theatre and performance studies at the University of Copenhagen, is doing research on how the participation in the war has been portrayed in contemporary theatre:

*“There has been theatre where veterans have been on stage: like Hjemvendt (Returned) (2015) by director Petrea Søe, where five actors with war experience, three veterans, an aid worker and a chaplain, tell personal stories during the performance. What they have in common is that the personal first-hand accounts come across very strongly in the narratives. The traumatised soldier takes up a lot of space. Not only in Denmark, but also in Norway, Sweden, the United States and Germany. It's really the dominant figure in European and American fiction. I think it's out of a desire to make war and its consequences present to an audience. I would also argue that the focus on first-hand accounts can more subtly be seen as a form of criticism of – or an invitation to critical reflection on – the sacrifices that have been the cost of the war. In these performances, the audience experiences precisely how major political decisions reach*

## My Deer Hunter

*into personal lives. At the same time, you could say that by putting these people's experiences on stage, you contribute to drawing them into the public sphere and saying that it is not just the individual soldier who has to deal with the fact that he or she suffers from PTSD. It is something we as a nation have to deal with.*" (Solveig Gade in Emil Høj, *Information* 3 September 2021)

In 2014, the performance *I føling – en krigsballet* by director Christian Lollike premiered at the Royal Danish Theatre. Three veterans performed monologues in interaction with ballet dancers using mannequin legs and fake arms as props. To Lollike, it was first and foremost about giving the audience an awareness that Denmark was a nation at war and an idea of how "enervating and futile" the war could be experienced.

*"I tended to forget that myself. In addition, I think it was important for the audience to come into close contact with soldiers who had lost several body parts and suffered from PTSD, in order to understand that the war was real and had real consequences. For me it was about making the war real, because I think it felt unreal.*" (Lollike, *Ibid.* 3 September 2021)

Phil Klay, an American author born in 1983, published the short story collection *Redeployment* in 2014 and his debut novel *Missionaries* in October 2020. As veteran of the US Marine Corps, he explains:

*"When I came home, I decided to write these stories because I had something I wanted to communicate. I was far from certain what I wanted to say. I just knew that it had to be captured in fiction and not in any ideological way. As a returning soldier, you generally feel exposed in completely new ways and you ask yourself the question: Will other people respect me as a human being? What is my life worth? Will God hear my prayers? You learn to work from that, and it can actually be rewarding. The depth of your realisations does not necessarily depend on what happens in the war zone, but on the mental work you do in response to what you have experienced. Unfortunately, not everyone can cope with it. Home is where the reconstruction process begins. It is here that you realise that you have to find a way to be human again. You quickly learn that the rest of society is not orbiting around the same dark star. It's even worse when you realise that wars are dishonest or a failure. Or when a war that you thought was successful fails. My experience of war has evolved dramatically over time. Not just because I tried to think the issues through. I also travelled back to Mosul in Northern Iraq and saw destroyed houses and not much life. Those experiences changed my perception of the war".* (*Politiken*, 16<sup>th</sup> October 2021)

(<https://politiken.dk/kultur/boger/art8407964/%C2%BBDet-er-dybt-bedragerisk-at-vi-bliver-ved-med-at-sl%C3%A5-folk-ihjel-n%C3%A5r-vi-officielt-ikke-er-i-krig%C2%AB>)

One can ask the simple question: can the theatre contribute to the reconstruction that Phil Klay refers to as a necessity? Can theatre, in addition to recounting war experiences in a dramaturgical process, also create an affective space where veterans and non-war participants meet?

## PTSD

The diagnosis “post-traumatic stress disorder” (PTSD) was introduced in 1980, in the wake of the Vietnam War, by the American Psychiatric Association as a mental illness resulting from war, and in 1990 a study concluded that more than a third of all Vietnam veterans experienced severe symptoms of PTSD. This meant that many veterans were able to receive treatment and compensation for their pain after the violent experiences of war. It also led to a reassessment of courage and fighting spirit. Previously, it was seen as a reflection of individual character and as a psychological resource that could be depleted. During World War II, there was talk of “combat exhaustion”, but this was questioned as an explanation for soldiers’ mental breakdown. Later, psychologists found that soldiers were able to continue fighting as long as they were part of a well-functioning military unit. The moment the military unit disintegrated the soldier lost that strength. The importance of the group on the morale of the soldier came to play an important role in military thinking and planning in the years that followed where the nature of war changed.

*The functioning of the individual small group became paramount. This required good leadership and a strong sense of community, with the soldier’s company or platoon becoming, at best, a kind of family. They fought for each other and even had to be willing to die for each other. In this perspective, the individual soldier’s morale is inextricably linked to the cohesion of the group (Johannes Lang, *Politiken*, 7 April 2022).*

Denmark has participated in various wars in recent years and each year commemorates its fallen soldiers, who are honoured annually for their efforts. However, there is one group that tends to slip out of the picture. Those veterans who have become ill from their participation in the war and have developed PTSD do not receive much publicity or honour. Some of them commit suicide (73 between 1992 and 2018), but they do not count as victims of war. Their act is individualised and it is made to look as if there is no link between the war and the suicide.

*My Deer Hunter* is about these veterans<sup>1</sup>: Four veterans meet on a stage set up like a living room with a sofa, dining table, refrigerator, lamps etc. They are Jonas Hjorth Andersen, 33 years old, sent to Afghanistan in 2010, Nicolai Stokholm Sondrup-Ottsen, 50 years old, sent out in 1991, 1992, 1993, 1999 and 2000, Palle Würtz, 36 years old, sent to Afghanistan in 2008 and 2012, Sara la Cour, 35 years old, sent to Iraq in 2006. All have been dedicated soldiers. Whether their participation in the war has benefited anyone or anything is not the subject of the performance. They only represent themselves and their own identity crisis as a result of their participation in the war.

## The Theatre Space

The spectators sit on either side of the living room and surround it as the four speak about their participation in the war. At the same time, they are busy filming each other. Mobile cameras are moved around during the performance and the four take turns reconstructing their story. Close-ups of their faces are projected onto a large screen on either side of the stage.

The whole choreography is like an operation with military precision that they could probably perform with their eyes closed. This is supported by a sound collage that puts the body on alert – and points to the readiness of the four ex-soldiers: they have the whole room under control and

---

1) Extract from a review by Erik Exe Christoffersen written for *Norsk Shakespearetidsskrift*, Vol. 4-2020.

## My Deer Hunter

could find the emergency exit blindfolded, as they say. Sometimes they have to put on hearing protection and sunglasses to cope. Sometimes things get a bit chaotic, with chairs overturned, desert sand out of the sofa cushions and earth all over the dining table – as some of the more traumatic memories emerge. A deer from the refrigerator is cut up on the dining table. They continuously clean up the living room in a disciplined way. The war is still present in the more or less disintegrated domesticity.

The four have never had anything to do with each other before, but now they are together to overcome the traumas they each have suffered. As a spectator, you think it is brave to participate in the performance and to go so far into the vulnerable minefield. Will they make it? Can it give the spectators an insight into embarrassing taboo thoughts.

Between the personal accounts there are references to the film *The Deer Hunter*, 1978, about hunting buddies from a small industrial town in Pennsylvania, USA. The film has Robert De Niro, Christopher Walken and Meryl Streep in the leading roles. It shows how the Vietnam War destroys them. They are taken prisoners and the guards force them to play Russian roulette, but Michael (De Niro) manages to escape. After the war, Michael goes back to Vietnam to bring back the mentally damaged Nick, who is still playing Russian roulette for a living. Nick forces his friend into the final game, where Nick loses and dies on the spot. The four veterans seem to recognise themselves in the film's Russian roulette.

### **Homecoming as a Loss of Meaning**

War is tragic in itself, but the stories become truly painful to witness when it comes to the homecoming. Returning from the reality of war, they find that no one understands them and few take an interest in their experiences. The euphoria of war turns into a never-ending nightmare and the body does not want to give up the extreme attention that war and survival demanded. It is as if there are enemies everywhere, any sound or sudden movement is sensed and experienced as if they were still at war: "I haven't come home yet," as one says. All four have post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and are haunted by the war, living a kind of zombie existence where they find it difficult to be with others. They isolate themselves in loneliness.

Tragically, they all develop a sense of shame for having lost control. They share a sense of failure in the war, where Jonas lost his best friend. Sara, a sniper fires a discharge and feels she has failed in her duty as a soldier. Disturbed, lost and full of shame, she isolates herself in the Norwegian mountains when she returns home. Nicolai is ashamed of not contributing to the home, and every day he struggles with the fear that his wife will give up and leave him. Palle is ashamed that he still has difficulty hearing the screams of children at Tivoli, and he shows how he blacked out and curled up on his mother's kitchen floor. The shame becomes a trauma that leads to self-isolation and contemplation of suicide becomes a daily act: "I hope for just one day without contemplating suicide".

This is where the long and arduous journey begins. It is about giving up the identity they each had before the war and the identity that life as a soldier created, for better or worse, and then finding a new one. The performance is part of this process. Thus, they experience a theatrical community as something new and rewarding. The constant observation of each other through the camera becomes a visualisation and recognition of each other. They trust each other in their stage choreography, which has both speed and precision just like an actual war manoeuvre. It has otherwise been characteristic of them that they did not trust anyone after returning home. The specific relationships in the performance are touching, moving, sensuous and, one senses, an alternative to the endless

series of therapeutic sessions that all four of them have been through over a number of years. As a spectator, you just want to shout: Yes, we see you

### **Theatre as Community**

Theatre is not therapy. However, this does not prevent theatre from having a therapeutic effect. The four soldiers have risked their lives without blinking an eye, but by going on stage – despite their anxiety, depression and other infirmities – they challenge one of the most common fears: standing up in front of an audience and confessing: “I am not a hero”, “I have to tell the stories”, as Sara says. At the end, she sings “Lo, the sun rises out of the sea” while the others hum along. The song becomes part of their shared story.

*Lo, the sun is rising out of the sea,  
Golden rays are playing on woods and lea,  
Oh, what joy and gladness, though all is still,  
On each golden morning all nature fill.*  
(Jakob Knudsen 1891, translated by J. C. Aaberg)

One can interpret *Lo, the sun is rising* as a religious use of metaphors, but one can also emphasise that the light lands on the coast of the world and the differences that the world encompasses. You can emphasise the physical and sensory relationship inherent in the address. I say to you: “*Lo, the sun is rising*”. There is a bodily community *here and now* around the act of seeing, as if the sunrise is a sensuous dance. The light takes on a healing function and dispels depressive thoughts: “And that night is vanquished, and griefs are gone”. The sun is a form of resurrection, greater than the individual subject, and by embracing this event it becomes possible to reconcile with death. *Lo, the sun ascends from the sea anew*. The song creates a community, so to speak, and becomes an important affect *between* the veterans and the spectators since the song is known by most Danes

### **Dramaturgies**

There are several narrative levels. First, there are the biographical narratives, which are intertwined in their diversity, and where there are some common points such as departure, posting and return. Second, there is the specific camera work, where they record and question each other. This creates a choreography in the space, but also divides the spectator’s attention between what is happening on stage and the faces in close-ups above the stage. This means that the spectators see something that the performers do not see. This both reinforces an empathy in some situations and at the same time creates a certain distance to the action, which takes on a demonstrative character. Third, there is the parallel story with the film *Deer Hunter* about the Vietnam War, where scenes are repeated and discussed by the four. Finally, there is the relationship and engagement with the spectators. Perhaps the most important thing here is that we listen to the reality of the four and their struggle for survival on multiple fronts. They are not just representations of soldiers as such, but subjects in the theatre performance as opposed to the objectification imposed on them by the war. They are performers and take full responsibility for the realisation of each evening, which one imagines can be quite harsh.

Personally, I have no experience of war, but the struggle for survival intrigues and captivates me, both their personal stories and the struggle they are under taking right here and now on stage, which involves its own kind of risk. It is something different from war, but it is a courageous exposure

## My Deer Hunter

and posing as who you are, without any kind of protection or possibility of cover. As Sara says in the play: it is necessary to *tell* the story.

Observing and recording each other creates a kind of mutual trust and focussing of attention and the presence of each person in the room. As one of the veterans says, the immediate impulse would be to escape from the audience who is watching them. Where is the exit? By staying, an experience is formed: the other is not dangerous, the spectators are trustworthy. A familiarity with the sensations of the body emerges and thus a kind of control of inner feelings, emotions, moods, etc. We survive this situation, which is super scary and anxiety-provoking, together as a group.

### Theatre as Learning

The performance creates and shows respect for the performers. Tue Biering has made theatre with unique characters with a certain risk before. He makes himself available as the *ignorant* director and does not have the answer to what they should do to get their lives back and does not take a position on whether their actions are right or wrong. The dramaturgical and scenic weaving of the different narratives, video images and positions in the room seems to the participants to have created an alternative to more classic trauma therapy. This suggests that the medium of theatre can have an important healing and cleansing effect without being therapeutic. The veterans are not war heroes, and they are not judged on their personal efforts. But on stage, they are in a strong position in their encounters with audiences who might not otherwise have this experience.

In many ways, the last twenty years have become the time of affect. There has been talk of a cult of emotions in connection with many collective actions based on grief, anger, joy, pride, shame. Shame is an obvious example of something that arises from seeing oneself through the eyes of others, but which also becomes an internal state, such as blushing, stammering or eyes filling with tears. Shame is an interaction between the individual and the social situation. And it can be difficult to give a linguistic explanation. The affective can be linked to places, actions. The affective can express itself as a sentimental nationalism, a hateful and angry mood. *My Deer Hunter* is an example of the opposite. The performance creates an affective connection between the soldiers and the spectators that neither condemns nor glorifies the war and their participation.

### The veterans

We set up a meeting with the four veterans who took part in *My Deer Hunter* along with the director Tue Biering. The interview takes place just after the performance on 2 June 2021 where we gather in the spacious attic around an ironing board. We talk for a good hour or so.

Let us start by introducing the main characters:

**Palle Würtz**, 36 years old, Holstebro. Sergeant Major, has been stationed in the Helmand Province Afghanistan in 2008 and 2012. Was diagnosed with PTSD in 2013 and started treatment.

Also suffers from impotence, chronic depression, anxiety and bipolar disorder. Served as a weapons technician/section leader. Marital status: Divorced, father of one daughter. Palle Würtz was discharged following a stress-related collapse in his office in the camp in the Helmand province. Würtz explains:

*“Most of all, I isolated myself because I felt a huge amount of guilt and shame after being discharged. I felt that I had disgraced myself by giving up on the mission. I wasn’t invited*

*to the homecoming parade when the rest of the unit came home, nor to events afterwards. It knocked the ground out from under me because I had always been a central figure who had made things work. I had given myself 120 percent in the pursuit of rank and status, which is everything in the military. The army was my whole identity. That is why it felt like I lost everything when I could no longer be a soldier. In the waiting room at the PTSD clinic in Aarhus, we all sat looking down at the floor. The room was kind of permeated with shame. I think this is directly related to the fact that it is not allowed to show weakness or difficult emotions. I want to help break taboos. Show that it is not so dangerous to be vulnerable as a man. I would very much like to change the one-sided view of mentally ill war veterans and psychiatry as a whole. We have won the war it was to be on stage. On my worst days, I feel like killing myself. I have this agreement with my psychologist. I have to hide the keys to my gun cabinet. We are four people who are on the edge of life. We've hit rock bottom from different starting points, but we've all experienced shame, guilt and a bad conscience. I feel like I'm constantly being judged. But for me, it's not just on stage. There's a new stage every time I go to the supermarket or enter a family birthday party." (<https://www.kristeligt-dagblad.dk/importfallback/jeg-tror-alle-krigsveteraner-ville-have-godt-af-en-uge-paa-teaterskole>)*

**Jonas Hjorth Andersen**, 33 years old, Hornbæk. Has PTSD. Stationed in Afghanistan 2010 as a group leader. Marital status: In a relationship with Sofie since 2006, married in 2016:

*"The contrast between me going to Afghanistan in January 2010 and coming home in August of the same year could not have been greater. Out went the boy, the idealist, the dreamer full of life and home came a man full of darkness and self-hatred. Every day I had to involuntarily confront horrific nightmares and flashbacks, and bear the heavy burden of losing in war. I had made a choice to try to make a positive difference, but that choice continues to echo in my life in a negative way.*

*I feel that in the small microcosm in which we operated in Afghanistan, we can be proud of the effort we made. We were there with our hearts first, wanting to contribute to the building of a new Afghanistan, naïve as that may sound. We were a tight-knit platoon, supporting each other to accomplish difficult tasks, even if they seemed arbitrary. There was a willingness to work hard and a culture that prompted us to listen to each other when we had been in violent conflict.*

*I have struggled every day since I came home, and a few years ago, it started to manifest itself as real progress. It has shaped a life full of reservations, but I try every day to turn towards the possibilities, just as I did when FIX&FOXY called and asked me if I wanted to take part in making theatre. This was also a decision that was to echo in my life, but this time in the reverse direction. What a gift it is to be allowed to create something beautiful out of the very worst." (<https://helsingordagblad.dk/artikel/krigsveteran-traumerne-fra-krigen-har-forfulgt-mig>)*

**Sara la Cour**, 35 years old, Nørrebro, Copenhagen. PTSD: Diagnosed in 2013. Caused by acts of war, as well as harassment in a war zone. Posted to Iraq 2006, as a scout with primary shooting function. Only woman in the platoon. Marital status: In a relationship.

Sara la Cour today has a degree in anthropology and is currently writing a book about returning from war. She is a co-founder of the Foreningen Kvindelige Veteraner (Women Veterans Association), which was founded in 2017:

## My Deer Hunter

*“When I was stationed, one of the things we were told was that we were not allowed to run alone in the camp without a male companion. Even though the camp is a place where you should be able to take a break from the state of preparedness, we women were told that there was a risk of rape. Inside our camp. And this became an additional danger that you hadn’t prepared for. I have practised and trained before the posting that if I am shot at, I will be able to return fire. But how do you defend yourself against rape? It’s hard to hide. So you learn to adapt, blend in, become invisible. Hundreds of times I’ve heard comments like how many blowjobs a female colleague might have given in order to rise up the ranks. You will do anything not to be excluded by the group, even compromise your own gender. Because they were my friends, my brothers, for whom I would die. Even to this day, I would take a bullet for them.”* (<https://www.berlingske.dk/samfund/til-sidst-aendrede-jeg-helt-kropsholdning-for-at-skjule-mine-bryster-og>)

**Nicolai Stokholm**, 50 years old, Horsens. PTSD. Stationed in 1991, 1992, 1993, 1999 and 2000 to Cyprus, Croatia and Kosovo respectively. Marital status: Married to Karina and father of three. Nicolai Stokholm Sondrup-Ottsen was among the first Danish soldiers to go to the Balkans. Today, more than 20 years later, he is fighting to be compensated and recognised for his efforts:

*“When I say that I have PTSD, people almost start planning an escape route. I want to help raise more awareness of what it means to be a veteran with PTSD. Just because you suffer from PTSD it doesn’t mean you’re dangerous – it’s only the dangerous ones you hear about. I want to help change that. When we landed in Denmark, 150 soldiers sat in a huge auditorium in front of a commander who shouted out if anyone needed a psychologist or a doctor. If you had raised your hand, there would probably have been boos from the other 149. There was a clear feeling that real men do not have problems after a war. When I came home from Croatia, my old friends said: “How grown up you are now. So quiet and thoughtful. Afterwards, I realised that it wasn’t about thoughtfulness. I just wasn’t the same anymore. The first night I was home from Croatia, I asked my mum to close the curtains. She didn’t understand. They live in the countryside and the nearest neighbour is five kilometres away. But I couldn’t stand it. You can’t see who’s outside looking in. I was genuinely afraid of that. I feel most sorry for my wife. When I’m at my worst, I think she should move on and find someone else”.* (<https://www.berlingske.dk/kultur/nicolai-kaemperstadig-med-sin-fortid-det-er-mest-synd-for-min-kone-naar>)

**Karina Stockholm**, 44 years old. Married to Nicolai (was indirectly involved in the performance, as Nicolai calls home during the performance): *“When I met Nicolai, he had already been stationed as a UN soldier in Cyprus. I heard a lot about that trip. On the other hand, we didn’t talk much about Croatia, where the experiences were much more violent. I didn’t even know what PTSD was. It was only later that I realised that there was something within him that we hadn’t talked about. After seven months in Kosovo, I picked him up at the airport. There was no supervision of how he or the other soldiers were doing. No-one phoned to ask afterwards. Actually, I didn’t really think about how he was feeling. You just had a daily routine at home, and he had a daily routine there. And Kosovo was so close. You could drive there by car. It didn’t seem terribly dangerous. So I just picked him up and we drove home. The first thing I noticed was that he slept really badly at night. Later on, he also became incredibly sad. I guess we just thought that it was a process he had to go through, and then everything would be fine again. We actually talked very little about what it can mean to have been stationed as a soldier. In 2013, Nicolai himself said that he wanted to call Svanemøllens Kaserne (Svanemøllen barracks) because he felt so bad. In the intervening days, I realised how bad it was. He really couldn’t do anything. He was lying in bed, he had*

*violent nightmares. Sometimes he was completely distant. It seemed like he was asleep even though he was awake. That same year, he was diagnosed with PTSD, but the State Labour Market Insurance still refused to recognise it. This has been going on for years. I don't think can justify sending people out and then not want to help them afterwards.*" (<https://www.berlingske.dk/kultur/nicolai-kaemper-stadig-med-sin-fortid-det-er-mest-synd-for-min-kone-naar>)

## **Interview**

*How was the rehearsal process in brief?*

Sara la Cour: We started in summer 2019 with interviews with Sascha. Then a three-week rehearsal process from February to March. Then a long break due to corona and finally two to three weeks before the premiere on 1 November. We played until 7 December and again in June 2021 with a tour in September. During the rehearsals we worked with dialogues, use of props, improvisations in small rooms, interviews with each other, where Kasper (the assistant director), who was with us all the way, wrote and wrote and was a rock of support in changing and fixing the script towards the premiere. Every day was very exciting.

*We are interested in what this whole project has meant to you? What have the rehearsals been like and what has the feedback from your colleagues been like. What has happened to you – how did you get into this, and: What has it meant to you?*

Sara: The Women Veterans Association received an email from Sascha Kempinski. She is a psychotherapist and caster and has had conversations with potential candidates for the performance. The message from Sascha simply said that they were looking for people who were willing and able to take part in a performance about veterans. I called Sascha to find out more so I could pass on the enquiry to the association, but then she asked if this was something that I could be interested in. I had an informal conversation with her and thought it sounded like an exciting project. It was important to me that there was a woman's voice in the performance. But what I particularly noticed was that our different and individual stories should become one common story. Building the story in this way appealed to me, and so I agreed to take part.

Palle Würtz was tagged several times on LinkedIn that they were looking for veterans for a theatre play. "When I was tagged for the fifth time, I called Sascha and said: Hi, I was also stationed. When Sascha told me that Sara la Cour and Jonas Hjorth were also in the theatre play, I said yes, because they are some of my friends. I reacted because for me it is important that these stories continue to be told so that the next generations of soldiers can learn". The importance that the experience ended up having came as a surprise to him. "I'm a classic West Jutlander and I have to be halfway in my grave before I admit that I'm in pain. Suddenly I was in an environment where it was perfectly legitimate to have my eyes fill with tears when I talked about helpless Afghan children. I found myself with others who were also filled with guilt and shame."

Tue: Nikolaj Stockholm was the first person we got in touch with. I was in the process of finding veterans, and you Nikolaj were in the first line, because (lawyer) Mads Pramming had sent out an enquiry to your network. Mads had warned me in advance and said that no one would say

## My Deer Hunter

yes. Because it is fundamentally contradictory to ask people with PTSD to stand up in front of other people on a stage. I was asking some people with social anxiety, people who hate big crowds, to get up on a stage and do theatre. I was interested in looking at people who have experienced – and survived – a life-changing moment. I was specifically looking to talk to people who had been exposed to extreme danger. As a soldier, it's almost part of the job description. One of your functions is that you can kill other people, that you have some pretty critical moments where you have to decide whether to pull the trigger. It creates an almost Old Testament existential situation and a dehumanisation where you end up abandoning some of the principles that made you leave. I discovered that many of them felt trapped in very stereotypical boxes. They want to return to life, as human beings and as part of society, but they can't. Not only because the many stereotypical boxes hinder them, but also because they have to settle into life as a different person. They have left their old self behind. In that way, you can never return from the war, and that's what this performance is about. I thought I could talk with 30 people during one evening. Each conversation lasted at least an hour and a half, and I just sat there looking at my watch and the long list.

The project is five years old, and the premise was that we were at war. But when it gets to dealing with veterans who have been at war and had to revitalise something, the story is completely reversed. Nikolaj told us that as a child he had danced and acted in theatre. As the conversation is about to end, Nikolaj says that he would very much like to participate. This becomes the turning point. Suddenly I started to believe that it can actually materialise because he wants to be involved. That's how the project got started, and Sasha joined as a communicator of the project to the veterans.

Jonas: I got a call from Sascha Kempinski in autumn 2019. She told me about the project in a way that was intriguing enough to make me want to meet you. Once I was in the theatre space, I had no doubt that there was a lot of patience to listen, a lot of willingness to understand and treat it with respect. This is different from what you just don't want to be part of. Because there are a lot of people who want a piece of the action. They want a killer headline and something with meat on it, but not too much, or people will drop out.

Palle elaborates: "We've all been on a screen or in a newspaper and have been in the public eye. It will lead to some repercussions in the hinterland. Because we are part of a group where you don't talk about the group. I had to get over that point. Because once I do this, it's final. It's like you say, Jonas. Everyone really wants stories like, did you shoot someone, and what was it like when you picked up your mate in a matchbox? *That's* not what's interesting. It's everything that happens afterwards. Like when I'm standing next to a daycare worker and I suddenly go extreme and say, if you don't shut up now, I'm going to punch you. The nuanced picture is never told".

*Perhaps this is also a way for you to get back on track rather than digging yourselves in?*

Palle: There must be something that says that I'm going to stand up and say that this exists. We want to talk about everything in between. None of us have the solution or the right story to tell. We are only representative of us and we are four voices in the debate. I want to mention the first day we met up in the rehearsal hall at Betty Nansen. I remember I started by arriving five minutes late and thinking, fuck, now I'm out. I felt like now I to go up to Steven Spielberg and break through, because I really want to communicate this. Jonas sat up there and was cool, as he always is, and

Sara was there, and Nikolaj sat there with his quickstep shoes on. It was all so great until Andreas (who later left the project for personal reasons) said: Who the hell is Betty Nansen anyway? Tue began by saying: “You are the performance. It is your stories and your episodes from your lives.” This meant that Palle Würtz felt part of a creative process that had to get to the core of the story.

Tue: There were five rather determined people sitting there, but actually it was me who was auditioning. The four people had to agree to work with me. For me, it was crucial that the first meeting was as honest as possible and completely transparent. I need to experience that you can talk about the concept in a mutual understanding that everyone agrees that this is what we are working on. Sascha had done a lot of work, and she has written long files on each person. Because how do we put together a team with different types that complement each other at the same time? To get the big narrative, you had to complement each other. It was interesting to have the mechanic, the sniper, the lorry driver and the group leader. So, it was also a military professional supplement. When you arrived, nothing was given. It was also hinted that you would leave if I didn't sense that we could only talk for a maximum of 20 minutes at a time, then there would have to be a break. Maybe that's when I understood what PTSD was. One of the first things Palle said was: “I'd like to know who's on the other side of the window, and where does that lift go?” I had to run down to the basement and tell them not to use the lift. I was certainly naïve and didn't realise how impossible the project really was.

*How were you convinced to join the project?*

Sara: I remember Tue saying that he do not know anything about war and that we have to educate him. In the performance, there will be a before, during and after, and the performance will be like a journey. But we are the experts, he emphasises. It was a good anthropological approach to the project. I myself sat and watched the whole group. It was the soldier I brought into that space. I had to see if I could establish trust with these people. What are they after? For me, it was important that Sascha acted as a kind of translator all the time. Sascha read our body language and often asked if we were okay, and there were backstage interviews with her without the whole group. As a woman, I was right back on duty with a watchfulness for other soldiers. I encountered that jargon again, which I reacted to, and which you in the theatre also reacted to. But you always made sure to create transparency and thus create a safe space. For example, there was a round where we were introduced to all the faces at Betty Nansen that we would potentially see on a daily basis. You managed to provide a huge sense of security. Every time we reacted to something, you immediately showed that you took *it* and *us* seriously – like the elevator, for example, it was making noise and we reacted immediately and then it was stopped. I wanted to be fully informed about what was going to happen, and how and when ... well, actually I wanted a platoon leader. And you were our platoon leader, Tue.

Nikolaj adds that for him the most important thing was the sense of security: “A feeling that everything was taken seriously was established. There was someone who listened to you. It wasn't just a case of someone saying: “calm down man”. That sense of security tipped the scales for me”.

Palle adds that he really wanted to be selected, and there was an almost familiar feeling or mood among the team that we will take care of your story with love and loyalty. That sense of inclusion

## My Deer Hunter

was very strong. “It was funny to see that Tue had set up a big table with a display of a lot of military toys and Tue says: See what you can do with that. There are also some cameras and coffee. Then we just started playing, and Tue sat there and said: what does it mean when you do that? But aren't you the one in charge, but Tue didn't answer. Well, what the hell do you want, and now you have to step up as a leader, and stop this socialist bullshit. For me, it was like stepping into a world of flowers, where I'm used to cold concrete. It became a free space”, says Palle.

Sara adds: “One of the things that was crucial was that we went into this together. I remember one of the first times when Jonas says: I don't want to do this if we do it halfway. I was actually feeling good at the time, but how much do you really repress? And when Jonas says that sentence, I can feel that there is something I don't really want others to see and hear. Because it's also about guilt and shame. I knew then that I had to talk about the accidental shooting experience that changed me, even though no one was hurt”.

*How do you deal with this sense of shame?*

Palle: I have always had the image of Jonas Hjorth that he looks like something out of an Italian fashion magazine and his wife is also 'irritatingly beautiful'. And for me it was like, “Jonas, there can't possibly be anything wrong with you”. And all of a sudden Jonas, whom I've seen at several veteran events, sits down and discloses some things and I think: Do you really feel that, and Sara, who I have always seen as a *superwoman*. It's Sara la Cour, she's fucking cool. Then the two prominent figures from the veteran community sit down and start talking about what they are ashamed of. Nikolaj also talks about what he is ashamed of. So I'm not alone in being ashamed. It was crucial for me to say yes to being here. I had been hiding in West Jutland with my shame and guilt that I went home just because my stepfather died. You can go home for a funeral and come back to the war in a week. You have to be able to do that. If you can't, you're a bloody wimp. But what has been revealed is that each of us has carried a shame that we didn't want to talk about.

Tue: The musketeer oath that was made that day was quite significant. Jonas says he is here because he wants to give 100 % and nothing less, otherwise it doesn't make sense.

Jonas: I knew that I would regret it if we didn't go all the way together. Because then we would lose the potential of the story.

Tue: Seeing how everyone clocked in on that was important. We returned to it in several rounds, where each of you could say: “I can feel that you are not here and that you are not going all the way”. That was our agreement, and it was another turning point in getting to where we were.

Jonas: It also made it possible that you didn't have an idea of what it was going to be. You, Tue, were willing to keep your options open for an incredibly long time. Probably even longer than we could have imagined. It took a very long time before we started to specify, and there was something we could relate to. But I still think it was important and helped shape the overall narrative that we got everything on the table. Then the big tidying up began: what do we choose and how do we build it up? A lot of things fell into place with that musketeer's oath, and it became easier to enter the very difficult space as the days progressed.

*How did the concept evolve?*

Tue had told the people behind him that he had now become a platoon leader in 24 hours, which was completely at odds with what he wanted to be: “But I realised that if this was going to happen, I had to do a quick training as a platoon leader. We started with some workshops in Øksnehallen, an old slaughterhouse in the middle of Copenhagen. I needed to get to know you better before we started rehearsals, so it took a while. Then we had a workshop at the Betty Nansen rehearsal hall, where I try to put some cameras into play. And finally, we also have a session in Sascha’s studio where I also collect material and we try to go back in time. What can we achieve when we try to reconstruct what happened? I needed to know if going backwards in time would work. Because I had two or maybe three concepts running at the same time and had to see what worked. But then we were stopped by the corona, fortunately. Because we were heading in the wrong direction, and that gave us six months to think. The first run-through had become very theatrical and illustrative”.

*How did you arrive at the idea that the stage should be in the centre with spectators on either side?*

Tue: We realised that the whole engine of the story is that people line up in an extremely pressured situation with the audience on either side, where there is no exit. The performers are precisely not supposed to be protected. They are supposed to be vulnerable, and what you experience is that people are fighting 1:1 so it becomes introvert and extrovert at the same time. With the stage in the centre and the audience on both sides, everything starts to unravel almost magically and more decisions become easy. Then the camera thing makes sense too. We spent hours figuring out the set design, and at one point we talked about having the actors behind glass. But it was too expensive and it didn’t make sense. You had to be extremely vulnerable.

Sara: Corona became a gift for us when we finished in March. It was incredibly hard to have to tell your story, and when I left the theatre, I felt like an open wound. Being asked curiously about the difficult subjects sets things in motion, and at the same time you could mirror yourself in each other’s stories. You were surrounded by mirrors and could always recognise what the others were saying. We were constantly exposed and the pause worked wonders.

Palle breaks in and says: On the last day before lock down, we sit and re-enact my suicide attempt with the shotgun, as if we’re talking about the weather, and then Tue says: Thank you. We’ll pick up on this tomorrow. Then evening comes, and the country closes down, and Tue has to make some phone calls.

The therapeutic process was not a plan at all, but suddenly we have been allowed to see ourselves from the outside and look in at ourselves. It has been a great gift that I could not have foreseen. Even though I’ve talked about my suicide attempt a number of times, I’ve never gone into depth in that way. I described it detail by detail. How I sat. What was around me. How I held the shotgun. It also made it tangible for myself, and was a big step towards becoming a whole person again. I would almost say it’s something all veterans should go through. Not necessarily on a stage, but a few weeks at a theatre school, where you learn some techniques that help you see yourself a little from the outside. Being able to re-enact my own experiences in a more theatrical setting has, in a way, allowed me to tell it more honestly.

## My Deer Hunter

*Do you have a sense of the audience's reactions?*

Nikolaj: There are many different episodes. One major wouldn't leave until he had spoken to us. Another came up to us sobbing and said loudly: Thank you for what you have done. You've opened up everything we couldn't understand. When my own wife saw the performance, I was surprised that she cried for hours afterwards. She was so touched and relieved by what the performance visualised. This is a family effort on our part. I have been in therapy for 10-12 years, but *My Deer Hunter* has been worth ten times more. I haven't felt as good as I do now for many years.

Sara adds: "Your story has become more transparent. The whole concept of a before, during and after gives you an understanding of yourself, and it seems that the trauma is losing more and more power. Bringing your story to light is an antidote to shame. The empathy of the audience you meet every night is also important".

Jonas basically agrees. "There is great power in bringing the most difficult things in your life into play. There's darkness in it, but it's a gift to be available. I feel much stronger than the person on stage, and it's good to be able to say that I've taken back the power and there's a crack that gives hope to other people."

Palle adds: "There are several war veterans who say that because we have said it out loud, they now dare to open up about their shame".

*When you film each other, you also see each other. In a way, you are kept in motion. How did you develop the technique that works so well here?*

Tue: It's pretty funny, because it's very much about getting details and getting physicality and close-ups of hands and feet. We were in doubt whether we should have camera people filming, but then the camera became a way of watching, interviewing and helping each other. In film there's an expression that says, we're just going to do "a shot" of you. So the camera also became a weapon and a technique to show how you work professionally. But it was also a way of getting you to see what the camera could do for you. At the same time, it also serves as a transition when, for example, Sara has just talked about the accidental shooting and immediately afterwards films.

Sara: The camera took on multiple functions and became a navigational tool in the theatre space, but also a way to hold you to the fire so you remembered what you had to do. A lot of time was spent making sure we were filming from the right angle and in the right way. During the rehearsal period, we also worked on interviewing each other. And we did a lot of little scenes where we show situations. For example, I was Nicolai's dance teacher and Jonas was my father in another example. And then we went through the situations as concretely as possible. This has created this observational look at each other and a demonstrative style, where we have shown concrete actions that we have observed together. Many of these situations are written into the play.

*Are they your own lines?*

Palle: Yes and no. It's our own story and everything that is said has been said by us. It's like when you have a long, beautiful branch and you think it can become a pointed, fine, long walking stick. But you have to get rid of all the superfluous stuff. So Tue and his people sat down and cut. Then they came back and said, these are your thoughts, only now expressed with almost surgical precision. We've worked together on this during the whole process. But Jonas Hjorth and I have said to Tue several times that if you remove any more, you'll end up in a lime pit.

Jonas: We had to be co-creators and not just say what you would expect. It has been a process that has pushed my expectations of myself. I have been challenged. I'm not an actor, I tell my own story and I want it to be as accurate as possible, but it's been cut to the bone. I had to keep asking myself: how much can you cut without losing understanding? Maybe 90% has been removed.

You don't have to tell everything, and people experience things in different ways. But the audience just have to take it in and do what they want with it. But you're so afraid that when your lines are cut, the essence is lost. Even then, there was a lot of confidence that Tue and his team had worked with this before. The stories are interwoven, we are all senders, and then you get about 15 minutes for each player, which together make a great story.

Tue: Jonas, do you remember what you said to me on the last day of rehearsals? "Tue, I don't recognise myself here". But already on the first rehearsal day I said that there would come a time when you would say: "I don't recognise myself anymore".

Jonas: That was a difficult moment, and here we have to trust you 100% Tue, because it is so precious and there is so much at stake. The interesting thing is that you represent yourself here, and suddenly you see yourself condensed to something you don't quite recognise as yourself. But that fund of stories unfolds in a new way in the encounter with an audience. It's not just what we each say: the light, the sound, the movement, the music, the silence, the noise, the mess are all elements that help tell the story. I was more interested in the story and only later realised that it's the whole that communicates.

Tue: And that's when you start to recognise yourselves through the eyes of others. It's quite magical.

Jonas: Well, it's the ultimate release when you realise that the audience understands and has spent an hour and a half with us. But it's damn hard to believe until you stand there and feel it.

*What has been hard?*

Palle: Tue says early on in the process: "If you think I'm an idiot, just say so". What he forgot is that soldiers just settle their scores right away. At some point during the rehearsals, I turn round and say: "Shut up, you're a fucking idiot". And Tue replies: "Yes, that's my calling", and then we're kind of over that hurdle. It was as if it shocked the others. But we have to deal with these conflicts, and Tue has taken an incredibly pedagogical approach. "I'll tell you what". And then Tue comes with the big Rembrandt brushes and tells us a bit about how to condense ... Well, if we'd had an extra five kroner every time Tue said *condense*. But the cool thing has been to be forced to boil

## My Deer Hunter

everything down and get rid of all the bullshit. Tue, you've just delivered the goods, and I don't think you're an idiot.

Nikolaj: The worst thing was when we were sent home, and I thought it wouldn't work out. But then Tue organised that summer get-together, and it was great fun and wonderful to feel Tue's enthusiasm. Then you believed in it again. Several elements have been really hard – including having to be professionalised.

Sara: The hard part has been showing the shame, despite the fact that I've agreed to that premise in order for the story to succeed. But showing it to the audience has been the biggest challenge. Personally, I have had the mantra: Sara, you are worthy of love, no matter how the audience reacts.

Palle: The worst thing for me is that I still don't feel that I have the right to be here. Tue can say it however many times Sascha can say it and my colleagues can say that I have a right to be here. But my story is not harsh enough, and I don't feel I am worthy of being in the performance. I feel that Tue had to choose me for lack of other participants.

(Tue laughs). It's the flip side of my (lack of) self-esteem that I came out of the military with. It's the demon I only got rid of by meeting with Tue. We were one-on-one and Tue says that I keep striving to be good enough. God, Tue feels the same way.

*Jonas, what was the worst thing for you?*

Jonas: I have a lot of doubts, but the sum of it is that it was hard not to be able to change the direction of this. Shit man, that's the hardest thing ever. It was my assumption of how it would turn out and my built-in anxiety and need to be in control of the narrative. I've had to let go of control and put it all in Tues's hands. That was the hardest part. Paradoxically, I thought I had done that, but I hadn't when it came down to it.

“The stakes are high. That's the headline.” Says Nikolaj

### **The continuation of the interview in Aarhus in October, where the performance plays at Teater Katapult (interview by Erik Exe Christoffersen)**

*In terms of theatre, the performance is structured in such a way that you perform a lot of actions. You are constantly doing activities, filming, sitting down, getting up, getting dressed and undressed, putting on hearing protection, cutting up an animal, barbecuing and eating, throwing and raising chairs, etc. There is a tight choreography. You don't just talk and what does that mean for you on stage and for your “acting”?*

Jonas: It feels like a dance some days, where all the actions slide from one to the next. There are other days when it's a struggle. All the actions are synchronised, there's a rhythm, we exhale, and when we go on stage, it starts because there's something at stake. The performance has never died, but there are evenings when everyone is a bit dull, tired, and doesn't bring much to the table. But the fact that we move and circulate creates energy and concentration, it creates a rhythm for the monologues. The text kind of comes by itself.

Sara: Changing physical positions, working with camera positions and camera settings creates transitions, we jump from one to the other, new scenes. I remember thinking: what is the bridge between one and the other. But it's the small actions that create this connection. The fact that we are constantly in motion. It's a process, almost a dance, that we had to learn and incorporate almost blindly, it wasn't there in the beginning, but it was developed during the rehearsals.

*Video cameras have become part of modern warfare. How do you see the work with the camera in the performance?*

Palle: In the beginning we just had to use the video camera to play, and it was fun to focus on something. It's difficult to talk directly to the camera. There's a really uncomfortable scene where I have to look into the camera without blinking and talk about my personal shame about not being invited to parades. Tue was good at catching demons and cutting to the bone.

Palle: On the first theme days, I was the happy child, fooling around. The others were much better, and I don't deserve to be here, because there are many who have it much worse, I thought. In the performance, I'm being caricatured quite a bit to create a counterpoint to Sara and to reinforce Sara's statements. It's important to include it. You emphasise a certain side, and that's the way it is with everything.

*Palle, you have a significant development in the play. You start out really cool and end up lying on the floor like a child. And at the end you're in a flowery shirt and say that the people from Enhedslisten (The Red/Green Alliance) might not be completely crazy. That's quite a development, isn't it?*

Palle: That's maybe 85 % me, and I have to admit that I had never thought about what Sara, for example, has been through. So in that way, many things have changed for me.

*Sound plays a big part and creates more shock effects. Do you wear hearing protection because you are actually sensitive to sounds?*

Sara: Yes, I couldn't be there without protection with that sound. Imagine how crazy it is that you can't switch off a maddening noise and that you can't turn it down. Maybe that's also the feeling the spectators get.

Palle: When you [Sara] are smashing glass in a bucket, I can't see how many punches you're throwing, but I sometimes think, you have to stop now, otherwise I'll go nuts. One day I was completely shocked because I had forgotten to put on hearing protection.

Jonas: In the war, sound is a subtle undertone of dark depth. The performance creates a recognisable feeling, the feeling of not being able to absorb what is coming. It has a powerful effect.

Palle: Imagine a situation: we are lying in a camp sleeping. Then there's the sound of a rocket and your nervous system explodes. You've just been fed and you can't hear whether it's travelling this way or that. Your heart rate goes from 14 to 500 and it takes a couple of hours to calm down although

## My Deer Hunter

it goes faster once you get used to it. Eventually you stop throwing yourself down. You lose the normal behaviour pattern, it's scary how fast it happens.

Jonas: You can't hear the direction of a rocket, it's completely impossible. It's like you're being stuck, you can only take it. You can hear the sound of projectiles flying past, there's a whistling sound, but you have no idea where it hits.

*A spectator who is a relative interrupts:* Can I just say: It was an fantastic experience, it really made an impression on me. It's insane what you've been through. You are entitled to be recognised. Thank you for that.

Palle: We also thank you for coming and saying that. It is good to get feedback.

*(Nicolai continues talking to the person he is related to)*

Palle: I can't concentrate if you are talking. We have an agreement that we are talking to each other, it's been noted, so can't you just step away for a moment so we can look each other in the eye?

*I'm glad you said that. Yes, let's focus. Couldn't the Armed Forces or the Military buy the performance? Wouldn't it be important to inform about the risk that is always associated with war? After all, it is also expensive, with illness and families destroyed. You can't avoid war accidents, but maybe they prevent psychological breakdowns?*

Jonas: I agree that this is an important conversation. I've been given quite a lot of speaking time at the Veterans Centre, they are happy to listen. I'm more doubtful that it's alive in the rest of the Armed Forces.

Sara: Yesterday there were veterans who asked questions: How were you cast? They thought we were a good cast, showing a wide range of soldier types with some common traits, but also many nuances. There are only four of us and it has turned out to be a good representation with both similarities and differences. It was random, and even though we are just representing ourselves, the performance strikes a universal chord.

*What is your experience of performing and being on stage? You act with your whole body, and it's not just the lines you communicate through. Is that something you can feel?*

Palle: If I'm not on stage, I can't remember the lines. The actions give birth to the lines and otherwise you start thinking too much. Nicolai and I have talked a lot and have had conversations after and during the process. I really thought I was at home in how I had it under control. But the performance has opened up new insights. It has taken up an enormous amount of space. I thought it would be like in the military: we come in, plan, rehearse, execute and finish. That's what I agreed to do and I had no idea what it would entail and what it would come to mean. I have given many talks, but theatre and the interaction between camera, sound and music is something special, and I would like to use the format in other contexts. I want to have a dialogue, not just send people out the door. I'm in love with theatre, but if I were to do something, it would have to be more

dialogue-based, where people come down and talk on stage. I was burning out on giving talks, but I've got the energy to do it again.

Jonas: My sense of the audience is that the most powerful experiences take time. I've never gone out of the room and asked the audience what they've experienced, I wouldn't demand that of people. We are different in that respect.

Palle: I would like to know something about what they have experienced, also to let them know that we take their experiences seriously. It's important to give a nuanced picture of mental illness. My stage is not just a theatre stage, it's every time I step out the door. I'm acting every day when I'm pretending everything is okay. It's an invisible handicap.

*In war, you take responsibility for each other, the group and the mission. Is taking responsibility in war transformed into taking responsibility for each other on stage?*

Palle: It's a part of the military where you learn from the first hour that you are part of a community. You learn that you are solving a mission, and we are trained to give constructive feedback.

*In the theatre, you don't get shot down, but you can still be humiliated by the audience? What is your experience of working together on stage?*

Sara: We have each other's back, we have promised each other that; we are there together and we really need that. It allows us to bring a nerve into the room, even when it's difficult. It can be on the edge, but we have been able to solve it.

Jonas: We give each other space on stage and check in together: how are things today?

Palle: Responsibility and respect go across rank. You check in on each other. No matter where you are in the system, you have to take responsibility for yourself and your colleagues.

Sara: We have a task to fulfil, a function that requires you to be top-tuned. You need fuel, extra ammunition, water and much more, and I have personally had a feeling, even when it has been a struggle to be on stage, like today, when my symptoms are more pronounced, that it is a failure not to solve the task. You shouldn't be self-sacrificing, but when it's a matter of life and death, you have to sacrifice yourself and put your emotions aside like a machine where the cogwheel has to work. Here we have supported each other, we do the task together and I fulfil my function. There is this mechanism we use to work together. We only realised it when we were dealing with it.

Palle: And we had to say to Tue, if you have a plan, you have to communicate it more clearly.

Jonas: But it's important that I'm in touch with my feelings, and even though today it's at a distance, my experiences are still vivid. I can feel it every time we play. If I can't feel the things that hurt, I wouldn't be able to participate. It's just here and now in me, it's not routine. Revisiting the breakdown and the depression, I have felt it more than I thought. But we have learnt to solve it on stage, we have faith in each other, and we have no doubt that someone else will take over if

## My Deer Hunter

you are down. We've had days where we struggle to revisit it. We can't play quite the same, even though it might be 90 per cent in place. It might be something with a breath or a pause, and we have exit strategies in place. We can stop the performance with a sign to the director if we need to. It's a psychological help, even if we won't need it. It's a victory that we make it on stage and with the people behind it, and we win over the demons.

*How have you experienced playing the performance?*

Sara: Theatre is powerful. There is an opportunity to tell stories raw, but in an artistic framework so that it can also be digested. This play is raw and honest. Nothing is black and white. I am one of many nuances in the story of Denmark's stationed soldiers. I hope this play will enrich and touch the audience. It enriches and touches me to be on stage with the other three nuances.

Jonas: We take back the power over our lives, so that it doesn't become something we have to rattle off. Thank you, Tue for this opportunity. It's a privilege to step into this theatre world, they have done everything to make us good, and to bring out what is important to talk about. It shifts the perspective, and it can be good if I can keep challenging myself.

*Can you use these experiences with theatre in your daily life as veterans?*

Jonas: We have received different feedback from veterans who can recognise themselves and who might be able to pick it up and start a process with themselves. But there are also relatives and people who have been involved, and it's great to hear them say: "it helps to understand some of the things that were previously difficult to understand". A lot has happened along the way, it's a living performance. I had hoped that it would bring things to a close. I want to communicate and become good at it. It was a gift to be involved and tell a story and make others understand what I have experienced. Theatre has a power and the audience may learn something, but the story of "Jonas" in the performance is retrospective. I am in a different place today. I work every day to move on, to get better, and I still want to finish this story. The theatre validates my need. Who you are, where do you come from? We learn something about theatre as a craft and a way of telling stories, but I feel like I want to make it bigger. Theatre is amazing but it has a limited audience. We've done 48 performances with 90 spectators. That's about 4000 spectators. That's a small number of people and I would like to take it beyond this limited medium. It could be interesting to use some of the things we have learnt in another medium. Too few people get the opportunity to see this. I want to continue my story and the process has made it possible that perhaps it can be finalised. I look forward to being allowed to say the last word and go out as a different person.

### **Interview with Nicolai December 2021 by Erik Exe Christoffersen**

*In the first version, Karina (Nicolai's wife) was in the play on her mobile phone and she was called from the stage. How did you come up with that idea?*

During rehearsals I suggested that we could call Karina and she would be better at telling the story, and Tue thought we could do that in the performance as well, and it worked fine. There was only one night when I couldn't get through, and I just talked about our conversations. It gave me terrible

anxiety, and I my hands were shaking before she answered her mobile phone. I asked her if she remembered when I went to Kosovo, we had just gotten married and neither of us knew what the mission was. There were a lot of emotions at stake, I didn't know what I was going down to, you don't know till you're standing there. Many of the spectators asked if it was true, was it real that I called her. People wondered, because there were many other elements that were recorded on tape. In fact, we could have done that.

*What did you do when she went to see the performance? Was she able to respond in the audience?*

Tue was afraid that it would be too theatre-like, so that it would become strange. So instead, I talked about the departure myself. But the situation became almost a family situation. I called at the same time every night within two minutes, so it was very tight, the children switched off the TV and looked after each other, so it became a family effort. We subsequently separated and I have no doubt that the performance also led to the divorce. When she saw it, she was completely distant and cried bitterly. Maybe some things fell into place. My PTSD is for the rest of my life, it's chronic. Maybe because too many years went by before I got treatment. I'll never recover and I'm still in treatment after 18 years. The first few years were just symptom management, and I was in and out of treatment. It wasn't until 2013 that I got help, and my counsellor calls me every week to see how I'm doing. If I'm not feeling well, we talk for a couple of hours. I tried not to be so horrible to live with, but I have been my own worst enemy. I beat myself up because I got so angry about not being able to make things work. I've managed to knock myself out like a light and I'm an old boxer. It's a shame it ended up like that, I would have liked to have avoided it. But it's also hard to say whether it's really okay and necessary in order to move on. I'm not sure that it's all bad. So even though I have felt sorry for myself, I've had to decide what I want to do in the future. I've got an apartment, and even though there's no furniture yet, it works: we sit on the floor, it's comfortable. My middle daughter is 15 years old. She's interested in art, Asian art and Japanese comics, and she's going to a boarding school where they'll be travelling to Japan and Korea. I'm fine with that, but it costs a fortune. By the way, we might be travelling to Korea with the performance next year. For a theatre festival. I hope so, Tue is travelling all the time. I'm a bit worried, he's at a dangerous age, he's a hypochondriac, he's afraid of freezing, I've tried to explain to him that that's not what makes you ill.

*Are there any incidents from the specific rehearsal situations you can tell us about?*

I'll never forget the start of the rehearsals. When we met, Tue had set up a play table with buildings, soldiers, trains and a couple of toy tanks that could shoot small bullets. We were just supposed to play. I thought, don't they have a script? It was really weird, but as it progressed it got exciting because we started using this set-up: they asked questions and let us talk and they wrote down. There was a situation where we had to smash plates and a situation where we had to recreate sounds and smells, and that came on stage. The noise created a kind of panic, all four of us reacted. It was too violent. We had to wear ear protection and it became a scene.

It were different experiments that led us to have the audience on both sides of the stage. In the beginning we were on the big stage, where we disappeared from the audience. We went down to a smaller number of spectators, but I think it made the performance much better because we had a greater proximity and contact with the audience. Andreas unfortunately ended up not being in

## My Deer Hunter

the performance. I really liked him and he had an important story that we didn't get to tell. Right up to the first day of the premiere, I was still afraid that they would come and say that we had to cut down to three and you shouldn't be in it. It turned out that Palle felt the same way, but not Jonas and Sara, I think.

*But was it otherwise a trusting space in relation to the theatre?*

It was, but there's also the ghost of PTSD that keeps telling you that you're not good enough. Even though we were in a safe space, there was always a ghost tapping you on the shoulder.

*Is it something about being unsure of who and what you can trust, and always being a bit suspicious?*

I have two dogs: one on each shoulder, depression and PTSD, and they take turns demanding attention. Sometimes they are sweet little lap dogs and at other times, they are ferocious beasts, and that's how I view the illness. During the rehearsals, the PTSD dog was there all the time, telling me that I wasn't good enough. There was always an activation of my PTSD dog. It's a way to illustrate and visualise my problem, and it works. When I feel bad, I think about the dogs trying to pull me down. I try to deal with it. It might be something that has affected me through a smell, a sound or a mood. The dog can be vicious and your best friend. The depression dog can be annoying and will bite and destroy. It's horrible and you have to really struggle to keep it down. I do exercises and it helps to focus. When we were rehearsing and later when we performed, we did exercises every day. When I got home, I was on a high, for better or worse. There were two times when things went wrong during the performance and I started crying and couldn't stop. I had a hard time when I told my story, and right after, Jonas talked about his platoon leader who died. I felt sad every time Jonas told his story. A couple of times I just couldn't stop crying and Jonas grabbed me from behind and asked if we should stop. But after a hug, I got it under control and we could continue playing. He whispered: "It's going to be okay". I wasn't expecting that and I calmed down. We may not meet again in the future, but there will always be a special connection between us. In the beginning, I didn't think I could trust the others who were young, but that definitely changed. I've told Palle that he shouldn't have been sent out after the first trip. The system is not good enough at assessing that kind of thing. I was on five trips, but especially after the third trip, I shouldn't have been sent out. Several people have been sent out even though they weren't ready for it. There was one who cut himself in the arm to show that he could take the pain. He was sent home, but is still in the military. That's the military in a nutshell.

*The process and the performances were risky. Was the risk too big considering your situation?*

Sascha was a safety net and if anything came up, we could talk to her. I also had my own psychologist who I talk to on a regular basis. So, considering how little they knew at the theatre, it was okay. We had a safety line during the performances and could put a purple post-it on the fridge and the theatre manager would say there were technical problems and maybe cancel if necessary. Fortunately, it was not necessary. We are different, yet we have the same problem and we know each other in a different way because our experiences are close to each other. It's sad, it's a waste of life, and I wish there had been more help. By the way, my injury has again been rejected as an occupational injury by the State agency, even though I have three medical certificates documenting that I have severe

PTSD. They think it's because my mum died. It's true that it broke me, but it was like the straw that broke the camel's back. I'll probably have to file a lawsuit about this.

You are yourselves on stage, but at the same time you are a character, how do you experience this duality?

The first time they came with a script, I thought it was something completely different from what we had told them. Jonas was about to drop out because of the way it was written. But it wasn't too bad, and it turned out well in the end, but it was difficult.

*Was it because you also became characters and not just yourselves?*

It was hard to accept those roles. I'm glad I'm not the one who got Palle's role, I would have had a hard time with that. A lot of people thought he was terrible in the beginning, but in the performance it turns out that he also writes poems in a flowery shirt. It was a good way to bring that out. During rehearsals he had to lift Sara once, just like he says he did with his girlfriend. Sara was scared of him and he was upset that she was scared of him.

*In re-enacted situations?*

Yes, and it was changed many times while we were rehearsing. The dramaturge, Tanja Diers, wrote everything down and then came up with a manuscript that we had to say exactly as it was written to make sure people got everything.

*You had to reinvent yourselves?*

Yes, we reinvent ourselves. But we had to be both as we were and as we are now.

*I guess the performance is also a good proof that you have a certain control over yourselves despite your diagnoses. It will be a demonstration of what you can achieve under the right circumstances?*

We only had one cancellation where I was hospitalised due to kidney problems, the next day I was back on track. We haven't cancelled anything because of PTSD. Every night when we stood in the dark and went on stage, we were electric. It was at every performance. It was a total adrenaline rush. I miss that.

*What convinced you to join the project?*

I wanted to tell people that PTSD is not as dangerous as some may think. When Karina said she wanted a divorce, a rumour started in our circle of friends and family. But I have never acted destructively towards my family. When I feel really bad, I hide under the covers, and I can get furious that someone might think that because you are a veteran and suffer from PTSD, you are dangerous. I am tired of those who almost run away if they hear that you have PTSD. Of course, it's because there have been cases where veterans have gone crazy, but that's because they didn't get help, I think. Tue called and inquired about how we veterans were doing. When the conversation was

## My Deer Hunter

almost finished, he said: now I have what I need, and I told him that I would like to participate. I used to be a sports dancer and I'm not afraid of the stage and Tue said: We would like you to join us.

### **Interview with Sara la Cour December 2021 by Erik Exe Christoffersen**

*Can you describe some of the exercises you did in the rehearsal process. And how they worked for you?*

Yes, there's a scene where we sit across from each other and have to play Russian roulette. And we're just suggesting that. Several scenes are based on exercises where we use the interview method. We ask each other a question and we get an answer. Or we recreate a situation and let Jonas be the father: I ask: "Where did he stand in relation to you?" and we imitate situations. We used an interview format: I look at Jonas through the camera and ask "What were you thinking just before you left?" Tue let the conversation continue and he let us talk in a safe space, where we also made the rules of the game with Tue as the conductor.

There were also situations where the acting and the demonstration could become transgressive. For example, there is a scene in the play where Palle is lying down and talks about how he can go crazy, as when he smashed his ex-girlfriend's door in a fit of rage, and also in rage shouts to the daycare worker that he can try to put a gun to her head. He used me to imitate the situation by putting two fingers to my temple and pressing against my head. That was too much for me and we moderated the scene so that he doesn't touch me with his fingers imitating the gun, but just points in the air. We understood that we had to tell stories and at the same time talk about what we had seen, the sounds we heard, the flavours, all the sensations. We also used all sorts of props to describe our experiences as vividly as possible. Little toy soldiers used to show a fire attack. Toast that became the farewell dinner, a table, a refrigerator that suddenly turned into a forest. We didn't use costumes. On stage they made areas and rooms with chairs, with a bed, an armchair. Slowly more was added. For example, if you said: "It was just wild with Coca Cola in the desert", Tue could pick it up, and the next day, there was a box of coke. A screen was put up so that you could see what we were filming. Tue suggested: "Try filming hands, feet, whatever you want to see, create images with symbolism". These were small signals that could support actions: Nicolai's feet when he was fidgeting and maybe did a little dance step, fumbling hands. These were good exercises that also made you aware of your own actions. It was a way to trigger our memory.

*And accessing emotions and moods?*

It's probably a therapeutic approach, yes. I have gained access to events that I thought had been processed and that I had to continue working on. There was one situation in particular where I had a camera focussed on me while I was talking about something I overheard on the radio. I felt extremely vulnerable. I hear my closest soldier colleagues talking about me in a sexualised way on the radio line. "Where were you? Where were you going on the patrol? What did they say specifically?" Tue asked, and I had to repeat it with the camera on me. I really got a feeling of being back there, and I felt totally exposed and insecure. When I was being filmed with a camera, I couldn't move if I needed to. I was completely exposed. I was sorry to make a fuss because Tue just wanted to make good theatre, as he said. He was into the story and forgot to listen. There were a few times when he turned into a theatre director, who has had to create the best product.

I actually have a rule that I don't share things that are unprocessed. I've admitted: "It was that mistake with the accidental shot" and I've said everything you can say to yourself. I have been sick with shame and been the worst judge. In many ways I have made peace with that accidental shot. I made a mistake, I'm not perfect, I'm just human. I am very conscious of that, and therefore it can be revealed that I made a mistake, and even though it still affects me, I have worked through the shame of it. There are situations that I am still working on, and experiences that feel overwhelming to have to talk about in a situation where I am completely exposed on stage. There are many events I haven't talked about. Stories that could be a play in themselves. Tue has focussed on the hero's journey: we went out into the world, it cracked and was recreated. In the beginning he was very interested in the event itself, the moment, where we broke. But there is not one event, there are many. We needed to put more words to our journey, but of course there have been differences in how much we have needed to put our experiences into words.

*Were there any situations where your boundaries were crossed?*

There were two situations in particular where I left the stage and thought, what am I doing? It was important that Sascha kept an eye on us. We checked in every day to see if there was anything we needed to be aware of, such as "I didn't sleep last night, so I'm a bit more on edge". During the rehearsals we had one in-depth conversation with Tue with Sasha present. This had the effect that I could feel safe because she could intervene on my behalf, and at the same time Tue could dare to take a step closer to the events, so it worked both ways. When there was something at stake or I felt something was transgressive, I could pull Sascha into the more vulnerable situations. I have had anxiety attacks that sat in my body all day, so we had to stop early, but I could put it into words, so I wasn't afraid that it would escalate. There have been situations where my body reacted. When the anxiety comes, I am without judgement and become detached from reality. My body reacts as if I am in extreme danger and goes into a kind of spasm, which I have gradually learnt to fight with and not fight against. I have a feeling of not being able to breathe. I hyperventilate and feel a tingling in my fingers, and if it escalates, I lose my hearing and my windpipe constricts. But I've been able to tell Sascha: "I feel bad and need a break". Sascha has been invaluable. She has talked to each of us individually and together and ensured that the necessary considerations were made. There were many things at stake, and she was Tue's mouthpiece so that he could focus on the theatrical side of things. Later in the process, Sascha trained the performance manager so that she could also check in with us.

### **Interview with Sascha Kempinski by Erik Exe Christoffersen**

Sascha Kempinski is an intimacy coordinator and psychotherapist specialising in topics such as self-esteem, boundaries, intimacy, contact and self-support. The work can be meetings with the director, producer or other relevant people about the intimate scenes and the thoughts around them, already in the casting process where tasks and expectations are aligned. She helps prepare the actor mentally and physically for the intimate scenes and ensures a safe working environment. Finally, Kempinski helps to ensure debriefing afterwards, and that the ethical guidelines established by the production company are followed.

*How did you get involved with FIX&FOXY? How is your task defined, what problems have you solved?*

## My Deer Hunter

I've had nothing to do with theatre before, so it was a culture shock. I've been doing TV for many years and have been a psychotherapist since 2014. A colleague contacted me and asked if I could help Tue. He's a bit strange, I was warned. Tue needed someone who could cast and organise the process for vulnerable people with PTSD. We met and were soon in a close partnership. He was good at involving me and not afraid to let go and give me responsibility: "What do you think?" He wanted veterans, and I set about finding the most seriously affected, but quickly realised that we couldn't put them on a stage. But we wanted to go to the limit and looked for veterans who could be present and communicate their story, and where we could have confidence that things wouldn't go wrong. I was lucky, or maybe just skilful, and took people in for an hour or an hour and a half to understand their story and situation. Tue had faith in me and later we brought together a number of people for casting where he was present and we rehearsed a scene. What he did was to create a room with props where they had to walk around and talk. It was quite chaotic and I was freaking out about the situation. When you have PTSD, you're used to a tight schedule, and with Tue it's a bit the opposite. We selected five who seemed to work in the context. Four had PTSD and one was undiagnosed. I had briefed the team on their situation and what triggered them. In addition to Tue, there was an assistant, a set designer and a photographer. Tue didn't quite know how to use video in the performance. What could make them uneasy was especially sudden noises, but also if people they didn't know, came in and walked back and forth. We were quite careful when we started and there was an enormous amount of care and consideration. I had to do the opposite and sat next to Tue. My job was to make the stories more vulnerable and sharper, and I had prepared material for all of them. There was a skeleton: What was their story? When did they break down? What happened afterwards? I played the tough one who asked the uncomfortable and probing questions. I've created profiles of each person before we knew them. It might be interesting to see how they change? There was a week of something resembling group therapy: we checked in and had rounds of how their current state was: What was bothering them? What were they thinking about the situation? We had to get to know them, and they had to understand what Tue wanted to do with the performance. They each had different challenges, and at the same time we had to create a group, even though it could be difficult. But there was also an energy there, so we simply had to find a way to tolerate each other. It's important to make the group work together despite differences. Yes, they are soldiers and I am impressed that they put up with each other. They are disciplined. It's impressive how they support each other. Two by two, they took care of each other and protected each other. Tue also had to cut through and establish that he was the director and when he made a decision, they had to respect it, which they did. Especially in the last phase, he had to emphasise: "I'm the one in charge" even though they might have wanted to continue talking.

*How did you deal with the crisis situations? How was the balance between Tue and you?*

Sara had a story that concerned her role as a woman. She unfolded it, and it was vulnerable, and it was clear to see when she was under pressure. In the beginning we could let her tell it as she wanted, but when it got to the painful part, it wasn't so clear. After all, they had all told their stories several times to psychologists in the military. Tue was careful not to press, but I thought we needed to know specifically what had happened? What had been done and said. We had to find out how she could tell the story of harassment. She told her story, and Tue took the material home and tightened it up. But there was something she couldn't stand. We had to find a balance so that he got what he needed. We filmed, and Tue wanted close-ups, but that didn't work, and I had to talk it through

with her: How could she say it so it was ok for her and Tue. It was too close with the video camera and we respected that boundary and found another solution. When they were on stage, they often forgot themselves, but with the camera on, you suddenly become very conscious, and Sara couldn't have people's eyes on her and be "exposed" like that. The veterans are very different. Palle could often comment with the best intentions, but it might not be comfortable when you're telling your story. Jonas is incredible in his closedness and had the heroic character that Tue might have had a hard time seeing. The hard part was to get him to in touch with his emotions, and Tue used me for that. Nikolai didn't have much of a filter. For me it was quite dramatic that he said straight out that if his wife wasn't there "I'll die". You can't say that on a theatre stage, but he wanted to. And dramatically it worked well. Nikolai was the first person Tue had spoken to, he was on the verge of being too unwell. We couldn't take responsibility for that, and we were in a tight spot, but we could ask him to talk to his psychiatrist if he got even worse, and that went well. I thought, he's been through a lot of terrible things, but he also had a huge desire to be involved and was a great character with a huge love for the project, which was touching. He had anxiety attacks and chest pains. We had to say: "Can you be here? Are you taking responsibility for the situation yourself?". He was super determined and wanted to do theatre until he collapsed.

There is no doubt that Tue knows how to create a space that is a heavenly space where everything fits and we become a fine unit that swings together. To me, not being familiar with theatre, it looked like amateur theatre in the beginning, but changed later. I didn't see Tue pressured, but sometimes there was pressure from the technical team. During the performance period, I watched the play many times and we took turns to see if anything seemed out of place? If the stage manager noticed a dull mood, we recorded it in the daily reports. During the process, it was mostly Sara who used me but otherwise it was important for me to maintain a certain professional distance. I didn't have a day-to-day role, but when they were touring, we got together for a briefing: What did we need to be aware of? It's been running smoothly, so Tue had to remind us that it shouldn't become routine: there has to be something at stake so that it doesn't become mechanical.

*Where are the boundaries of the relationship?*

Tue is good at being a director and at not becoming a friend or therapist. That's where he used me. He shouldn't socialise too much, and when the performance needs to be tightened up, he goes into himself and is aware that he is the one who makes the artistic impression. "Now, we don't want any more good ideas", and he is really proper in the way he does it. He maintains the good atmosphere and makes it become a work of art. It's a difficult balance, but we have to be able to go in the opposite direction. There is consideration and respect, but it is okay if it is uncomfortable, otherwise it gets boring.

*How did you come out of the programme, how did you debrief?*

Now it's over, and there is a void that has to be considered. Tue is present when he works, but he is also an artist and must be able to withdraw and is almost cynical about what the work requires. He has been very fond of the veterans, and it has become a fine piece, but he is also capable of being absent. And move on. We kept talking about the fact that when it was finished, that's how it is. It was a bit brutal with the last performances, where Tue had moved on, and it had become a product

## My Deer Hunter

that was going on tour. He only had one rehearsal day with them, but otherwise they had to lean on the performance manager. I could sense that they felt a little abandoned. I talked to Tue about setting aside a couple of days to talk it through, otherwise they would lose it. We've talked, and I've phoned around, and they've moved in different ways, while the performance managers have taken over. They haven't let go and haven't given up, even though they may have had a hard time now and then. I think that the military therapy has been supplemented by an emotionally focussed process and the fact that they are soldiers means that it comes quite easily to them physically, they adjusted and performed the physical pattern. They have experienced unfolding the pain in a new way, and they have truly taken control of their own story. The relational space has been loving and fun, and that can only make you feel good. Tue has been good at creating the space. Tue balances between the gentle and inclusive leader and a *hard core* leader who is a self-absorbed detached artist. When does he consume people? It's a balance. Art has to be taken seriously and you have to go beyond the social with a kind of cynicism. The audience wants to see the intolerable, and it takes a kind of cynicism to show it.

### Interview with Dramaturge Tanja Diers by Erik Exe Christoffersen

*Tanja Diers (TD), dramaturge and PhD student at Lund University. Cand.mag. in theatre studies from the University of Copenhagen. Has worked as a dramaturge at Black/White and at FIX&FOXY on productions such as Mod alle odds (Against All Odds), Landet uden drømme (The Land without Dreams) and My Deer Hunter.*

*When did you start working as a dramaturge for FIX&FOXY?*

I have worked with FIX&FOXY all the way back to when I was employed at Teater Sort/Hvid 2011-17. We then developed the collaboration further because Jeppe Kristensen got a job at a university in Norway. That's why Tue needed a sparring partner. It's important to say that my role is very different from Jeppe's, who was more equal to Tue. I am engaged for each individual performance with a specific task. At the same time, you get sucked into FIX&FOXY's work and become part of the artistic universe. It's almost a condition. We have developed a way of working together that changes from performance to performance. The last performance that wasn't FIX&FOXY was *Stille Slag* (Silent Beats) (2021), and it was actually me who initiated the project and engaged Tue as director. The important thing for me as a dramaturge is to make the production team as good as possible.

*Is it a kind of partnership?*

It's mostly a mutual influence. In the case of *My Deer Hunter*, I was not involved in the close work with the veterans. My job was to be an outsider and to participate in a theatre professional space where Tue and I discussed different possibilities and directions. I didn't have specific tasks, but I sparred with Tue about what dramaturgy the material could sustain, or how best to evoke the veterans' stories. When I joined the work, the veterans had already been selected, and I attended the first workshop. Tue works a lot with setting different improvisations in motion, which creates a lot of material that is written down and at some point, needs to be edited. It's not easy because there is so much and so many possibilities.

*So how could all that translate to the stage?*

The original idea was to use a kind of backwards dramaturgy, a kind of slow rewind, where we go back to where the actors made the decision to go to war. But it was a bit of a gimmicky idea, and it would force something on the material. I had many ethical considerations about the choice of dramaturgy, which meant that I thought a lot about where the line is between telling a good and truthful version of their experiences and at the same time not pushing the actors into a framework that their hard-earned experiences cannot sustain. I'm quite sensitive to the fact that it has to be their story, and it shouldn't be forced out. I think *Tue* is too. The task is to make their story appear as strong as possible. With the courage of the cast, we owe it to them to be as strong as possible on stage.

*Do you work with the dramaturgy of the film *The Deer Hunter*?*

It was in the picture and in fact there was a lot of material that could be used in parallel with the film. There was a wedding and a funeral, but that wasn't essential for the cast. As Jonas says in the performance, it was only after the homecoming, where the film ends, that things get interesting. For the veterans, it was the homecoming that was important to bring to the fore, and it is a lengthy story that cannot be reduced to a single scene.

We had four parallel stories, and here tragedy and the Aristotelian dramaturgy of conflict escalation, *peripeteia* (turning point), *anagnorisis* (recognition) and *catharsis* (purification) was a possible structure. Precisely because we know Aristotelian dramaturgy so well, especially from Hollywood films, and because it is effective and takes the audience through a satisfying journey that ends with a redemption – *catharsis*, Aristotelian dramaturgy becomes a safety net for the characters in the fragile narratives. This dramaturgy pushes the performance forward and keeps the stories of shame, guilt and suicide in a secure grip.

*Perhaps it is also quite reminiscent of *The Odyssey*, which is about the journey home from war and the difficulty or impossibility of returning home because the home has changed?*

There is clearly that structure too, but we emphasise the recognition and turning points in their stories. Incidentally, *Odysseus* probably also had a form of PTSD with all his adventures and visions on the 20-year journey home, so perhaps it could be seen as internal delusions?

We built the dramaturgy around the individual's story and the inner conflicts as parallel tracks. In this way, they complement each other, and one story draws the other in, like "I recognise that, but perhaps in a slightly different way". It doesn't get muddled but gives a kind of wholeness. They see themselves in each other, and the prerequisite for this to be possible was that the participants had already been through a long therapeutic process. Physically and mentally, they really knew themselves. It's important to emphasise that they shared their knowledge and taught us a lot about what it's like to have PTSD, which we didn't know much about. Each of the actors goes through a different turning point in the performance. One gives up suicide when he looks at the picture of his daughter, another gives up his dream of becoming a special forces soldier.

## My Deer Hunter

The common turning point for all of them is that they have PTSD and have a breakdown, where they each recognise that they need help.

The experience leads to shame, loss of identity, and they rediscover parts of themselves, so to speak, through various forms of therapy, and the four stories are woven together into a whole. One could probably have told each story individually or told one of their stories, but bringing four stories together gives a general sense of tragedy in that they will never be quite the same as they once were. We weren't interested in the obvious conflicts that the audience can work out for themselves between them internally, between Sara and some of the other's men's jokes. That's something that the audience can imagine for themselves, and we focused on each individual's inner conflict.

*What role does the space play?*

We talked a lot about what a PTSD-dramaturgy with interruptions, elements of danger and being out of control might look like. But it would push the material to repeat trauma and let them portray how they are trapped in a web. The physical stage could be stressful and without safety because the audience is sitting on both sides of the stage and there is nowhere to 'hide'. Fortunately, they could cope with being 'trapped on stage' with the ceiling lowered and with a living room that is made up of several different rooms without a centre. There is not one perspective on stage, not one story, but there are many angles and stories. Hopefully, the multi-perspective scene helps to nuance the overall story of veterans with PTSD. It was an attempt to translate PTSD into space. You could call it the dramaturgy of space.

*How many versions of the script did you work with?*

It was constantly being rewritten and was an evolving working tool and up to a week before I cut 8-10 pages. It was difficult, because the actors were happy with what they were saying, but it's the dramaturge's job to make it precise, so it's precise for the audience.

It's Tue who adds and subtracts, and I comment. You have to be there every day to be fully familiar with the material, and my job was to be a bit withdrawn and think about what was missing, or what could be left out. I was there about three or four days a week, but not all day. I only watched run-throughs so as not to get too far into it and to be able to maintain a different perspective and see with different eyes as an audience.

There are many voices and movement in the rehearsal room and a lot of suggestions, and that can create a sense of insecurity in the process. Theatre production is often chaotic and the veterans were used to a more hierarchical structure, which we tried to create. It can be different in other processes, but here I gave recommendations to Tue. At the end I had individual conversations with the veterans and could say: "You have to be precise and not say something else, stick to the point. It's important that you say it like that." They tend to change their lines and choose different words without intending to.

Towards the end, we got the dramaturgy in place and their lines were completely settled. They agreed that what they say early on should be included so that the audience understands that the

person they were when they were young, develops during the performance so that by the end they have moved on after returning home.

That was also something that should not be included. Everyone has boundaries that should not be crossed. But something becomes less dangerous by being said, so the boundaries shifted during the rehearsal period. When there were moments when they needed to set boundaries, Sascha helped. That was and is her expertise.

*Were there any changes after the premiere?*

There were personal changes, but only tiny things. I watched the performance several times along the way, but they stuck to it and said: "Let's go in as if it's the first time" – opening night every night. After all, that's what it is for the audience.

*Do you follow the performance?*

As much as possible, but not when it went on tour, I was working on another project then. But obviously you get involved both personally and professionally. Fortunately, FIX&FOXY has events where former cast members come to parties where we get together. For the cast, it's often the only performance they're involved in. We had a nice bus trip to Odense for the Reumert award ceremony.

It is the performers who provide the material, and we have to listen, and that requires us to put ourselves into play. We have to be professional listeners. What is the right thing to do? How can we convey that someone makes a decision to commit suicide. We have to discuss it and it's difficult. Gradually you get to know the people involved really well, and that's important. Time is also essential to the process in this type of performance. The right dramaturgy can mean a good performance. Each performer puts a piece of their life on the stage, so it's a big responsibility if we fail. They put their souls in our hands and we have to take that seriously. You never really know how it will be received?

*Is there an anthropological dimension to the work?*

Yes, there is something about going in and making their field visible and understanding the unexpected or outlandish and the knowledge they have. The anthropological aspect is perhaps that we understand something about being a soldier and returning home with PTSD mainly through the way they tell us about it. It is a kind of knowledge that can have consequences for other PTSD-victims and also for the veterans personally. They take responsibility for a story that is difficult to tell. For the theatre, there is an ethical responsibility for the structure, for the audience and for the performers. They show trust, and we must transform and manage that trust. But it's no use planning it, you can't calculate what's going to happen. Our job is to make art and believe in its power.

**Interview with Kasper Bisgaard Laursen by Erik Exe Christoffersen**

*How was your task as assistant director defined?*

I had to transcribe all the stories that they were telling. They had done workshops and interviews beforehand, and we had to work on that. Tue asked questions like: “Do you remember the last situation before being posted”. They were given 10 minutes to write down as specifically as possible what happened. Then they told us, and Tue asked them to act out the episode. For example, Sara says goodbye to her family, they hug? What conversation are they having? Where and how are they standing? Tue then says: “Can you act it out with the help of the others”. There were props that they could use and play with. “Can you use the everyday things we have in different ways to represent something else?”. A cup could be a suitcase, bottles became streams and an apple became a roadside bomb. The coffee and fruit table were on stage, so when there were breaks, we didn’t go somewhere else, we stayed on stage. In fact, the breaks were also used to create little situations where they talked away and used objects.

*Was there also a video camera?*

Yes, Tue had them filming each other right from the start. There was also a table with a model railway with a village as a central part of the set design. A small village with toy soldiers, it later disappeared and dropped out. In the beginning, my job was to write everything down. I wrote 25 pages a day. We had to include everything, said Tue.

*How was it processed? Was it in collaboration with the dramaturge?*

We went through it and we wrote comments, also with Sascha, paying attention to what was central. In the first weeks we got through their stories. Tues’ job was to bring the stories out. In practical terms, considerations were made and there was care. From 10 to 12 noon, they were one-on-one with Tue and Sascha, where we asked about the personal relationship with family. This created a safe space so that they could share it in a larger forum afterwards. They didn’t know each other and needed each other’s support. It was clear that you could say stop, there were breaks, and they didn’t feel the pressure that often arises in the theatre process, where you have to get to a performance. They have to find their pace and have breaks and a suitably slow way of working. There were days when they had to say they couldn’t go on. They were not used to being on stage. There were situations where stories had to be prepared, for example Sara’s story, and there were discussions about whether it should be included at all. But she worked out a version in collaboration with the psychologist, and it was important that she could decide for herself what to include. In the end, when everything was cut down to the bone, we reflected on the fact that the nuances disappeared. Tue had to explain that what we are doing has a perspective that cannot encompass everything. It took time to convince them.

*How was the relationship between the dramaturge, Sascha and Tue?*

In the beginning, Sascha was present all the time, new stories were brought to the table, and she was almost a co-director. And Tanja was more of an observer in the background. As we got closer

to the premiere, and the material was fixed, Sascha was more in the background. Tanja and Tue made cuts in relation to the fact that it was a performance about PTSD and not a war. Tanja went through the monologues with the veterans so that they could phrase their text in the right way and ensure what information should be included. At the rehearsals with invited spectators, they ask questions about whether the spectators understood the technicalities of the sequences and the acts of war, whether anything was too much.

*What about the video part?*

I wrote down at the rehearsals. Camera 1 films like this and like that, it became stage directions. The camera angles were written down during the rehearsals and established where they should zoom or be close up.

*How do they remember that? The stage work is much more important than the actual images?*

The first performances had some uncertainty and were hell to get organised. But we were sure of the form, which they had to familiarise themselves with in terms of camera cables and tripods. They are given a function and they are concentrated. They took it a bit like a parallel to a military exercise. They saw a parallel between theatre and military. It's hard and you have to follow orders with discipline and the production team is hierarchised. Palle said: "We are family and stationed". "No", Tue had to say, "We do theatre, we are not comrades in arms", there is a professional distance.

The process has different phases. There is the generation of materials, and there is the establishing and demarkation of the work. We started in the rehearsal hall, where we had objects in the practice room. Later we moved onto the stage with the audience seating, and the spatial shift confirmed that this was going to be a performance to be shown to an audience. That material needs to be shaped. We stopped interviewing the individuals from 10am, so it became rehearsals from 10am to 4pm. In the autumn it was straight to work. We had quite a short time. There was a set design, there was a script, and we started with run-throughs. My function was to focus on the camera and where they were in the room, how was the image, where were they sitting, who was shooting?

*What is the balance between the repetition of the theatre and their PTSD?*

They are relatively far along in the treatment of their PTSD, so they were comfortable with the situation. They have told their story before, but in the rehearsal process, repetition becomes difficult. When the audience came in, it became a new form. It stirred something up. Sascha was there to maintain some control over the risk factor: "Do you need a break?" she could ask, and she could take over Tue's role and talk to the veterans if it was a strenuous day. She followed up on each day and helped managing, but Tue himself was aware of the limits. She managed the check-in and check-out, because there had to be time for that, and then we had to stop a little earlier. This became crucial for the artistic aspect, and it wouldn't have worked without her. They went for walks together and talked about how to approach the stories. She went to the veterans as well as to Tue and was in a position to ask direct questions. Sasha helped to define the boundaries between the social and artistic spaces. It was important to delineate and guide the social space. It was important to keep the focus on the problem itself.

## My Deer Hunter

*How could they balance between repetitions while keeping it alive, so that it doesn't become routine?*

Tue wanted them to talk and listen to each other and in that way be present. The camera forces them to look and listen. I can perhaps sense that they have lost a bit of nerve. It's as if they're playing it faster, but it's hard to pinpoint what it is. Of course, they get a routine, and as Tue said, they should remember that there's something at stake also for the audience. To step onto the stage is an active choice?

*What have you learnt?*

The form, the way Tue collects materials, creates questions and structures rehearsals. The project succeeds because Tue is generous and empathetic. He gives something of himself. The veterans didn't know him, and they also asked him to talk about himself. Tue is a person in theatre with a fairly high status, but he hadn't told them that. But he would like to share his theatre life. At the same time, he had a certain reservation: it wasn't about him. It was their role to talk about themselves, and they were not on an equal footing. When we did check-in, Palle suggested that we should all check in, but Tue made it clear that it wasn't our role. It's always a question of what and how much to give.

### **Aftermath**

Two years have passed since the veterans first entered the Betty Nansen Teatret for a workshop. There were 38 performances at Edison and then the performance went on tour to TEATER V, Teater Nordkraft, Aalborg, Teater Katapult, Aarhus and Teater Momentum, Odense.

The performance received a Reumert award for performance of the year, and the four veterans received medals of merit from Danmarks Veteraner (Denmark's Veterans).

***Performance of the Year 2021: My Deer Hunter, FIX&FOXY and Betty Nansen Teatret.***

The jury's motivation: *"The traumas emerged like snipers in the eternal field kitchen of four PTSD-stricken military veterans. In their frayed nerves, the sound of a smashed plate became a shell impact. Here, the stench of burnt flesh and the sight of the soldiers' suicidal looks brought reality onto the stage, making us shudder at the encounter with the living dead. Grim and unsettling theatre."* (<https://www.aaretsreumert.dk/pris/aarets-forestilling-21>)

### **Jonas' acceptance speech for the Reumert Prize:**

*"I have thought a lot about right and wrong wars over the past 11 years, since I took part in one of the wrong ones in 2010. A war that must be considered lost. The best thing that has come out of it, is that a year ago I had the opportunity to take part in one of the right ones. With the three toughest soldiers I know, I went to war – not in a desert far from Denmark, but on a theatre set – to challenge the perception of wounded veterans. And we won. I wish that everyone who fights can see that the battle can be won!"*

*Thank you to Tue Biering and FIX&FOXY, Betty Nansen Teatret and all the other good people who have beautifully reinforced our story. We have taken 1000 tears and turned them into a Reumert.”*



Tue Biering, Trine Bramsen og veteranerne

### **Sara's acceptance speech:**

*Thank you to all the people who spend an hour and a half of their lives watching the performance, and in that hour and a half join us on our deer hunt. From childhood, to joining the Armed Forces, to each of our missions around the world and back home again. Where each of our missions to come home from war started, up to today's conditions and premises. This is a great recognition. It confirms to me that the story of Denmark's stationed personnel is important to tell. (sings)*

*“Lo, the sun ascends from;ant on life's bright shore.”*

*It took courage to go to war; it also took courage to stand on stage and tell my story. But! If I want people to understand, then I must also tell the story – and what an honour it has been, night after night, to stand on stage and tell my story together with the three toughest warriors and with the wildest safety net of beautiful people under us.*

## My Deer Hunter

*Thank you for listening. Thank you for the recognition. Thank you to the Danish stationed personnel. Men and women who have been, and are right now, out in the world making an effort for Denmark. Thank you to dear relatives. Thank you to those we miss. This Reumert is also your Reumert.*

*A journey is not defined by time or place. A journey can take place in a few days, in familiar surroundings. And that's what this reunion feels like, a journey. I have already been in the valley and on the mountain top, in the desert and on the stage. I have already been in excitement, nervousness, the state of being overwhelmed, joy and sorrow. This hunt, has taken me on many trips in and out of myself.*

*It takes courage. It takes self-esteem. It takes trust in the loss of control.*

*A journey is not defined by time or place. A journey can take place in a few days, in familiar surroundings. The journey continues.*

### **“Award of the Danish Veterans’ Medal of Merit”**

Denmark’s Veterans have awarded the four veterans who with great success convey their experiences and emotions through a communication channel we have not used before – the theatre. On 8<sup>th</sup> of September at Teater V in Valby, our chairman Niels Hartvig Andersen and Preben Korreborg presented the Denmark’s Veterans’ Medal of Merit to Sara la Cour, Jonas Hjort Andersen, Nicolai Stokholm Sondrup-Otsen and Palle Würtz”.

The last performance of the autumn tour was at Teater Momentum, where Minister for Defence Trine Bramsen and the Mayor of Odense Peter Rahbæk Juel were among the audience. After the performance, they both had a good talk with the veterans, which ended with an invitation to lunch with Trine Bramsen to continue the conversation.

### **MY DEER HUNTER**

**Cast:** Jonas Hjorth Andersen, Nicolai Stokholm Sondrup-Otsen, Palle Würtz and Sara la Cour

**Director:** Tue Biering. Scenographer Ida Grarup. Lighting and video design Andreas Buhl.

**Sound design:** Daniel Fogh

**Dramaturge:** Tanja Diers. Cast consultant: Sascha Kempinski. Assistant director: Kasper Bisgaard Laursen

---

**Erik Exe Christoffersen**, Associate Professor at the School of Communication and Culture – Dramaturgy. Aarhus University.

---

---

**Ida Krøgholt**, Associate Professor at the School of Communication and Culture – Dramaturgy, Aarhus University.

---

---

**Kathrine Winkelhorn** has for a number of years been responsible for the master’s programme in Culture and Media Production at Malmö University and is chair of Copenhagen International Theatre.

---



My Deer Hunter. Photo: Søren Meisner



# Interview

FIX&FOXY's Poetics, Method and Organisation

# **FIX&FOXY's Poetics, Method and Organisation**

## **Interview with Tue Biering, October 2021 and January 2022**

*By Exe Christoffersen, Ida Krøgholt and Kathrine Winkelhorn*

We talk about the theatre's profile, working methods and, not least, what happens to the theatre's artistic expression when the performers, in addition to co-creating a performance, also represent themselves, so to speak. We begin in a slightly different place. Sometimes Tue Biering is a director and employee at, for example, Aalborg Theatre, Aarhus Theatre, The Royal Danish Theatre, Eventministeriet or Mungo Park. There is certainly an artistic overlap, but the different theatres have their own organisational production methods and conditions.

*What is the difference between the way FIX&FOXY produces and the performances you work on in various institutional theatres?*

Within FIX&FOXY, I feel that I can be 100% consistent. Here, concept, content, form, process, visual identity are integrated, and we can maintain our very own way of doing things, all the way from idea to the last performance. I can't do that anywhere else.

*Can you outline your methodology?*

I've always said that I don't have a method, that there is a new method for every project. This probably has to do with the fact that I had enough of methods and masterclasses at drama school and since then I have defiantly refused to have a method myself. But despite that, there are still some patterns and routines that recur. It is a method that has gradually become intuitive. Over time, I have also realised that if I want to create something new and leave my own routines behind, I have to be aware of my practice and recognise that there is probably a method. Only when I can map that pattern, can I break it. It's actually incredibly affected to claim that I don't have a method.

*Do you make a kind of script for the performances?*

We often do a lot of preparation, but at the same time we have to be able to constantly change the concept, because the people and the material we work with is something we only really get to know when we are working with it. We also don't know how reality will react to the concept, so we have to be prepared that everything can change. It feels like we prepare for many versions and scenarios at the same time and end up having created a number of different performances through the process. We are always ready to throw everything up in the air if it doesn't work the way we intended it to.

*How do you persuade the participants to take part?*

I don't feel I have to persuade anyone. It's more of an invitation into a shared artistic endeavour. It's

about making everyone feel safe. And then each process is very special, and I really have to listen to the people involved, because we can never figure things out from the beginning.

It's often about being ready and prepared to meet another person, and then there has to be transparency in the process and a curious openness to the fact that this person can take you somewhere new.

*How does the locality play a role?*

It depends very much on the individual performance. First and foremost, I think it should be relevant to the people who see it, and sometimes the performance gains that relevance by being locally anchored. With *Et dukkehjem* (A Doll's House), it has so far worked really well to make different versions that are actually quite similar, whether it is created in northern Norway or in France. But in London, for example, they said that some things could be quite difficult to realise and understand as family structures and the way you invite people home are completely different from what they are in Denmark. I think it's interesting when our Danish version meets a different context and a conversation is created about the Scandinavian view of family that the performance brings. I would say that Ibsen is interesting all over the world because his dramaturgical mechanics unfold and challenge something in all of us.

*Is the aim to franchise (sell as a concept and a manual) FIX&FOXY's performances?*

Getting other directors to take the performances further is something we are developing, and that's also why we need to be able to describe our processes and methods fairly precisely. It would be fantastic if there was someone who could follow me and then take over the performance when it was about to go out into the world. In the past, actors from the performances have acted as directors in reproductions in other countries. That's really nice. But I believe more and more that we need to have someone who can continuously be the person who takes over the performances and brings them further.

*What does your future organisation look like?*

It's still hard to say, but we would like to work more internationally and co-produce with international partners in the future. We would like to look out into the world and invite the world into our work. Simply because we love meeting other artists and creating complex stories that challenge our own perspective. We also need to work on becoming financially sustainable and less fragile by structuring our organisation in a way that gives us the support of different types of institutions and foundations. We dream of being able to create performances that can do much more and sometimes have a larger volume than the ones we have done so far. We run very fast in our small organisation, and we dream of having more people running with the many ideas we have.

*When you apply, do you have to have the plan and concept ready a long time in advance?*

Yes, and it can be quite challenging to have to look far into the future and decide what is relevant at that time. Therefore, you have to be very open and think of the projects as conceptual frameworks that you want to work with. An application is conceived quite loosely because there is a long

time until the idea is to be realised, so you can imagine all sorts of wild ideas and be bold. On the other hand, you are faced with the challenge that you are bound by the application, and it becomes a question of solving the completely crazy and impossible ideas. There's a good energy in that. Concepts are usually best when you don't have to think about realisation and practicalities at the same time. I am incredibly naïve and completely uninhibited at the beginning of the concept development. It is only later that I realise how difficult it is to implement. I really appreciate that naivety, because I can also become very cautious and then it becomes incredibly boring.

*How do you plan to incorporate new media?*

To me, the digital medium is a really exciting playroom to be in. The digital medium allows you to create stories that can be distributed on all kinds of platforms and that can be incorporated live in the theatre space. I'm currently talking to others who see a huge potential in the combination between the digital medium and theatre. Those of us who work in theatre can create live experiences, and if we can translate that into digital formats, for example, there are a lot of possibilities.

*How can we describe your poetics? Is it about putting yourself in a difficult and vulnerable position, or is it about seeking out what you know nothing about beforehand, what you are blind to? Could you tell us about the *Familieudredning 1* (Family Report, 2013), where you put your whole identity at stake?*

The *Family Report* is not produced by FIX&FOXY, but by Eventministeriet at the Royal Theatre. I made the performance with my girlfriend, Marie Rosendahl Chemnitz, and we asked ourselves: what would be the most difficult and the most unthinkable and transgressive to ourselves? It would be to make a performance with our own parents. Marie and I had written ourselves out of the story, but there is still a lot at stake when you work with people who are such a big part of your own life, and who you will hopefully see and interact with again far into the future. There were crying and protests and conflicts on all sides, and it was a very dramatic process that could have had consequences for the relationships between our parents. It became a generational narrative about some epochs they had all been through, but where each of them had made very different choices. The process ended up being rewarding for everyone in the family, and the performance gave us some common references, and that year we were able to celebrate Christmas with them all for the first time. The family got a new narrative.

*What was the dramaturgy of the *Family Report*?*

It was a simple life dramaturgy: Where do I come from? Who do I meet, and why do new directions appear in a person's life? It turned out that several members of the family had common references and had been in the same places in some historical events. I have realised that I often return to the

---

1) *Familieudredning* (Family Report) is about coincidences, dreams and expectations of the future, and the amazing things in the lives of ordinary people. The participants are the parents of Biering and Rosendahl Chemnitz, with new and old partners who know little about each other's life stories. They are brought together for the first time, and they talk about the butcher's daughter who regrets that she never became a gogo dancer, the girl from the evangelical home, the man who can prove his own immortality, the dyslexic boy who had a girl in every port and later suffered amnesia, the man who learned to fly by the power of thought, the girl who wanted to see the whole world and the woman who received a letter from Mick Jagger.

fate narrative. I can't get enough of hearing about people's lives. Why do they end up where they do, through this combination of chance and more or less conscious choices? In the process, I had to be completely detached and far more professionally defined than in other cases. I had to say: "In this room we pretend that we don't have a family relationship." In the beginning, they often spoke all at the same time and in all directions, so I had to say: "I'm in charge and when I say 'shut up', that's how it is." It scared them at first. It was a very new relationship for me, but it gave everyone a sense of importance and that we were taking it very seriously, that they were delivering something they hadn't done before and that it could only be done if they let me help them. So I was in charge of my parents and in-laws for a fortnight of rehearsals. That hasn't happened since, I can safely say.

*Was it a lot of pressure for them to take part?*

One of them told me that she had stage fright and was anxious every day when she stepped in front of her pupils as a school teacher. The worst thing she could imagine was singing in public – so of course she had to sing in the performance – at the Royal Theatre. It was a real struggle to see this person struggling with the real circumstance in the room, and it's something that we can all feel and recognise. I love working with the real struggle on stage, precisely because this is precisely unacted. This applies to both actors and non-actors.

*How did you push?*

There were many different forms of persuasion. And this time, I have to admit, it was pure persuasion, because it couldn't be anyone else but exactly the people who participated. There were several who initially reluctantly did it just for our sake. But everyone was curious and saw an opportunity to get to know themselves better. Through hours of interviews, they learnt as many new things about themselves as we did.

*What was it like working with the children in *Mod alle Odds* (*Against All Odds*)?*

With the children, it was about something as existential as destiny and the preconditions you have through your upbringing in a society. We wanted to challenge the assumption that we live in a society where everyone has equal opportunities.

We started casting a year before we were going to do the performance. We got a whole school class of 12-year-olds in for a workshop. I did some different choreographies with the class that illustrated who and how many of them slept badly at night, had divorced parents, what different socio-economic backgrounds they came from, etc. It worked well with that age group and number of children, and those workshops became the basis for the ongoing process.

*How did you find the children?*

We had many castings. The cast had to be statistically representative of the Danish population of children, and that proved to be very challenging. It was obvious that it was generally the same group of children with culturally orientated parents and with a social advantage from home who turned up for our castings, and what you would previously call the 'underclass' was always missing. It made sense that the group that didn't have the same level of support from home didn't show up

for the casting, and since the performance also had to shed light on personal things like economic and social background, it's a much more vulnerable position to be in than for the other children. For a long time, we had half a cast. We were missing those from the lower classes. The concept and planning of the performance had taken three years, and I didn't want to do the performance without them being represented. We rehearsed with the children who had already been chosen, and in the meantime, we were working on finding the rest of the cast, in collaboration with many different casting directors, consultants and people who work with children from different backgrounds. Sometimes we managed to engage some children, but we had to get the consent of the parents, and the parents had to understand the project, and sometimes that seemed close to impossible. We were genuinely close to not being able to realise the performance, and we found the last participants three weeks before the premiere, when we could finally start the actual work on the performance.

*What is your interest in children and young people and how did you work on the performance *Ungdom (Youth)*?*

Tue: I haven't really had a dream of working specifically with children or young people. In a way, it is a natural necessity in connection with some conceptual ideas. But that's really how it is with casting in all our productions.

In the case of *Youth* (2015), it started with us wanting to do something with big emotions, and when you are young, everything is existentially on the edge, emotions are magnified, and you face some of life's big fundamental considerations and decisions. We wanted to recreate some of those moments with the audience. The best cast for that performance would of course be young people.

The premise was that for this to be possible, it would have to be a very long process.

The work on *Youth* took six months of rehearsals, but an even longer period of preparation. The young people were in school and could only rehearse after normal working hours and not continuously. For the first couple of months, they went to rehearsals once a week, then twice a week, then three times a week. Then there was a run-up for two weeks, and the last three days we took them out of school. It was crucial that we had that much time together, to get to know each other, to get brave together, so they could develop themselves and the performance. At rehearsals, we sometimes let them watch each other's actions. We realised that it meant a lot to everyone to experience each other's stories. It was interesting to hear others talk about sexuality, about anxiety, about loneliness. All of a sudden, it was really moving and they built each other up. We discovered that they could facilitate each other by being an audience for each other. I don't think I direct, but I can tell people what works. I don't tell them what *doesn't* work, but I say: "That thing that you're doing right there, that's good". And when everyone hears that, they will also try to work in that direction. Because who doesn't want to do things well?

*Is that generally part of your rehearsal method?*

I quite rarely have what I would call rehearsals when I work with actors. I'd rather do run-throughs from day one. So it's usually just run-throughs and notes every day for many weeks. This allows the actors to work freely and try out many different things. Actors are often much smarter about situations and physical presence than I am, and it allows me to see their potentials and ideas and personal style. I wouldn't be able to do that if I asked them to do something I had planned beforehand. After each run-through, I can say: "I thought it was quite exciting when you did

that. But do something else tomorrow". Then something often emerges that is totally organic and feels right. I interrupt as little as possible until the last two or three weeks. Because by then we've developed a language and a sense of the performance. Only then do I go in and cut and rewrite, and then we suddenly get really busy. But the important thing is to get to the point where it has become the actors' own. "You can also say something other than what I've written", I usually say. However, they often end up saying what was originally written but which they have now made their own. Now, I don't want it to sound like it works every time, it doesn't.

*Do you jump straight to the material without a reading rehearsal to make the actors co-creators?*

I think that at reading rehearsals you often sit around a table and talk and expect to hear a lot of clever words. But I think there is a great quality in getting on the floor right away and trying some things out. Just the fact that you have created a space, a conceptual framework and decided that this particular group of actors will be the ones to create it, is a very concrete framework and premises that set a direction in the rehearsal room. I remember clearly from the first rehearsals of Youth that I said: "It has to come from you, because it is going to be about you. You're the ones who are experiencing being young right now, something the rest of us have forgotten, so you're the ones who have to deliver it.

*Do you use a particular interview technique to elicit the personal material of the participants?*

I have to admit that sometimes it's super banal. It's often something like asking "what's the worst thing you've experienced, and what's the most beautiful thing you've experienced, what's the hardest decision of your life", and if you can talk about the most beautiful and the worst and everything in between, you've gone a long way towards getting to know another person. Then you can quickly talk about turning points and dramatic moments. There's much more to it, of course, but it can be a very good kick starter and we all like to talk about those moments because they define who we are. Even very introvert people are happy to share those things when they are in a safe space. The most important thing is to create that space.

*What's the most transgressive thing you've done?*

The quick answer would probably be Pretty Woman A/S (Pretty Woman Ltd.), because at that time we had absolutely no experience with this kind of work, which we have practised many times since then. When we did Pretty Woman Ltd. in 2008, we had to cast prostitutes, and that was definitely transgressive. We had to meet people that I had no idea how to relate to. But what I learnt then are still some of the things we draw on. To understand that the greatest crime is to deprive people of the opportunity to be seen or to be heard. When you talk to some of the so-called "vulnerable", they often want to be on stage. But they never get the opportunity, they are stopped by a pedagogue, a doctor or other well-meaning people because they are not allowed to let themselves be "exposed". But in Pretty Woman A/S, there were some strong women who said: "Every day I have to make some pretty big decisions about some clients, so acting and being on stage, I can actually do that".

Another thing we also learnt was to bring in consultants to help us. Jeppe and I had a meeting with the manager of Reden, which is a shelter for prostitutes, and she said, "try talking to Tiller, here's her number". I guess she thought: "Then Tiller can say: "It won't work, boys". But Tiller, who

was a former drug prostitute, was simply fantastic. She understood what we wanted and thought it was the greatest idea in the world to do the performance. So she put her heart and soul into it and started contacting the women who worked as prostitutes near Halmtorvet. Here we realised how important it was to have a person with us who could guarantee that the people involved are doing well and that we are not going to do anything wrong. And if we do something wrong, we will be told. She said: "Listen boys, you have to look them in the eye, and you have to talk to them. They're just ordinary people." It was really cool because the worst thing you can do is talk to people as if they're not real people. So the most transgressive experience was *Pretty Woman A/S*, and at the same time it was the one that taught us that the boundaries are not as narrow as you think.

*Can you say your production has an ethical perspective?*

I'm not so keen on that. What do you mean by ethics?

Some might define it as a certain humane attitude. Others might say that the ethics lie in giving the stage to prostitutes, for example? It's not just a question of whether it's good or bad to be a prostitute.

In *Pretty Woman Ltd.*, we had a communications advisor who said that it was absolutely crucial that we didn't show our colours. If we described our personal intentions, it would be too easy to read and we would lose the potential for discussion. It is important to stay neutral and never be moral. We never take sides, but our concepts are sometimes staged as a kind of transgression, which brings an ethical discussion into play.

*Is there also a kind of transgression in *My Deer Hunter* (2020)?*

Putting people with PTSD on a stage with bright lights, loud noises and a lot of people watching is definitely a transgression. But it was crucial in order to show what they struggle with every day. But it starts somewhere else. *My Deer Hunter* was about making a time machine and asking the question: Can you go back in time to a point in life before an extremely transgressive and life-changing moment in a person's life and recreate it? We thought that one of the most life-changing things is being at war. That when you get a rifle in your hand, loaded with live ammunition, and you see people around you dying, it challenges something fundamentally human, and something will change in you. That's why a group of war veterans were involved, and that's why the inspiration for our time machine became the film, *Deer Hunter*.

It may also be a transgression to put the children in *Against all Odds* on stage with their own statistical destinies. To have a child say: "I'm going to kill myself when I'm 29" is pretty cruel. You just can't do that, but for us it's not so much about the fact that it's a transgression, but about creating experiences of consequence. But it's also important to say that we don't want to be provocative or transgressive as a starting point. That's not interesting, but I thought it was interesting when someone said we couldn't justify doing theatre with prostitutes when society allows prostitutes to be bought by men who put them in their car and drive them under Dybbøl Bridge, beat them up, don't pay them, and then throw them out of the car?

*Can we talk about Dark Noon (2019) and the process from Western, to text and dramaturgy with the different spaces and your work with the actors?*

Dark Noon began wanting to explore a huge blind spot we had in terms of Africa. Africa as a phenomenon has been a big part of our lives since we were kids. The perpetual guilt and powerlessness that has become a narrative and a dehumanisation of a huge continent in the world. Because Africa has often been made out to be a place where people are always starving, and where people are almost walking around with no clothes on. How could we try to explore this and bring it onto a stage? For a long time I had this idea that it was going to be about migration, and I was going to cast some people from Nigeria, who were potential immigrants, and they were going to talk about their own lives in a Western setting. But I could see where that performance was going. It would be a reproduction of a power relation, where I would direct the actors' story of Africa to satisfy my curious gaze. The performers would be ready-mades and good at playing themselves, but not particularly good at acting. It would be a predictable tale of poverty and people wanting to go to Europe. After a lot of deliberation, we decided that this was not what we were going to do. Instead, we wanted to find some good actors. I had no prerequisites for casting in Africa, but I started talking to people who had worked in different African countries and was advised to look for actors in South Africa. As luck would have it, I became a host for some international residencies organised by Metropolis. On the list of participants, I could see that there was one person from South Africa and I had a meeting with her. She told me that she knew a South African choreographer and dancer, Nhlanhla Malangu, who would be very compatible with the way I was working. When I contacted him, he was on tour with a performance and would be in Germany for a week. So I went to Germany, saw the performance and met with him the next day. Shortly after our meeting started, he opened his diary and asked: "when is it?" He got the dates. "That's fine" he said and made a mark in the diary. It was pretty crazy that it happened so quickly, and I'm usually very slow to make big and important decisions, but I could feel that it was the right thing to do. A few months later, I travelled to South Africa with our producer Annette Max Hansen and had a casting in Johannesburg with a whole bunch of actors and dancers. All sorts of people turned up for the casting, who were extremely talented. We wanted to find our own ensemble to get as much diversity in the group as possible, and we got a cast of personalities who were not just great performers, but who really brought their own stories.

*How did the text come about?*

I had struggled a lot with figuring out how to do this. It was a great concept in the application, but how was it to be realised? I had a great cast from South Africa, I knew there was something interesting in the Western setting, but I didn't have any material. Jokum Rohde gave us a lecture, because he's a total connoisseur of Westerns, but it was totally confusing with the incredible number of subcategories within Western films. I sat at home and watched all the sheriff films, stagecoach films, southern films, Indian films, etc. The deadline was approaching and I had no material and I was pretty desperate. I just watched more Westerns and made tons of notes, but I was missing some substance and some meaning.

With a rather thin concept and very loose ideas, I travelled to Johannesburg again with various themes that corresponded with the history of South Africa. These were themes and classical Western scenarios in different spaces such as saloon, gold mine, bank, railway and the like. I had written

the themes down on slips of paper and asked the players in turn to take one each and play a scene based on that theme. It was very playful and I encouraged the actors to integrate something from their own history. There were stories of alcoholism, poverty and violence and after a few rehearsals we all thought it was too stereotypical. It would become a reproduction of an old-fashioned Africa narrative, created by me sitting there with my big white hat and ivory cane. So I suggested we did it in a different way. I suggested that the players should represent me and my European migration story.

I suggested that they put white make-up on their faces, and in a way, it was at the same time a kind of exploration of representation. The difference between representing minorities and being at the top of the food chain, and then being someone who is used to being at the bottom and having to be represented by the others. We all got quite excited about that idea, and now I maybe had a concept with some substance that could help me create the material. A long time ago, I had bought a book about the history of the United States, which I have been reading on and off and keeping on my bookshelf. When I came home from Johannesburg, I took it out and realised that it was the manuscript. The whole manuscript was in the American history. Once I realised that, I put these Westerns aside and dived into the stories of European migration to the land of opportunity. We would still use the Western genre, but more as an aesthetic reference and a theatrical device. There was still a long way to go, because now I could visualise the dramaturgy, but in terms of scenography, we were still fumbling. We were very preoccupied with perspective. Should you look at or be inside the scenography? I sat with the scenographer Johan Kølckjær and moved all sorts of small set pieces around in a model, and we couldn't decide. We tore down and built new models of all sorts of Western towns, and suddenly it made sense. The whole American narrative is about building, it moves from the horizontal flat uninhabited landscape to the vertical, in taller and taller sky-scraping buildings. We cleared the stage, because of course it begins with an empty space, a flat, barren, unconquered land to be occupied. In that way, *Dark Noon* is, on another metaphorical level, about world building.

*How do you approach representation today?*

My view is that we need to talk about the potentials of representation, and it's been exciting to work in Sweden on a project I call *At Repräsentere En Anden* (Representing Another). The idea is to shift the conversation so that it's about potentials and not limitations. 99% of what we do is representations, so we need to examine representations and try to reclaim this dilemma-filled field. An actor can represent children, animals, fantasy creatures and anything else. Where do you draw the line? Maybe you have to be careful not to draw the line too close, because there might be people who actually need you to represent them. I sometimes ask people if they prefer to represent themselves or let an actor do it, regardless of gender, ethnicity, religious preference, etc. Then suddenly a constructive conversation starts to be established. My experience tells me that there is something interesting in seeing yourself represented by someone else, and often by someone who is not at all like me, but who is trying to capture the essence of who I am. I have to say, though, that I think it's a field that is very difficult to navigate in, and it's much more complex. I think that the problems with representation are sometimes about power and bad experiences with some representations that can be characterised more as bullying. The crucial thing is that we have become aware of what representation means. That it has a significant impact on "who and how". I have

become more aware of the power associated with representation and who is on stage and who is telling the story.

*Was representation also what Viljens Triumph (Triumph of the Will, 2012) was about?*

It was first and foremost about staging, seduction and beauty. Jeppe made the suggestion that we should recreate Leni Riefenstahl's infamous Nazi propaganda film *Triumph of the Will*, and to me it sounded crazy enough that we should do it. It was originally supposed to have four actors, but then three of the actors dropped out, and in the end, we were left with actor Anders Mossling and had to figure out how on earth we were going to tell the story of the world's greatest film, which originally had a cast of over a million people, with one actor. It turned out to be a blessing, because now there was a single, helpless person on stage that the audience wanted to help. The impossibility of the project turned out to be the best key to getting the audience to want to participate. The audience ended up representing and recreating the film scene by scene with Anders. That film is one big seduction and we were able to reproduce the seduction in this way. We were all seduced into making the Nazi salute, marching and loving the special community that the film shows from the 1934 Nurnberg Congress. And in that sense, you could say that the film is also about representation.

*Is there a kind of self-representation in your work?*

Well, in the beginning it was about reality reclaiming the representations of fiction. In other words, the way prostitutes were represented in the film *Pretty Woman* had to be re-appropriated by the people it was about. This has been an ongoing project for us, when we put the people on stage that the film is actually about. But I can feel that I now increasingly want to recapture the theatrical representation of reality. To renegotiate the theatre's aesthetics and approach. It's challenging in a dangerous, exciting and indeterminate way.

*Do you sometimes find that your ideas are perceived differently than they are intended?*

I have recently experienced this quite specifically in Germany, where I did my own adaptation of *Hamlet*, and where there was a lot of discussion about a scene in which Ophelia was to be drowned. I had decided that she should be drowned on stage instead of someone coming in and saying: "Have you heard that Ophelia has drowned?" I wanted it to be articulated that the woman was to be drowned. Shakespeare's plays were written in a pre-democratic, violently patriarchal time. It is problematic if we are not aware that we are reproducing those structures without commenting on it. I wanted Ophelia to say that and refuse to be drowned, and the other actors on stage should recognise that – and then drown her afterwards anyway. Some of the actors had a hard time with that at first. Many of the female staff at the theatre were furious with me for doing that scene. They asked me to remove the scene or let Ophelia leave the stage, but I thought that we would be telling a lie about the fact that there are no longer structures that precisely keep parts of society stuck in old structures. The scene was very uncomfortable for all of us, but I think it's important that the scene started a discussion. If we had let her go, it would have been feel good, and the performance would have been harmless and morally correct entertainment. Instead, it became a performance where audience members regularly went up on stage to stop that particular scene in protest, and I

think the theatre and the cast subsequently understood that it was important and good conflictual conversations that arose between the audience during the performance and afterwards.

*You are making a performance about China?*

The performance is called Imperiets Tropper (Imperial Troopers) and the basic idea is to make a performance that addresses the fears and this narrative that is exponentially increasing around China. For better or worse, there is a demonisation of a large area of the world. It's a huge blind spot for me. I'm not around any Chinese people myself. In high school, I was in the same class as a girl of Chinese background, but I never spoke to her, and her father owned a fast-food place. The only relationship I've had with Chinese people is the Chinese fast-food place close to where I lived as a child, and where I spent a large part of my youth eating jumbo burgers and playing arcade games. But that's a poor, stereotypical idea of what Chinese people are like. So, I would really like to do a performance with only Chinese people on stage, because their representation is so absent on stage in this country, in complete contrast to how much China is exposed in the media.

*Representation is a necessary process in a democracy, but does representing the audience also help to create understanding and empathy?*

I think that audience representation is interesting. We often talk about audience participation and it is crucial for me to consider the people sitting in the theatre. It's always easiest to point to those who are not in the theatre, those who are far away and whom it is safe to laugh at, but what if I point to those who are in the theatre and who most likely are a lot like me? Childishly, I want to leave scars on the audience. Something they remember. It's fine if they are provoked by the performances.

*How do you avoid creating a moral compass that divides people in a kind of dramaturgy of polarities?*

I think that the world we live in right now is quite overwhelming. And I think it's absolutely crucial that we become better at dealing with much more complex stories. But I myself am mentally limited, and even though I know I should embrace complexity, I can be very doubtful about whether I really want to dissolve the binary dramaturgies. Because you lose control when you dissolve the clear markers. At the moment, what threatens our coexistence is driven by some extremely powerful binary dramaturgies. I can be ever so open minded, but storytelling in clear, easy-to-understand dramaturgies is a very powerful weapon, and if I don't use it, what do I have to offer? In a moment, the world may be polarised to an extent where I will have to choose side. I want to tell myself and everyone else that I'm better than that, but it's naive to think that I won't also want to choose the simple narrative. That scares me.

*Do you have any ethical doubts when you ask people to be themselves and be vulnerable?*

I can see myself accused of being the artist who exploits other people's fragility and tragedy for personal gain. "Those poor people are destroyed by being on stage and exposing themselves." I think this is worth discussing, and now I can say with great certainty that the opposite is happening. On the contrary, we are going to hide some people who want stage space. Because we protect them so much, but they're not really interested in that, because most of them are super strong. I now have

15 years of experience in dealing with the ethical considerations and making sure that I have people employed who are incredibly good at handling the different tasks involved in a performance. But I can always ask myself if I'm doing the right thing and I spend quite a lot of time scrutinising myself.

*How are you as a leader?*

I'm actually an anti-democrat, because I don't believe in democracy within my own practice. I'm very fascinated by, for example, a group like the German Gob Squad, who work with a flat structure. I've tried it, but the result is never really good because what I do often requires some kind of management. My principal task is to be a curator and manager for a whole bunch of talents and at the same time make sure that it doesn't become a mess of all kinds of directions and voices. I have to curate and edit all the time. There should be no doubt that at the end of the day, I am the one who makes a decision. And if I get it wrong, that's also my responsibility.

*But at the same time, you're pretty good at distributing management as a directing tool?*

I certainly hope that everyone has the experience of being involved in the process. I would find it boring if it was only my words that counted. But having said that, I am also aware that I have very clear views on aesthetics, text, dramaturgy, and I also say no quite a lot. It would be wrong to tell anyone that it's a flat structure because I think I work best myself when someone is in control. I think it makes people calmer in a room, and I try to avoid saying that I'm in charge. Because then it won't be very pleasant for anyone. But if everyone knows that's how it is, then it's my responsibility to create the best framework so that everyone can collaborate creatively, and everyone can feel that they are being heard and used. And then it's fun.

---

**Erik Exe Christoffersen**, Associate Professor at the Department of Communication and Culture – Dramaturgy, Aarhus University.

---

**Ida Krøgholt**, Associate Professor at the Department of Communication and Culture – Dramaturgy, Aarhus University.

---

**Kathrine Winkelhorn** has for a number of years been responsible for the master's programme in Culture and Media Production at Malmö University and is chair of Copenhagen International Theatre.

---



Sex and Violence. Photo Rebecca Arthy



# Article

The Europeans

# The Europeans – FIX&FOXY's Post-Dramatic Approach to the Classics

By Mads Thygesen

The early 2000s were a time when Danish theatre drew many new impulses from director's theatre and its deconstructive approach to the reinterpretation of dramatic classics. These impulses can also be found in FIX&FOXY's first theatre production *Europæerne* (The Europeans), which was performed at Det Kgl. Teater's (The Royal Danish Theatre's) experimental stage in Turbinehallerne in 2005. *The Europeans* can be seen as the performance that initiated FIX&FOXY's artistic work, and in many ways, it constitutes a model example of their conceptual approach to the development of new performing art with a political edge<sup>1</sup>.

The dramaturgy of *The Europeans* was developed for the Royal Theatre in a collaboration between dramaturgs Jeppe Kristensen, Benedikte Hammershøi and Tue Biering, who were also responsible for directing the play, and Christian Friedländer, who designed the set. The basic idea was to perform a montage of works from the European drama canon (e.g. Euripides, Aeschylus, Shakespeare, Schiller). Common to the works included in the montage was that they all had – in one way or another – European wars as their dramatic focal point.

The dramaturgy of the Europeans was developed for the Royal Theatre. Teater in collaboration between playwrights Jeppe Kristensen, Benedikte Hammershøi and Tue Biering, who also directed the play and Christian Friedländer designed the set. The basic idea was to perform a montage of works from the European drama canon (e.g. Euripides, Aeschylus, Shakespeare, Schiller). The works included in the montage all had - in one way or another - European wars as their dramatic focal point.

In this paper, I will analyse *The Europeans* (2005) in order to discuss how the seeds of FIX&FOXY's poetics and conceptual thinking are laid in this early performance from 2005. In continuation of Hans-Thies Lehmann's ideas of the post-dramatic theatre (Lehmann 1999), I will show how the production uses the classics as an opportunity to intervene and interfere with a current historical and political context. Initially, therefore, I will argue that the concept of the post-dramatic holds important insights that can help us locate some central themes and problems in *The Europeans*. Lehmann's central idea is that the post-dramatic theatre is moving in the direction of "der Auflösung der logozentrischen Hierarchie" (Lehmann 1999, p. 159). As the choice of words suggests, Lehmann bases his theory on the deconstructive point of view that European theatre has hitherto been characterised by a logocentric hierarchy, insofar as dramatic theatre is sustained by the idea that there is an absolute order and meaning, which everything can be brought back to<sup>2</sup>. In line with deconstructive thinking, however, Lehmann argues that post-dramatic theatre erases and

---

1) The performance was announced as the first project in FIX&FOXY's portfolio, but the partnership was not formally established until later. In 2006, Biering and Kristensen further developed their collaboration in the performance *Come on, Bangladesh, Just do it!* (The Royal Theatre), where they developed the concept of the performance together.

2) For a more extensive discussion of deconstructive dramaturgy, see Niels Lehmann's thesis *Dekonstruktion og Dramaturgi* (1996) and his article "Performance efter dekonstruktion" (2006), where he, among other things, problematises the way deconstruction is often used as a synonym for "fragmentation" or "disintegration of totalities" in order to promote an avant-garde ideal of art production that differs from classical art.

undermines the hitherto unquestionable authority of the text. If we thus ask how the post-dramatic stands in relation to the classics, it becomes clear that, according to Lehmann, the crucial new development concerns the degree of freedom in the interpretation of the work. Theatre is no longer bound by the playwright's work, Lehmann argues. The text is no longer the all-dominant authority in theatre, but merely figures as an element on equal terms with other theatrical elements (such as for instance sound, light, space, body, etc.)<sup>3</sup>. It is this commitment to rethinking and revitalising the classical plays that we recognise in FIX&FOXY's *The Europeans*. Not only on the performance level itself, but also in the conceptual thinking that forms the basis of the reinterpretation of the classics. The idea, in short, is to deconstruct the classics and perform them in a kind of *mash-up*, bringing the plot of the works into a contemporary context. In this way, the audience is invited into a vital and playful theatre space, where they reflect on how our present is connected to the European canon.

### From Concept to Production

In FIX&FOXY's artistic practice, the concept of status is the central idea that forms the basis of the artistic intention and thinking of the performance. The concept is formulated on the basis of an analytical process, which usually take complex and intangible conflicts as their starting point (Kristensen 2019). That is, conflicts that, according to Kristensen, do not invite rational consensus, but rather cause unrest, conflict and disagreement. In other words, in FIX&FOXY, the staging is based on the concept, but also differs from it as a structure that is created collectively by the director, set designer, actor, lighting designer, dramaturg etc. during the rehearsal process itself. The staging thus acts as the plan that ensures the repeatability and structure of the theatrical performance, while the performance itself has the autonomous status of an event that can vary from evening to evening.<sup>4</sup>

This duality is very much present in *The Europeans*, where Tue Biering's staging allows for improvisation and comic scenarios where the planned actions can actually go wrong and/or fail for the actors. This adds a touch of irony to the performance of the classical works, making it clear to the audience that this is not a production that is true to the work, but a self-reflexive reinterpretation that questions the canonical status and authority of the narratives. On the whole, *The Europeans* appear as a kind of *mash-up* created by merging two or more works, as FIX&FOXY superimpose the classical narratives and place them in a contemporary space. Unlike a musical composition, where the producer has seamlessly superimposed a vocal track from one familiar song onto the instrumental track from another familiar song, Biering refrains from covering the seams in the production. Instead, he allows them to emerge in the most grotesque and surprising ways, to evoke various alienating effects (*Verfremdung*). In continuation of Willmar Sauter's reflections on *The Theatrical Event* (2000), we can say that the production makes a virtue of highlighting the interplay

---

3) For more on the political engagement of post-dramatic theatre, see Gade 2010. In this context, it is important that Lehmann's theory is more comprehensive and nuanced than I can present it here. In his comprehensive work *Tragödie und Dramatisches Theater* (2013), for example, Lehmann shows that his dramaturgical thinking is not limited to the concept of post-dramatic theatre, but on the contrary is connected to an extensive knowledge of European theatre history and the particular role that the concept of the tragic has played in the dramatic canon.

4) Cf. my article about "Interaktion og iscenesættelse" (Interaction and staging) (Peripeti no. 11, 2009), where I discuss the dialectic between staging and performance with reference to, among others, Jens Roselt's *Phänomenologi des Theaters* (2008) and Erika Fischer-Lichte's *Ästhetik des performativen* (1999).

between the sensory, artistic and symbolic levels of the theatrical situation itself.<sup>5</sup> The production contains many sensory surprise attacks (for instance a strong focus on sound, smell, water, sweat, blood, etc.) that draw the audience's attention to the immediate presence of the theatrical situation. In several sequences, in short, the focus is more on theatrical power and energy than on the question of how best to convey the knowledge and information contained in the classics. Furthermore, the audience's attention is constantly directed to the way the actors perform and the scenic solutions used in the staging (all of which relates to what Sauter calls the artistic level of the performance). In line with post-dramatic theatre – and with a clear inspiration from the German *Regietheater* – *The Europeans* attempt to revitalise the classical works by creating significant surprises and disruptions in the theatre space.<sup>6</sup> The recurring device is that the staging emphasises the theatrical position of speaking and creates double exposures (for instance of actor/role, narrative/space) by evoking the classics in another time: the audience's own present.

The performance opens with a prologue in which a messenger (Kristian Holm Joensen) lies in the pool and recites Friedrich Schiller:

“This scene  
encourages the poet to leave  
common everyday life,  
to observe life from a place,  
which corresponds better to the great time,  
in which we live, full of hope and unrest.  
Let the poet's imagination for a moment  
recreate the horror of bygone days,  
that we may rejoice in our own time  
and the hope of an even better future.”  
(Kristensen, Biering and  
Hammershøj Nielsen, 2005)

With a thick irony, the messenger thus frames the theatrical situation and invites the audience to step out of their own time, to live in a bygone, mythical time that contains the background of their own narrative (the symbolic level). *The Europeans'* approach to classical works is entirely in line with Kristensen's article *Love Theater: Intangible Conflicts*, in which he reflects on the relationship between the modern individual and grand, collectively committing narratives: “Our performances [...] often have as their conceptual starting point the fact that in our lives, we all come into contact with stories, whether imposed on us or appropriated, about who we are and who others are.” (Kristensen). This is consistent with the conceptual starting point of *The Europeans*, where the interweaving of the

---

5) Cf. Sauter, Willmar: *The Theatrical Event* (University of Iowa Press, USA 2000), where he distinguishes between the sensory level (everything that the audience senses), the artistic level (for instance the way the play is performed and the artistic skills of the actors) and the symbolic level (the space of meaning created in the performance). See also Michael Eigtved's introduction to theatrical communication in *Forestillingsanalyse – en introduktion* (Forlaget Samfundslitteratur, Copenhagen 2007, pp. 95-106).

6) Here I am thinking in particular of the signifying stress that is often part of the staging in Frank Castorf's theatre performances, see also Peter Boenisch's reflections on “Composing the “signifying stress””: Frank Castorf in Boenisch (2015), pp. 169-176.

classical works investigates how our European narrative and heritage have contributed to shaping our immediate world, our identity and, not least, our problematic relationship with 'the others'.

### The Scenic Space

Christian Friedländer's scenography functions as a spatial manifestation of the conceptual starting point: Danish allotment garden idyll meets a Europe shaped by wars and genocide. This means that the visual elements of the performance create a metaphorical framework that acts as a supporting strand throughout the performance.<sup>7</sup> The montage of classical works is set in a garden, where the audience is positioned on either side of the stage space. This means that they can see themselves reflected in each other. Above the stage space hangs a collection of flags with coats of arms (for instance eagles, shields, lions), which do not have any direct references to specific European cities or nations. Nevertheless, the flags point to the fact that the Europe we encounter at FIX&FOXY is an assembled family of small states fighting each other in continued territorial wars.

On the symbolic level, the set thus accentuates *The Europeans'* general play with meaning and representation, because the visual elements of the performance (present) are in sharp contrast to the narrative space (past). All the scenographic elements are taken from the present: Garden furniture, a gas grill, empty bottles and an inflatable swimming pool are placed in the middle of the stage floor, which is covered with artificial grass. On one side is a greenhouse. A shed in the other. A well-dressed but untidy man desperately tries to launch a kite. Another man, carrying a sign saying "kiss 10 kr.", lies asleep on a sunbed. In other words, it all signifies an ordinary Danish villa garden, where that has not been cleaned up after a wild stag party. Not a battlefield where the Greek tragedies are now to be played out.

### Performing Style and Role Doubling

At the level of the narrative, however, it turns out that the two men are King Agamemnon (Morten Eisner) and Achilles (Mads Wille), whose army is prevented from travelling to Troy because "the wind has failed". However, this primarily becomes clear through dialogue when an officer enters the scene and addresses the king with the words: "Agamemnon, our army is assembled, it is ready for battle. Yet we are stuck here." In the theatrical enunciation, in short, it is the utterances (verbal expression) that signify that we are witnessing a scene from Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis* (406 BC), while the visual elements of the performance rather refer to the audience's own present. In this way, all the classical tales are transferred to a contemporary context, where the heroes and villains of the past enter the Danish garden – all the roles are embodied by the six actors (Helle Fagralid, Ditte Gråbøl, Lars Mikkelsen, Mads Wille, Kristian Holm Joensen, Morten Eisner). The references to the year 2005 are also reflected in the acting style, as the actors often make the characters appear as a crude caricature with reference to modern phenomena (such as football, politics, stag parties, pop music, the EU, etc.). In other words, this device provokes different emotional and cognitive reactions in the audience when they recognise their own reality in the classical scenarios. Moreover, the performance style obviously points to the fact that the actors present themselves on stage as themselves (i.e. individuals with gender, age, body, temperament, etc.), while simultaneously portraying a character from the European canon. For example, when Helle Fagralid plays a variety

---

7) Cf. Michael Eigtved's description of the theatrical universe as "an overall description of how the concept of the specific performance is embodied" (Eigtved 2007: 124). By extension, Eigtved describes the performance's *supporting strand* as a "metaphor, key phrase or image that can encompass an overall sense of the performance's basic idea" (Eigtved 2007: 124).

of female roles, a *mash-up* of meaning occurs between the women of the different classics and eras (such as for instance Euripides' Iphigenia, Shakespeare's Katharine, and the role of "Helle" in the show's contemporary scenes, where the actors step out of their roles).

The dramaturgical starting point for *The Europeans* is found in Euripides, who places King Agamemnon (Morten Eisner) in an irresolvable conflict. He is the leader of the Greek army on its way to Troy to reclaim his brother Menelaus' wife, Helen. But the army is trapped because the wind has failed them. The goddess Artemis demands that Agamemnon sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia (Helle Fagralid) to get the wind that can bring the ships to Troy. The conflict is insoluble because Agamemnon is torn between the interests of his family and those of the state. If he sacrifices his daughter, he fails as a father and husband. The consequence will be that he loses the trust and love of his wife and children. If, on the other hand, he refuses to sacrifice Iphigenia, he fails in his responsibility as army commander: "The nation demands, whether I like it or not, that she must be sacrificed; against it I am too weak", Agamemnon argues, – "Our people must live in the free, democratic world; we must never stand by and watch barbarians violate our fundamental values". In *The Europeans*, Agamemnon chooses to sacrifice Iphigenia, and he does so deliberately, luring her to Aulis under the pretext that she is to marry the goddess's son Achilles. The opening scene takes the form of a stag party, where the festivities have gone too far, and on the whole, there is little divine about the hungover Achilles. Unlike Euripides' tragic portrayal of human reactions to the inevitable (fate), Agamemnon's reasoning is also not very convincing when he tries to justify the sacrifice of his daughter to save the free world from "Muslim terror". The visual expression puts the tragic plot in a grotesque light and makes it easy for the audience to understand the plot, as they can translate the tragic events into their own time – a time when Agamemnon's actions appear incomprehensible. Therefore, the audience's sympathy must necessarily be with Agamemnon's wife, Clytemnestra (Ditte Gråbøl), who persuades Achilles to help her protect Iphigenia. The shocking outcome, however, is that Iphigenia continues to choose to let herself be sacrificed in the service of the greater cause: "Take my life and overthrow Troy. Give me that as a monument. It will be remembered – it will be my reputation," she pleads, adding "It is a disgrace when barbarians rule over white people. Mother, barbarians must be controlled! They are slaves, we are citizens of the free world". The statement thus refers to the privileged position that the "whites" (*The Europeans*) occupy in the narrative, while the others (slaves, barbarians and Muslims respectively) appear primarily as an invisible threat to the Western world order. In short, she wants her sacrifice to stand as a monument (a memorial stone) that shows the greatness of their war against the barbarians. All this is a clear and ironic gesture, through which the production points back to the audience's own position in relation to the war on terror, which was a topical and important issue in the political debate in 2005.

The scene ends in a bloody scenario in which Agamemnon sacrifices his daughter inside the greenhouse. Here, Biering's direction places great emphasis on both the sensory and symbolic levels as the bloody sacrifice is taken to the grotesque. Agamemnon returns with Iphigenia's bloody bridal veil and gives it to Clytemnestra, after which he places Iphigenia's heart on the grill to sacrifice it. The nauseating smell of the fried meat spreads through the theatre room as the officer sucks on his finger and sticks it in the air. The stage picture is concluded with the (effect) sound of wind blowing, signifying that the army can now travel on to Troy.

### Montage and the Compulsive Repetition of War

With *Iphigenia* as dramaturgical starting point, Biering stages a total of 9 scenarios, all of which draw material from the European canon (from Greek tragedy to absurdist drama). The various scenarios open as a kind of boxing match with a sign bearing titles such as “Territorial War”, “The Endless War”, “Prisoners of War”, “Revenge I-III”. In the two final tableaux, “Fortress Europe” and “Court”, however, the actors partially step out of their roles and into a disturbing present, where the dramatic material is drawn from specific political events. The fragments of the dramatic classics are thus interwoven in a montage of wars and conflicts, where the repetitions refer back to the starting point: the sacrifice of the innocent Iphigenia.

The theatrical situation is constantly kept open and we can see that it is the same actors who portray the different roles. This also means that the actors spend a relatively large amount of time and energy entertaining the audience with their more or less successful attempts to portray roles and situations. At the same time, the staging plays on the recognitions in terms of meaning that occur when the same actor plays different roles. In the second scenario of the performance, entitled “Territorial War”, for instance, the same actors enter Shakespeare’s dramas about kings, where the English try to conquer the garden (France) because of a neighbour dispute. A neighbour dispute that plays heavily on cultural clichés and prejudices: The simple and drunken Englishmen want to play football, but there is no room for that in the garden, where the French celebrate with music and champagne. In contrast to Shakespeare’s famous depiction of the Battle of Agincourt (1415), in which the English longbows turn the tide of battle, the present-day scenario ends in a ludicrous duel in which the French King Charles, dressed as a sports fencer, is served out in tennis and beaten up with a racket by the English King Henry.

In keeping with the post-dramatic approach, the string of canonical European dramas is finally interrupted by a disturbing re-enactment of scenes from the UN War Crimes Tribunal against the former Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic (played by Morten Eisner)<sup>8</sup>. The double exposure of fiction/reality and actor/role (Eisner/Agamemnon/Milosevic) means that the audience can recognise the patterns across the scenes and interpret it as a total narrative that the European tragedy is linked to the Greeks and the sacrifice of Iphigenia. For although there is no logical connection, the doubling of roles creates a link between the narratives that puts both past and present atrocities into a disturbing perspective. In the extended scenario where the war criminal Milosevic delivers his lengthy defence speech, for example, it becomes very clear that history has taught us nothing, but that barbarism is allowed to continue. In FIX&FOXY, however, *The Europeans* are trapped in the hopeless compulsive repetition of war, where violence only breeds more violence. And the performance does not end with a redemptive and just punishment, but instead lets Milosevic’s defence speech fade into a scenic and musical inferno.

### FIX&FOXY’s Conceptual Thinking

With its radical deconstruction of classical works and playful acting style, which uses alienating devices (*Verfremdungseffekt*) to prevent the audience from becoming fully immersed in the narrative and forgetting to be critical of the characters’ statements, FIX&FOXY’s *The Europeans* writes itself into a post-dramatic theatre form. It is post-dramatic because the staging explicitly breaks away from a principle of fidelity to the European canon and its founding principles. In contrast to a more

---

8) The trial was ongoing when the show was performed. It began in 2002 but was never completed because Milosevic died in his prison cell in the spring of 2006.

mimetic approach, where the ideal is that the audience is not invited to reflect on the idea behind the performance or on the actors' performances, FIX&FOXY attach importance to exposing the interplay between the sensory, artistic and symbolic levels in the performance. The intention of the many double exposures, shifts and doubling of roles is to use the classics as an opportunity to intervene and interfere in a current historical and political context.<sup>9</sup> Now, it is not in itself post-dramatic that the action is transferred to the present, because this device is often used in theatre productions where the staging is based on an interpretation of a dramatic work in order to relate to the spiritual problems of our own time.<sup>10</sup> The post-dramatic rather lies in the deconstructive approach to the classical works, where FIX&FOXY critically addresses questions such as: Why are the "great" dramas such a significant part of our cultural inventory? What norms and values do they carry? What role do they play in our own narratives? And how can we relate to them critically and/or reflexively when they are performed on the national stage today?

*The Europeans* clearly draw inspiration from post-dramatic theatre, where it is almost unthinkable to uphold the authority of the text and fail to engage critically with the cultural heritage represented by Euripides, Aeschylus, Shakespeare, Schiller. To sum up, one can say that the concept of FIX&FOXY is deconstructive in the sense that they relate ironically to the internal hierarchies and underlying values of the works. They also relate critically to the educational ideals and aesthetic expectations that the audience of the Royal Theatre may have in relation to the staging of the classics. It would be fair to say that FIX&FOXY have long since abandoned the idea that there is an artistic measure for determining whether the classics are represented in a "correct" way. But their conceptual approach to *The Europeans* does not merely break free of the fixed work (the text) and renounce the instructive authority of classical educational thought. Nor do they lapse into an ironic game where they can freely use their newfound freedom to evoke arbitrary meanings and effects. In my view, they rather attempt to open up the form and content of the works towards the present in an effort to examine and test the artistic, cultural and political boundaries of the works.

As far as the referential relationship between the theatrical performance and its environment is concerned, it is therefore crucial that *The Europeans* link to some very specific historical and political events, the topicality of which plays a significant role in the overall statement of the performance. To put it simply, there is little sense in viewing *The Europeans* in isolation from its historical and/or political context. Indeed, the critical dimension of the performance lies in the fact that it invites the audience to observe specific events in a new and surprising way. In this context, two historical circumstances played a particular role in FIX&FOXY's approach to *The Europeans*. First, Denmark had just become a nation at war in 2005, which serves as a point of reference for the performance's underlying strand about the unsettling compulsive repetitiveness of war. Hence the performance did not conceal its political standpoint, as its portrayal of Agamemnon/Milosevic appeared as an overt critique of the discourse of "the ends justify the means" on which the war on terror was then founded. Second, in 2005 Denmark was to hold a referendum on the EU Constitutional Treaty, which was based on a lofty narrative that "Europe's cultural, religious and humanist heritage"

---

9) See Solveig Gade's *Intervention og kunst: Socialt og politisk engagement i samtidskunsten* (2010), where she presents a thorough analysis and discussion of the political dimension of post-dramatic theatre.

10) Cf. Irina Malochevskaya's "Regiskolen" (Tell Forlag, Norway 2002), where she takes Konstantin Stanislavsky's artistic method as her starting point for a description of the director's process of interpretation. See also Runar Hodne's reflection on the relationship between staging and concept in "The Truth of the Mask – A reflection on Concept Development in Theatre", in Pålsson and Balevieiuete (eds.): *Looking for Direction* (Uniarts Helsinki, Helsinki 2022).

## The Europeans

formed the basis “for the development of universal values: the inviolable and inalienable rights of the individual, as well as freedom, democracy, equality and the rule of law” (Folketingets EU-oplysning 2005, p. 9). However, *The Europeans*’ deconstructive approach to the classics gives rise to a scathing critique of the grand narrative of a common Europe that has learned from all its many wars and conflicts. In other words, the form/content dialectic of *The Europeans* centres on a critique of the conditions of possibility of reason and rationality.

In FIX&FOXY, the whole idea of a grand narrative in which man is at the centre of an evolution leading to freedom, knowledge and progress is not given much space, and there are no convenient solutions to the narrative of *The Europeans*. The staging of classical works should therefore be seen as an attempt to bring the more uncomfortable aspects of European cultural history into play on the national stage. This ambition is a recurrent feature of FIX&FOXY’s artistic work, but it is nevertheless supported by the hope that it continues to make sense to investigate and stage the intangible and uncomfortable. In his reflections in *Love Theater: U håndgribelige konflikter* (Love Theater: Intangible conflicts), Kristensen writes for example that it does not make sense for them to work with the conflicts in a traditional dramatic form, where a safe and convenient resolution of conflict is provided. At the same time, however, he maintains that “we [...] have not been willing to give up the idea of the need for change. This has placed us in the peculiar position of wanting to participate in conflicts as creative theatre artists in ways other than through a classical critical position” (Kristensen, 2019).

In the Europeans, FIX&FOXY’s particular position also shows itself in the way in which they relate to the duality of the Royal Theatre’s institutional purpose as it is stated in the Theatre Act. “The Royal Theatre must continue the classical traditions, while at the same time developing a contemporary performing art through its activities”.<sup>11</sup> This is not a monumental historiography that preserves the great and memorable of the past, nor is it an antiquarian effort to protect and preserve classical traditions and values. In my opinion, it is rather a critical approach to the history of *The Europeans*, in which FIX&FOXY maintain their own uncertainty and relate reflectively, humorously and thoughtfully to the people, actions, stories and works of the past.<sup>12</sup> In line with Lehmann’s thinking, *The Europeans* in this way appears as a Trojan horse, sneaking post-dramatic theatre onto the national stage to attack the artistic framework and expectations from within. The following year, this willingness to test the boundaries of the Royal Theatre led to *Come on Bangladesh, Just do it!* (The Royal Theatre, 2006), in which FIX&FOXY outsourced the Golden Age romance *Elverhøj* (Elves’ Hill) to actors from Bangladesh. *The Europeans* was based on the European canon in order to show how European culture and identity are shaped by wars and conflicts.<sup>13</sup> In FIX&FOXY we are confronted with a chaotic and incoherent world where wars and conflicts have thrown Western civilisation into a fundamental identity crisis. However, they maintain an element of hope and a will to change in their artistic work, and the fundamental identity crisis they first grappled with in *The Europeans* has subsequently given rise to a string of thought-provoking performances, each of which has confronted us with the uncomfortable aspects of existence.

---

11) See the Danish Theatre Act, Ch. 2, §2. Online at: <https://www.retsinformation.dk/eli/lta/2003/1003>.

12) My distinction between monumental, antiquarian and critical history draws inspiration from Friedrich Nietzsche’s ideas on the utility of history. Gyldendal, Copenhagen 1994.

13) The same conceptual approach to classics is applied in FIX&FOXY’s *Parsifal* (2011) and *Et dukkehjem* (A Doll’s House, 2014). Tue Biering later reapplied this conceptual thinking in the performance *Det europæiske slagtehus* (The European Slaughterhouse, Odense Teater, 2022), in which the entire ensemble at Odense Teater perform eight of Shakespeare’s history plays from Richard II to Richard III.

---

**Mads Thygesen**, is a dramaturg and former Rector of the National School of Performing Arts.

---

### Works Cited

- Balevičiūtė, L, Suša, B (ed.), 2022. *Looking for Direction*. Uniarts Helsinki, Helsinki.
- Boenisch, P, 2015. *Directing Scenes and Senses – The Thinking of Regie*. Manchester University Press.
- Eigtved, M, 2007. *Forestillingsanalyse – en introduktion*. Forlaget Samfundslitteratur, Copenhagen.
- Fischer-Lichte, E., 2004. *Ästhetik des Performativen*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main.
- Fischer-Lichte, Risi, R., (ed.), 2004. *Kunst der Aufführung, Aufführung der Kunst*, Theater der Zeit, Recherchen 18, Berlin.
- Folketingets EU-oplysning: *Traktat om en forfatning for Europa* (Folketingets EU-Oplysning, Copenhagen 2005).
- Gade, S 2009. *Pretty woman walking down the street*. *Peripeti* vol. 11.
- Gade, S, 2010. *Intervention og kunst: Socialt og politisk engagement i samtidskunsten*. Forlaget Politisk Revy.
- Kristensen, J, 2019. *Uhåndgribelige konflikter*, in: Böhnish og Eidsaa (ed.). *Kunst og konflikt*, Universitetsforlaget.
- Lehmann, H-T, 2001. *Postdramatisches Theater* [1999]. Verlag der Autoren, 2. Auflage, Frankfurt am Main.
- Lehmann, H-T, 2013. *Tragödie und Dramatisches Theater*, Alexander Verlag, Berlin.
- Lehmann, N, 1996. *Dekonstruktion og dramaturgi*. Aarhus Universitetsforlag, Aarhus.
- Lehmann, N, 2006: *Performance efter dekonstruktion*, in: Pedersen, H. V. (ed.), 2006. *Performance positioner*. Forlaget Drama.
- Nietzsche, F. 1994. *Historiens nytte*. Gyldendal, Copenhagen.
- Roselt, J. 2008. *Phänomenologi des Theaters*. Wilhelm Fink Verlag, München.
- Sauter, W. 2000. *The Theatrical Event*. University of Iowa Press, USA.
- Thygesen, M. 2009. "Interaktion og iscenesættelse", in: Christoffersen (ed.): *Peripeti* vol. 11, Aarhus Universitet.



# Article

Against All Odds

# Against All Odds

## Tragedy and Statistics

By Erik Exe Christoffersen

FIX&FOXY's *Against All Odds*, 2019, is a representation of today's young people as they will statistically look in the future. The question in this article is what means the performance applies and what dramaturgies are used? Is it a documentary and "scientific" representation of young people or a subjective self-presentation of young people as they see themselves? In any case, it is a staging by FIX&FOXY, who observes the young people from different positions. At the *Reumert Award 2019*, *Against All Odds* received the award for Performance of the Year with the following motivation:

*"Here the figures from Statistics Denmark, were embodied as the flesh and blood of 22 children. Who rises to the top, who falls to the bottom? Who will die, who will go to prison, who will become a bank manager? Classes and categories became concrete when the children reported what the statistics predict. The children were given voice, some more nervously and shakily than others – all equally touching."*

(<https://iscene.dk/2019/06/02/aarets-reumert-2019-her-er-vinderne>)

What is it more precisely that creates this "touching" effect? In my opinion it is a combination of the energetic and affective presence of the young people and a dramaturgy based on the structure of the tragedy. The tragic is seen as an element in late modern life, where young people have the freedom to create their lives as they want, but where there is also a number of unknown forces that intervene in their reality – randomly or predictably – and this will shape their lives and lead to their end. The performance is a hybrid between the presence of the young people and the form of tragedy.

### The Statistical Method

Statistics is about predicting and thus creating a basis for the most favourable development, and in this way avoid disasters or reduce the risk of accidents. Statistical calculations rule our modern daily lives. Will it rain tomorrow? Should I cycle to work or take the bus?

Are the performance's questions about the future conditional on the young people's choices, the interplay of chance, or is the future given by virtue of, for example, a particular class upbringing and privileges? How do biological and social conditions interact with subjective dreams? The aim of statistics is to reduce random coincidences, but there are of course many different approaches to statistics, just as there are differences in emphasis concerning the relationship between personal agency, biological, genetic and social inheritance, education and the ability to break with predictable life patterns.

The use of the statistical method seems to be inspired by the German artist group Rimini Protokoll, who use statistics as a starting point for creating new ways of looking at reality. In 2013, in collaboration with Metroplis, they created 100% København (100 % Copenhagen), which was shown at the Royal Theatre with the participation of 100 statistically selected citizens from the city. It was a city portrait that portrayed the identity of Copenhagen as a statistical image of a city's culture.

## Against All Odds

Statistics can resemble a kind of fate narrative, about what is (probably) going to happen. It is reminiscent of classical tragedy, for instance Sophocles in King Oedipus, where the oracle predicts that Oedipus will kill his father and marry his mother. Both his parents and Oedipus himself try to avoid this prediction, but in doing so tragically come to realise it. The tragedy ends with Oedipus recognising and acknowledging his fate and taking it upon himself by gouging out his eyes and going into exile abroad. The tragedy leaves a question: is it fair, just or could this fate have been avoided? Is it a condition of life that we cannot change fate? This is also the question in *Against All Odds*.

### Young People as Ghosts

There is no classical dramaturgy, no plot and no fictional characters, but 22 young people chosen to represent youth. They slowly fill the stage and are organised into five groups, each with a sign marking their class affiliation: Upper class, upper middle class, middle class, working class and lower class. What will their youth, adulthood, old age and the journey in time leading up to their deaths be like? These are the questions posed by the performance, based on the adults' concerns in relation to the young people.

The performance brings together a number of different parameters such as inheritance, environment, relationships to adults, education and personal circumstances, without specifying, however, which is the most important. It lets the young people form a community that resists an overly concerned adult. As they say: "*We do not give in to your worries*" and "*we fight against all odds*". In this way, their own voice is included in the performance.

The performance alternates between closeness and distance. The young people's bodily vitality and sensuality create closeness and empathy, while the set design and sound, for example, create an investigative and cool distance. The scenography is stylised and consists of geometrically drawn spaces and tracks on a white stage floor. Outside the stage platform, there is a dark backstage where the performers are visible in relative darkness – a kind of "ghosts". It is a classic set-up: the stage opposite the auditorium creates a duality. It is both theatre as theatrical art and a statistical demonstration and study.

### Structure of the Performance

The performance alternately presents the young people as individuals with a more or less personal and monological expression and as a visually mediated choral community. The performers form a "we" as a group but are also singled out as individuals. The initial presentation of 22 young people of different ages is followed by a clarification of the factors that shape the young people and their identity: these are categories such as academic competence and personality, the quality of the school, parental resources, expectations and values, and parental presence. The factors that create identity in the performance are economic factors and psychological parameters such as substance abuse, obesity, homelessness, success, divorce and social status, alcohol consumption, domestic violence, sleep, competition, divorce in the family and the number of children.

The first part is a presentation of the young people here and now, and the second part is a prognosis for the future. What can they expect in terms of education, work, leisure, housing, gender and relationships. External factors such as war, climate, disasters and old age also play a part and lead to the young people's different ways of life. The play ends with the young people lying down one by one on the stage floor and marking their deaths. The play has a reflective epilogue in which the possibility of evading statistics is prominent.

## Between Fiction and Reality

The young people demonstrate agency through their participation and performance in the show. The energy is high: they dance, do gymnastic exercises, perform a ritual score, mime their parents and the well-meaning advice of various other adult voices on how to deal with the future. There is a high tempo choreography both by the whole group, small groupings and solo performances, with a series of dynamic transitions in and out of the stage. The young people take turns holding microphones for each other, taking turns as “narrators”. Finally, the young people’s costumes change along the way, which also creates dynamics, along with a sound backdrop where sound signals and music mark transitions to new scenes. The young people are both vital and representatives of categories. The statistical narrative construction is presented by different young people in turn from a special “narrative table” so that statistics become a narrative with integrated interruptions that create a certain irony and undermine the credibility of the statistics. At the same time, there is also a pathos effect by virtue of closeness and the actual reality of young people. Their performance is, in and of itself, a form of denial that they are subject to a fate or, for that matter, a director who has forced them to perform. They perform voluntarily, which means that they have become a group that relates to statistics with a certain irony: *“My friends here and I all have different backgrounds ... what we all have in common is that we believe that the future is open to us”* (script). They say what is written in the script, but they also occasionally interrupt and come up with their own ideas, which, however, seem also to be written in the script: *“No one can predict what will happen. I decide for myself... Except for what I’m saying now. Someone has decided that I should say that”* (script).

At the same time, however, they are selected and inscribed in a theatrical framework from which they cannot escape: *“It is also no coincidence that it is precisely us who are standing here. We are generally a statistically broad cross-section of children in the Danish population”* (script).

You could speak of a double irony here: on a dramaturgical level, the text acts as a predetermining figure, and as it turns out, the text is in a way “cruel”, leaving the young people to die one after another as a consequence of the statistics. At the same time, there is a paradox because it is also the text that determines that the young people free themselves from this fate and become self-determining. It is the irony of the dramaturgy that it expresses a paradox: the young people are both free and bound.

On a theatrical level, however, the young people are credible and manifest a “we” that is capable of action. This creates an ambiguous relationship between the young people and the text and the audience’s reception is indeterminate and ambiguous. The young people talk about their potential future, which is thus a form of fiction:

*“I’m completing a long higher education programme, even though I never really liked going to university (...) I choose instead to become a single mother”.*

*“It’s going to be pretty awful for me”*

*“When my father dies at an early age, I will start drinking ...”*

*“I will never get over being bullied in primary school”*

*“According to the statistics, it doesn’t look good for me. I will most likely develop social anxiety...”*

*“The statistics say I can rest assured with my parents’ long education and their high annual income (...) I will have a good job and three children, but my depression will keep coming back and I will die at 37, committing suicide in a hotel room in Vienna.”* (script)

These prophecies of the future are the fiction of the text, but the lines reflect back on the perception of the young people as if it is their future reality. And this, of course, creates a marked contrast to their scenic vitality. The statistical prediction of their deaths is denied by the young people in a kind of epilogue:

*“There are probably some people in here who think that this performance may keep us stuck in a narrative about who we are and what will happen to us. That we will believe that the statistics apply to us and that we can’t do anything about it.”*

But the young people’s conclusion is: *“We are the ones who can change the statistics”*.

The performance both highlights and emphasises that the actors have become a group and the production has contributed to creating a unique group community. It is as if the young people are taking on a collective agency. The creative process has created a community, and even though the young people are different, they radiate commitment, dynamism, energy, unity: there is no doubt about who does what, holds signs, speaks, who dances or sings. The performance has created a “We”, even if there are social differences that can have consequences unless the young people take responsibility for the inequality and the challenge it is to change the prediction of statistics against all odds. The solution is, for good reasons, not clear-cut: How can the individual offer the statistics resistance? What are the given conditions that cannot be changed? The young people fight against all odds, but the performance is an achievement in itself.

### **Theatre as a Space of Difference**

Morten Kyndrup (2010), professor at Aarhus University, calls the mediality of the theatre a space of difference, because there are different out-distributed senders: for instance, playwright, director, actor and set designer. You can also speak of different recipients, as the spectators do not see and hear the same thing in the auditorium and do not have the opportunity to check what they might have missed, as you can with a book. Thus, a central part of theatre is addressing the audience itself, which helps to emphasise and reinforce the specific character of the communication: that is, to sharpen the spectator’s attention, concentration, curiosity and focus, but not in the same way for everyone. A theatrical performance has an idea of its spectator and addresses this ‘virtual’ recipient, who is not necessarily the same as the actual spectator. The same applies to the sender, who is a complex figure:

*“Who says what to whom? Who can know what and when, also in relation to a possible fictional space, which the act of signification in question may evoke and refer to? (...) So who speaks? The author does, the director does, the individual actors do as characters, as artists respectively. All these positions of enunciation are, of course, “embedded” in the performance, and in practical terms they are part of every single act of enunciation on stage. That is to say, corresponding to this complex of embedded sender positions in each statement, the performance contains a matching set of embedded receiver positions, of model or implicit recipients. The actual spectator in flesh and blood is thus offered to listen to the author, to the director, to the individual characters as characters, as actors, as living human beings. All of these are different positions of enunciation that are expressed simultaneously in the individual act of enunciation.”* (Kyndrup, 2010 Translation: Ølholm)



Against All Odds. Photo: Søren Meisner

Kyndrup calls this complexity of enunciation a space of difference and emphasises that this is a fundamental feature of the mediality of theatre, where the spectators are the recipients of the work.

Works stage different voices addressing the spectators, and they draw on irony as well as pathos – both distance and empathic immersion in the work. *Against All Odds* has this complex staging of different “voices”, which means that factual uncertainty is a dimension of the dramaturgy and is amplified as the spectator is drawn into concerns about the future: for example, when we hear about the statistical fate of young people, which we may or may not share, and which we may be ashamed of or contradict. The tight structure of the staging creates an adult perspective that coincides with a spectator perspective.

The text, the young people as a social group, the staging, the scenography, the sound design and the choreography are different “voices” that do not say the same thing. The Betty Nansen Teatret is a specific and institutional art framework with its own tradition and atmosphere, and it is probably the first time 22 young people and children are on stage selected according to social and not professional criteria. Furthermore, FIX&FOXY is, of course, a completely different theatrical organisation.

Are the young people the director’s material in FIX&FOXY’s representation? An artist can sometimes be suspected of exploiting reality, the actors and their stories for his or her own (artistic) gain. Is that the case here? Young people are a fragile material. What happens when they are part of an artistic framework? In the theatre, a construction of enunciation is created with multiple voices present simultaneously and side by side: the actors are their own reality, so to speak, but also part of the staging, choreography and sensory effects such as intensity, rhythm, sound and light.

### **The General and the Unique**

One of the basic structures of the performance is the contrast between the general presentation of the future of young people in the statistics and their actual reality. In principle, the statistics speak of an abstract generality. Seven out of ten will do such and such. But the individual can be either one of the seven or one of the three unique exceptions. This creates a conflict between the singular and the general, which is perceived by the spectator, and where the statement of the work appeals to the spectator's choice between the exception and the rule.

The performance is open to various projections, and there are both sensory, artistic and symbolic forms of representation in a complex statement: the young people speak, dance, sing, show signs, where utterances can be both concrete and actual, as well as having the character of an "utterance" that is said because it is in the script. The passage of time itself takes on a fluid character because, in addition to being here and now in time, we move into a future and an imagined reality created by statistics. The device of the performance is precisely to allow the time and space of enunciation to change imperceptibly, while at the same time the local here and now is maintained by virtue of the reality and vitality of the young people. Is the young people's "resistance" real, or is it inscribed in the text as a form of ambiguity? This is the fundamental irony of the performance.

The spectators are entertained by the young people, and they may feel a little guilty about the predictions of the statistics, but on the other hand, they can rejoice in the fact that the young people claim that they can decide and change the statistics.

The performance dissolves the hierarchy between person and role and between present and future. As mentioned, it is a very tightly composed performance, and the young people practically run in and out and perform their tasks: the text must be spoken into a microphone, which they hold for each other, they change clothes, take part in solo and group scores at a relatively fast pace. It is a rhythm that creates an almost old-fashioned gymnastics drill emphasised by the painted tracks on the floor. This staging creates a kind of compassion that takes on a metaphorical character. They are busy realising their statistical destinies and at the same time a community is created in the struggle with the choreography and sound directing the pace.

### **The Indeterminate Space**

*Against All Odds* touches on the mutability and instability of late modernity. It creates an uncertainty in the affective space, which can be solemn, concentrated, cheerful, melancholic, disorientated, catastrophic and with an ambiguous atmosphere. The young people on stage address the adults, the spectators, who react to their performance with laughter, applause and empathy. The performance creates an atmosphere of "we" communicating about what is usually without words: an indeterminate future. The enunciation as a whole presents the statistic both as a modern prediction that is simultaneously deconstructed by the young people's unity, responsibility, energy, courage and recklessness: *against all odds*.

### **Closing**

*Against All Odds* as a concept can be applied in several ways. It is particular for this type of theatre that it is possible to incorporate different, also more pedagogical forms of realisation. The concept could be developed and adapted to another group of young people in another city or another country, with the variations that this might create. You could also use the conceptual idea to study and present a given group: a school class, a youth school or a folk high school:

What elements have particularly influenced your identity? School, parents, expectations, ethnicity, health, genes, heritage, other communities: sport, hobby, religion, scouting. What does the future look like for you as an adult and as an old person, when and how do you imagine your death?

For many, the experience of fragmentation, discontinuity, a gap between the internal and the external, doubts and uncertainty about the future are dominant. What is it that I want? Who am I when I am constantly changing? A large proportion of young people today are characterised by neurodivergence, anxiety, gender diversity and loneliness, and they find it difficult to recognise themselves as anything other than a tragic statistic. Prospects for the future are bleak due to climate change, political conflicts, the rise of autocracies and developments in technology and communication.

The concept can be used to explore a range of identity markers. How do I profile myself? How can my identity be represented and to whom? And which ones are inapplicable? About what and in which media? This is what *Against All Odds* as a concept can explore and possibly create a community as a theatre act.

---

**Erik Exe Christoffersen**, Associate Professor at the Department of Communication and Culture – Dramaturgy, Aarhus University.

---

### **Against All Odds:**

**Produced by:** Betty Nansen Teatret in collaboration with FIX&FOXY.

**Concept & direction:** Tue Biering. Set & costume design: Karin Gille.

**Choreography, casting & co-direction:** Freja Rault-Lykkeberg.

**Cast:** 22 children aged 10-14 years – Anna Olympia Bøss, Artianne Olivia Søgaard Andersen, Asta Bundgaard Wanscher, Conrad Bengtsson, David Prammann Schrøder, Emma Skov Dahl Christiansen, Falke Lindegaard Hvidtfeldt, Felix Worsøe Alegre, Frederikke Holm Bergendorff, Ida Møller, Isak William Bjerregaard, Jaafar Machal, Kajsa Krogh Larsen, Luka Gry Selander, Michael Basse Theobald, Molly Grand, Nicholai Kristensen, Ronja Emilie Clemens Tillebeck, Samir Abdi Elmi, Thea Hagelskjær Godskesen, Ursula Outzen, Zeraphina Corrie Bendtsen.

### **Works Cited**

Kyndrup, M (2010.) *Teatret: medialitet, udsigelse – og hamlet. Peripeti* Vol. 14.

Christoffersen, E. and Krøgholt, I. (eds.) (2017). *Make it Real – Virkelighedsteater. Peripeti* Vol. 27/28,



## Article

### The Management of Audience Discomfort FIX&FOXY's Practice of Political Confrontation

# The Management of Audience Discomfort

## FIX&FOXY's Practice of Political Confrontation

By Laura Luise Schultz

A key feature of FIX&FOXY's political remediations is their sophisticated engagement with the audience. Inspired by international groups such as Gob Squad and Rimini Protokoll, FIX&FOXY have developed their own subtle yet confrontational way of involving the audience in their performances. FIX&FOXY also work with so-called everyday experts, such as prostitutes, war veterans and other social groups not usually found on the theatre stage. The aim is to confront the audience with our own blind spots in our encounters with people and experiences of reality that we do not normally meet in the theatre. The nuanced positioning of the audience is crucial to the complexity of this encounter and the overall statement of the performances.

In recent years, Tue Biering has expressed a desire to not only represent oppressed groups and social realities on stage, but further to make room for people with whom he himself fundamentally disagrees, such as internet trolls or right-wing extremists – people whose worldviews he also expects his audience to be provoked by.

The question is if Biering, in this endeavour, risks sacrificing the complexity of the audience dramaturgy, because he positions his audience as more unambiguous and prejudiced than we necessarily are – after which he can provoke and undermine our supposed preconceptions.

By critically analysing FIX&FOXY's negotiation of the audience contract in a number of controversial performances, including among others *Dark Noon* (2019) and *Rocky! Taberens genkomst* (Rocky! The Return of the Loser, 2017), I will, based on Jacques Rancière's concept of the emancipated spectator, examine some of the dramaturgical devices that influence whether the works manage to create diversity and complexity in the positioning of the audience, or whether the audience is rather confined to a more unambiguous and predefined position.

It is my thesis that the more nuanced dramaturgical leeway the performance gives its audience, i.e., the more potential – and preferably mutually incompatible – audience positions the performance opens for and brings into play, the greater the space for critical reflection.

### **Benevolence and Discomfort: An Ambiguous Spectator Position**

We stand in rows behind each other and are asked to place our right hand on the shoulder of the person in front of us. Then we just have to take a step back and raise our hand slightly, just a tiny bit... Almost imperceptibly, almost unknowingly, we raise our hand halfway, almost to the point of *heiling* – before hastily withdrawing our arm! With socialising, nudging, communal eating, mild peer pressure and collective instructions, we have quietly been lulled into the national socialist community, and before we know it, we are almost standing there *heiling*.

We are in the middle of FIX&FOXY's production of *Viljens Triumf* (Triumph of the Will, 2012), a theatrical remediation of Leni Riefenstahl's famous tribute film to Hitler and Nazism on the occasion of the National Socialist Party's spectacular congress in Nuremberg in 1934. Along with Riefenstahl's *Olympia* (1936) about the 1936 Berlin Olympics, *Triumph des Willens* (1934) is one of the most influential but also controversial films in cinema history. As audience, we are invited to the theatre to help remake "the most beautiful staging in the world", as the trailer for

the performance says.<sup>1</sup> Using *green screen* and video camera, cotton wool that turns into clouds, and rows of folded pale yellow post-it notes illustrating an infinite tent camp, it is the actor Anders Mossling's job, single-handedly, to play the roles of the supposed 700,000 participants – with a little help from the audience.

The audience is keen to contribute when the benches have to be moved to make room on the floor. We help pass soup around and enjoy ourselves with guitar music around the campfire. We play the waving people who greet the Führer as he enters Nuremberg, and we listen to the speeches of Hitler, Goebbels and other prominent Nazis. Anders Mossling moves his bangs cartoonishly from side to side to act as first one and then another caricatured Nazi. We pull on long rubber boots after we have practised walking in step... Only an elderly couple draw the line at the rubber boots, so that they do not end up (almost) *heiling*.

*Triumph of the Will* (2012) is one of the plays in which FIX&FOXY work with the audience's discomfort. They have done so to varying degrees since *Come on Bangladesh, just do it!* (2006), when they outsourced the Danish national treasure *Elverhøj* (Elves' Hill, 1828) – and bought pizza for the audience with the money they saved by using cheap foreign labour.

Since then, FIX&FOXY have worked systematically with varying degrees of audience involvement in order to make visible the audience's own investments in specific socio-political conditions. This has occasionally led to polarised political debates, not least in the wake of *Pretty Woman A/S* (Pretty Woman Ltd., 2008). Here, different street prostitutes were hired every night to play the leading role in the 1990 film romance in which the street prostitute Vivian Ward (Julia Roberts) is rescued by the wealthy businessman Edward Lewis (Richard Gere). FIX&FOXY's version exposes the hypocrisy of the Cinderella story: in reality, no saving prince appears, on the contrary we send the women back to the streets at the end of the performance. The performance was accused of exploiting women who supported themselves as street prostitutes, but one could suspect that the criticism was rather based on the fact that the audience could not bear to get so close to the prostitutes and be confronted with their real living conditions.

In both performances, the discomfort is linked to the ambiguous spectator position: on the one hand, as a spectator, you want to support the performance and play along with the premises it lays out; on the other hand, you are uncomfortably confronted with your own complicity in social and political abuse.

### Feel-Good Theatre and Political Contradictions

FIX&FOXY's practice is inspired by international groups such as the German-Swiss Rimini Protokoll and the German-British Gob Squad, who in the 1990s and 2000s developed audience-involving post-dramatic formats that moved out into different public and social spaces while responding to global market mechanisms and a globalised media reality by exploiting new technologies such as video, internet and mobile phones.

FIX&FOXY have found their very own expression in this genre. Especially their feel-good way of inviting the audience to participate is in line with the relational and interventionist current in both art and theatre, which dominates both avant-garde art and post-dramatic theatre from the 1990s onwards. This kind of art and theatre is more socially intervening than politically agitating, inviting the audience into dialogical interaction rather than attempting to provoke and incite

---

1) See the trailer: <https://fixfoxy.com/en/viljens-triumf/>. FIX&FOXYs: *Viljens triumf* 2012 (consulted 28 May 2022).

specific political or revolutionary actions in a confrontational gesture, as seen in activist theatre from the 1920s and 30s and again in the 1960s and 70s.

Art historians such as Claire Bishop and others have been critical of relational aesthetics' soft and consensual form of social interaction and, drawing on political scientist Chantal Mouffe's concept of an agonistic public sphere, based on a shared recognition of legitimate conflicts and antagonisms, have insisted on the need to recognise real political contradictions in participatory art that seeks to intervene in public space and activate audiences.<sup>2</sup>

It does not seem obvious to accuse FIX&FOXY of being afraid to challenge consensus. But in their very invitation to the audience, there is an openness at play, rather than an aggressive politicisation. A group like SIGNA, by comparison, inscribes the audience into its performances in a far more heavy-handed way, literally enrolling us as for instance hospital patients, disciples of a sect or hotel guests in universes with clear house rules, regulations, etc. Similarly, SIGNA does not shy away from sanctioning, excluding and expelling the audience if they violate the power hierarchies of the game universes. On the contrary, it is a central part of the project to investigate how these power mechanisms work and make the audience align so that we submit to the rights of the strong rather than risk actually challenging the universe and its hierarchies and laws.

At FIX&FOXY, the audience may be seduced into playing along, but the approach to audience participation has usually been based on a fundamental openness and trust, where the premises are continuously laid out so that the audience is almost gently guided into the dramaturgical rules of the performance.

### **The Shared Responsibility of the Audience**

What is at stake in FIX&FOXY's audience involvement can be analysed using Rancière's critique of the position of the spectator in modern theatre. In his essay on "The Emancipated Spectator", the French philosopher Jacques Rancière highlights two main currents in twentieth century theatre thinking, represented by Antonin Artaud and Bertolt Brecht respectively.

At first glance, these two main figures seem to represent opposite ideals in modern theatre: Brecht wants to raise the spectator's awareness by introducing alienating elements that break theatre's seduction of the spectator using distancing devices that activate the spectator's critical sense and mobilise the audience for revolutionary action. Artaud, for his part, wants to completely overcome the distance between stage and auditorium and draw the spectator into the pure energy and presence of the theatre.

However, it turns out that both Brecht and Artaud attempt to overcome the very theatricality of theatre by simply creating a theatre without spectators. In both cases, the aim is to overcome the passivity of the spectators and mobilise them to action. In a curious analysis, Rancière points out how both strategies aim to overcome the cultural distrust of theatre, which Rancière traces back to Plato and his criticism of the poets for assigning a passive role to the audience.

Plato wanted to replace dramatic (and democratic) theatre with a choreographic community where everyone moved to the same beat and rhythm. In other words, he wanted to overcome the distance of representation in favour of *communitas*. Rancière's surprising point is that the same distrust of the theatre that motivates Plato's rejection of it also motivates the formal experiments of modern theatre innovators.

---

2) See for example Bishop 2004, Mouffe 2005.



Triumph of the Will. Photo: Søren Meisner

They are based on the idea that the theatre is fundamentally an expression of falsity, with its seductive shadow images which make the audience passive – an idea we know especially from Plato's allegory of the cave and Guy Debord's concept of a capitalist society of the spectacle permeated by false representations. This false theatre must now be overcome by a more authentic theatre of pure action and unmediated community, an idea we also know from the celebration of theatrical *liveness* as an expression of a unique presence that transcends all systems of representation and trumps all other art forms.

*They intend to teach their spectators ways of ceasing to be spectators and becoming agents of a collective practice. According to the Brechtian paradigm, theatrical mediation makes them conscious of the social situation that gives rise to it and desirous of acting in order to transform it. According to Artaud's logic, it makes them abandon their position as spectators: rather than being placed in front of a spectacle, they are surrounded by the performance, drawn into the circle of action that restores their collective energy. In both cases, theatre is presented as a mediation striving for its own abolition. (Rancière 2021, p. 9)*

Rancière does not buy the idea that the theatre is a space of undivided community that is particularly enabling for social or political action. He does not believe that there is any fundamental difference between being in a theatre or in a museum, in a school or in front of the TV at home in the living room. The romantic insistence on physical presence is in fact irrelevant, because the ability of art to generate community depends on the ability of individuals to interpret what they experience in their own way. We share this ability to individually create meaning through associations and dissociations, not by merging into one large unmediated community.

Rancière therefore does not believe in the unbridled activation of the audience. According to Rancière, the audience is always already active in its critical interpretation of the work unfolding on the stage (or the wall or the screen). And the apparent passivity of the audience merely ensures the distance to the work that is necessary for such a critical space of reflection to occur. The performance or the work is the third thing, the material that we can refer to from different points of departure as the basis for a free dialogue. The work generates a space of reflection that is the basis for our free translation into different constellations of meaning. Therefore, the real basis for emancipating the spectator is not to eliminate the distance to the stage and activate the spectator, but to ensure an open and democratically equal space of reflection in a form of theatre that Rancière describes in this way:

*Faced with the hyper-theatre that wants to transform representation into presence and passivity into activity, it proposes instead to revoke the privilege of vitality and communitarian power accorded the theatrical stage, so as to restore it to an equal footing with the telling of a story, the reading of a book, or the gaze focused on an image. In sum, it proposes to conceive it as a new scene of equality where heterogeneous performances are translated into one another. For in all these performances what is involved is linking what one knows with what one does not know; being at once a performer deploying her skills and a spectator observing what these skills might produce in a new context among other spectators. (...) An emancipated community is a community of narrators and translators. (Rancière 2021, p. 17)*

Such a “stage for equality” can of course easily emerge through interactive forms of theatre such as those developed by FIX&FOXY. Audience involvement does not have to be the same as uncritical *feel-good* theatre or aggressively lecturing theatre of provocation. Just as classical drama or conventional proscenium theatre do not guarantee the emancipation of the spectator. Regardless of genre and form, according to Rancière, the emancipation of the spectator depends on the extent to which a critical space for reflection can be left open. With their post-dramatic dramaturgy, in which all effects and positions are in principle equal, FIX&FOXY place themselves firmly between Brecht and Artaud when they play on the very connection between the audience’s need for presence and its ability or willingness to take direct action. At the same time, they work to put real material for political conflict on stage as Bishop argues for. What is interesting, however, is how the audience dramaturgy, i.e., the positioning of the audience by the performance, affects and defines the space the performance leaves for antagonisms in Bishop’s sense and critical reflection in Rancière’s. As mentioned earlier, I will argue here that the more different and contradictory audience positions a performance allows for, the more complex its potential space of meaning becomes.

This does not mean levelling out real differences and insurmountable disagreements – nor is it about whether the performance is interactive, experimental or conventional. It is about dramaturgically making room for a complex and conflictual space where the audience has access to several possible points of identification, rather than closing the space of meaning in one position – even though the content of the performance may deal with a fixed and irreconcilable social or political antagonism. In the following, I will examine how the audience dramaturgy in a number of FIX&FOXY’s performances affects the critical scope of the performance.

### **Black Sun and White-Facing: A European House of Mirrors**

*Dark Noon* from 2019 is a performance that works with a high degree of complexity in the casting of the audience.<sup>3</sup> In an almost exemplary visualisation of Mouffe's agonistic space of contradictory positions, *Dark Noon* works with the conflict of opposites in the space as well as in the positioning of the audience, without at any point identifying a pure position from which the truth of the play can be said to emanate, and where the audience can seek refuge and settle in the secure conviction of having sympathy on its side. Specifically, the conflicted space is mirrored in the structure of the stage, where the spectators see the performance from different angles and also enter the different parts of the scenography and the performance from different positions and with incomplete perspectives – but still enter a common projection, a common space. Although the performance can be said to make use of Brechtian *verfremdung* as well as intensive moments of presence in Artaud's sense, I will argue, based on its complex positioning of the audience, that *Dark Noon* in its overall dramaturgy first and foremost creates space for Rancièrian reflections or translation manoeuvres in a space of diverse conceptions and experiences.

*Dark Noon* is something as rare in theatre as a Western, performed with seven South African actors in *whiteface* and co-directed with South African musician and choreographer Nhlanhla Mahlangu. The idea of staging a Western based on the massive migration from Europe to America, which lasted for over a hundred years and culminated in the early 1900s, serves as a complex commentary on the European panic over the many African and Middle Eastern refugees and migrants heading to Europe today.

The seven actors unfold the whole of American history through a genre pastiche, where we see *the land of opportunities* come into being before our eyes, as we are taken to a slave auction in the South and head west across the prairie with Indians and cowboys, settlers and gold diggers, Chinese railway workers, preachers and prostitutes.

At the same time, current American politics are folded into the representation of the historical United States when we see a Trump-figure with a red tie and yellow toupee signing the Constitution, or when the Indian reservation on stage is marked with wire net of the same type used today to separate Mexican children from their parents at the US border. In this way, the performance reveals how the racist violations we see today are rooted in the colonial history of the United States. Furthermore, it seeks to tell this story from a non-Western perspective, which is emphasised towards the end, when the South African actors recount their experiences of watching Westerns as children, experiences that range from fascination to alienated indifference.

### **The Stage as a Field of Social Experience**

One of the most interesting things about *Dark Noon* is how it not only works to break different perspectives against each other in the staged narrative itself, but also in the way it positions its audience. *Dark Noon* is a complex performance that specifically works to break up the perspective, so that it is both told and experienced from several angles and positions at the same time.

Specifically, the audience was placed on three sides of the rectangular stage area, which consisted of red sand. Along the way, the actors build a town out of boards, reminiscent of a classic Western set, but also drawing references to Lars von Trier's 2003 film *Dogville*, which in turn refers back to Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* from 1938 as the classic *all-American* drama about the American small

---

3) Parts of this article have previously been published in another form in my review of *Dark Noon* in *Norsk Shakespearetidsskrift*, cf. Schultz 2019.

town. In combination with the red sand and the black actors, the set suddenly also resembles the poor houses made of boards and corrugated iron that we know from the South African townships to which black South Africans were forcibly relocated under the apartheid regime. In this way, the thread is traced back to European imperialism, just as the title itself invokes the European idea of the uncivilised wilderness, be it the American prairie or Africa as the dark continent that has been used to legitimise and whitewash the European colonialists' own inhumanity.

The performance upsets the North-South balance, but it also manages to weave together many different historical times and perspectives. Along the way, the role of the audience slowly shifts. We become less neutral and more exposed as the audience becomes involved in the performance: the benches are removed from under us as they are used to build the sets. Some of us become customers in a bank that is being robbed, and we are encouraged *at gun point* to scrape together the South African banknotes that fly around the stage. We are encouraged to queue for Coca-Cola but are refused as we have no money. As churchgoers, we suddenly become participants in a civil rights demonstration.

Finally, at the very end, we get the actors' own stories of how they experienced American Western films as children and young people growing up in an ethnically divided South Africa. Some have been fascinated by Westerns, some reflect on Westerns as a direct expression of the violence and guns that Europeans brought to Africa – others have not been able to relate to the genre at all: seen from the outside, this western mythological basic narrative is not necessarily very interesting or fascinating. Although European colonialism is of enormous historical significance, it is not necessarily very relevant for a South African to engage with it in its western, mythologised form.

### **Addressing a Complex Audience**

The performance employs a number of devices along the way to address these different perspectives on the material. First and foremost, it refrains as far as possible from addressing the Danish audience as a homogeneous, white 'we': Just as the entire performance is an attempt to apply critical perspectives to a dominant historiography, the performance also makes a concrete effort to spread the perspective and both address and position the audience differently.

The audience is seated all the way around the red sand of the stage and thus has different views of the action unfolding across the entire stage area. As the set emerges, it partially blocks the view of some of the spectators. At the same time, however, live cameras project central parts of the action onto a screen on one end wall where there is no audience. The different spectators who are invited on stage further have varying experiences of the action. In other words, not everyone experiences or sees the same thing, but at the same time the stage still functions as a shared social field of experience. The effect is that the audience is addressed as diverse and complex. In this way, *Dark Noon* manages to concretise diversity in the theatre space itself, in the dramaturgical and scenographic devices, and in the relationship with the audience. The story is in a sense familiar material, but we get it in a fragmented and decentred version, where different, parallel narratives, points of view and experiences challenge each other – and thus require of the audience that we connect what we know with what we do not know, in a reflective translation work in Rancière's sense.

### **The Beast on Stage**

"The left wing is characterised by an enormous self-righteousness", Tue Biering claimed in an article in the daily paper *Berlingske* in 2017, explaining how he was completely unaccustomed to seeing opinions other than his own represented on stage:

## The Management of Audience Discomfort

*I myself am part of the echo chamber that has emerged in cultural life. Many of those who sit in the theatre are the 'true believers.' They go to the same church as I do. In that way, it's also very safe. We can put on a lot of performances about the bad guys, the right-wingers, and sit and laugh at them. And because it's a left-wing artist on stage portraying the others, it's nice and recognisable. In this way we just emphasise the division into us and them.*<sup>4</sup> (Biering in Almbjerg, 2017)

With his statement, Biering attempts to reflect critically on his own positioning as an artist and ask whether he has been good enough at creating a theatrical space that can accommodate contradictory positions. However, it seems as if Biering, with this statement in *Berlingske*, is simply reproducing a criticism right down to formulations, sentences and metaphors that is already widespread in the bourgeois press. The interview was a prelude to the performance *Rocky! Taberens genkomst* (Rocky! The Return of the Loser), which, based on Sylvester Stallone's 1976 boxing film, tells the story of a loser who becomes a winner, and in Biering's version mutates into a demagogue who, with money in his pocket, gains access to the media and cultural education, and in this way wins over even former leftists to his racist *white-trash* agenda.



Rocky. Photo: Henrik Ohsten

The performance is built around a dramaturgical circularity in which it is the handsome, and one might understand, centre-leftist actor on stage, Morten Burian, who tells Rocky's story. At first, he holds Rocky at arms-length like a loser at a safe distance from Burian's own self-evident access

---

4) All translations from sources not previously translated into English are by Marianne Ølholm.

to education and privilege, but gradually he embodies Rocky more and more. It begins with homophobic, racist and sexist jokes – carefully dosed with one of each kind – but accelerates, especially when he hangs a slaughtered pig on a hook as a punching bag. Gradually, he takes over the pig’s position. From punching away at it when language is inadequate to express the loser’s frustrations, Burian moves towards the point where he literally hangs himself by the feet like an animal to be slaughtered and sacrificed. Like a pig.<sup>5</sup>

For Rocky’s successful rebellion causes increasing frustration for the benevolent narrator-actor, to the point where the Burian-character breaks down and wants to smash both Rocky and democracy... and in this way suddenly becomes like Rocky himself, the inarticulate loser who cannot help himself because he has no language for his own anger and humiliation.

We physically feel the sickening coincidence between the collapse of language and the dominance of hatred when Burian stuffs the pig’s torn out tongue into his own mouth and breaks down in inarticulate sounds. He then replaces the pig with his own body, which he has previously marked with red paint like a pig for cutting: a sacrifice of his own left-wing position in order to get *the other*, that is the right-wing populist position, on stage – and at the same time an extreme physical performance that rivals the boxer’s in literally taking over his macho performance before our eyes.

As an epilogue, a politician from The Danish People’s Party, Cheanne Nielsen, enters the stage and talks about how she has been reported to the police for racism, while the media simultaneously tell charming stories about peaceful refugees, but fail to tell us about all the “aliens” who abuse “our hospitality” by cheating, stealing and murdering.<sup>6</sup> Finally, the last death blow to the “leftist echo chamber” comes in the applause, when Burian enters hand in hand with Cheanne Nielsen, so that if we want to applaud his acting performance, we have to applaud her xenophobia as well.

### **Echo Chamber or Critical Public sphere**

Biering undoubtedly has a point in his analysis of how, in a broader societal reality, the progressive part of the culture-bearing segment that seeks out experimental theatre sometimes acts in a patronising manner towards the minoritised or excluded groups that they also wish to represent on stage or in the debate – and that this elitist approach is problematic. The rest of the analysis, on the other hand, appears more questionable, especially when it comes to the perception of the art field’s link to the surrounding socio-political reality.

A fundamental device in *FIX&FOXY* is to use the theatre space to let the audience meet social groups we do not normally encounter – in other words, to exploit the function of the theatre as a shared democratic space. In *Rocky! The Return of the Loser*, however, Biering short-circuits the critical potential and complexity of this space when he tries to force the audience to listen to the same shrill voices that fill the rest of the media public sphere.

By virtue of its relative autonomy, art is one of the central places in a modern democratic public sphere where a critical analysis of society and ideas of a different socio-political reality have been

---

5) This physical application of a slaughtered pig’s body was also used in Cecilie Ullerup Schmidt’s gymnastic performance *Landbrug* (Agriculture) at the Café Theatre in 2012, where she had hung herself on a hook with a slaughtered pig while explaining her research into the working and production conditions in pig production. Ullerup Schmidt, however, hung with her head up. The scenography in that performance was by Lisbeth Burian.

6) Dansk Folkeparti (The Danish People’s Party) is a national conservative, right-wing populist political party.

allowed to be heard and articulated. However, at a time when free research, free media and critical art are shamed and subjected to aggressive nationalist mobilisation and censorship by policy-makers, experimental art is put under pressure as a legitimate field for critical thinking.

In democratic, bourgeois society, art has been a public space where we could meet around a common object – a work of art – and form our individual opinions in interaction with and against others, as the old Enlightenment thinkers envisioned it. Rancière builds on this Enlightenment idea when he insists on a radical and potentially transformative equality, both in his ideas about the emancipated spectator and in his more extensive analyses of the political as the designation of a democratic and anarchist process that reconfigures the established structure of society.<sup>7</sup>

That such a critical, democratic space should be disavowed in favour of populism's artificial division of society into the people versus the elite is, in my view, a bigger societal problem than whether the left becomes patronising in its defence of weak social groups. When Tue Biering includes a right-wing populist politician in his performance in order to provoke the cultural elite, it appears more than anything else as an internalisation of the bourgeois suspicion of the critical function of art.

It is a strange logic to hold critical thinking responsible for the rise of populism – should this responsibility not rather be attributed to populist politicians and opinion makers? In *Rocky! The Return of the Loser* Biering wants to analyse a mechanism whereby populism is driven by the people's opposition to a patronising elite, but in his eagerness to open up the space for the position of the radical *other*, it apparently escapes Biering's attention that he thereby becomes part of the anti-*woke* attack on any legitimate critique of the exclusionary mechanisms of bourgeois society.

The very premise of the theatre as a left-wing echo chamber is a truth with modifications. First of all, the bourgeois power elite are happy to go to the theatre, although they tend to go to the big theatres rather than the small experimental venues. Nevertheless, the institutional theatres benefit from the fact that the progressive artists in the independent field develop the language of the performing arts at a low cost and prevent it from stagnating in pure old-fashioned melodrama and popular comedy. Experimental theatre is thus not a closed circuit. FIX&FOXY attempt to challenge and reconfigure the prevailing division of society and the public sphere by giving voice and visibility to groups that are not usually heard. It is commendable to try to make this a truly equal encounter in a space where you have the right to speak yourself, and to try to let yourself be genuinely challenged by the voice of the other. The question is, however, what political gesture this endeavour will translate into.

Biering is to some extent on the same wavelength as Rancière, who has also criticised the critique of populism for being left-elitist. Rancière's position is that the quasi-fascist currents of our time do not emanate from right-wing populism or from the masses. Rather, it is the need for state power to ensure the free movement of capital, on the one hand, and to control the movements of the populations, on the other, that gives rise to discriminatory and racist legislation that serves to produce groups of precarious workers and second-class citizens who can potentially lose their citizenship and legal rights at any time. States need to legitimise their so-called security measures by maintaining a constant state of alert with a series of enemy images that ultimately conflate the democratic concept of the people with the spectre of extremist mass movements, so that any challenge to the legitimacy of power can be dismissed as potentially totalitarian. In this way, the ruling power appears as the only reasonable option and model of society: "*The current polemic*

---

7) See for example Rancière 2021, p. 51.

*over the mortal dangers of populism seeks to establish in theory the idea that we have no other choice.*" (cf. Rancière 2017). According to Rancière, far-right populism merely exploits the xenophobic defamation of Muslims in particular, which already emanates from the centre of power.

In Biering's dramaturgy, however, this critical analysis is reduced to teaching the audience to be tolerant of intolerance. Cheanne Nielsen ends her incriminating denigration of "the alien" with a plea to the audience to accept that voices like hers are out there, because "I respect yours." But that is simply not true. Her entire speech has been one long expression of disrespect for voices that are different from hers. What she says can therefore only be understood in one way: that she perceives the audience as consisting of one kind of people whose presence she can acknowledge, namely white, ethnic Danish people like herself, who unfortunately just have the wrong opinions. People who differ from this category, on the other hand, she has just demonstrated that she does not respect in any way.

### **The Casting of the Audience**

This brings us back to the question of the dramaturgical positioning or *casting* of the audience. From the outset, FIX&FOXY's central artistic device has been to confront the audience with parts of reality that we tend to look away from and avoid encountering: the prostitutes in the red-light district, the unemployed, the Rocky types, the populist politician, etc. The way to get there has very often been through an alliance with the audience: we are going to shoot this film together, we are going to build this western town together, we are going to investigate this phenomenon together...

In performances like *Rocky!* and also, for example, *Vi de 1%* (*We the 1%*) from 2021, however, there is a shift in the way the audience is positioned. In *Rocky!* we still have the alliance between actor and audience – but we are dealing with a completely unambiguous audience position, where the audience and actor are cast in a clear antagonism to the Rocky character, who is portrayed as *the other*.

In *We the 1%*, super-rich Danes are on stage to feed the audience's curiosity about their lifestyle. The rich are challenged in a play between pride and discomfort at having their wealth on display, and they are met on stage by an underclass of homeless, unemployed, criminals, etc. while the privileged middle class of the theatre audience looks on. An interesting encounter in itself, but both dramaturgically and conceptually the whole exercise seems somewhat diffuse and unresolved. A lone actor, Maria Rich, has been given the task of keeping the actors busy in the scenography, and it appears most of all like a directionless pastime – perhaps mimicking our prejudices about how the rich squander their lives in idleness: We ask the rich man probing questions and let him brag about his Rolex, then we set up a suitable environment for him with cake and champagne and bar cart and maid, then we put pressure on him by introducing the intrusive poor who never become really dangerous, while we play a little tennis and go hunting and have a little conversation about why he should have all the cake and why the losers do not get more angry about it. Although there may be a point in the fact that a united front against the rich does *not* arise – as we saw, for example, in Rocky's populist revolt against the elite – it is mostly the lack of dramatic direction that gives rise to the feeling of embarrassment and cringing, and not the actors themselves. Apparently, there is only one idea behind the whole production: to turn the mirror on the audience itself. Just as the audience in *Rocky! The Return of the Loser* is confronted with Cheanne Nielsen and the limits of our own tolerance in the form of our intolerance of the intolerant, so, as the title almost suggests, we are confronted with our own wealth in *We the 1%*. Because in a final twist, we face-time from the stage with a poor family from Moldova, after which the camera is turned towards ourselves,

and in comparison with the living conditions of the Eastern European family, it becomes clear to the audience that just by being Danes, we ourselves belong to the richest part of the world's population – seen in a global perspective. We are thus to end up looking at ourselves and realising our own privileges, but here, in my opinion, lies the problem that we as an audience are cast in a somewhat simplistic way. The surprise is not really a surprise, because it is already anticipated in the 'we' of the title. The unambiguous casting of the audience serves mostly to cover up an unresolved political analysis and a lack of dramaturgical idea behind the play itself, which means that nothing really comes into play in the encounter on stage or in the theatre space.

### **The Reconfiguration of Reality**

Here we can appropriately return to Rancière, who in 'The Emancipated Spectator' takes as his starting point his book about *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* where he describes the French teacher Joseph Jacotot's method of intellectual emancipation. Jacotot argued that the traditional idea that the teacher must impart knowledge to his pupil leads to stupidity, because the pupil learns first and foremost how ignorant she herself is. The method of intellectual emancipation, on the other hand, confirms the fundamental equality of the talents. The ignorant teacher does not attempt to impart to the pupil the teacher's own knowledge, but on the contrary to help the pupil to acquire knowledge for herself in a process of poetic translation:

*From this ignoramus, spelling out signs, to the scientist who constructs hypotheses, the same intelligence is always at work – an intelligence that translates signs into other signs and proceeds by comparisons and illustrations in order to communicate its intellectual adventures and understand what another intelligence is endeavouring to communicate to it. (Rancière 2021, 10)*

The basis of any learning, according to Rancière, must be such a fundamental equality of knowledge and talent. Concerning the ignorant teacher, he states:

*He does not teach his pupils his knowledge, but orders them to venture into the forest of things and signs, to say what they have seen and what they think of what they have seen, to verify it and have it verified. (Rancière 2021, 11)*

Similarly, according to Rancière, the relationship between director and spectator can be conceptualised as a radically equal relationship. It is not a question of the theatre inciting the spectator to action, or of returning the theatre to an original cultic fusion between the agents. It is about recognising that the spectator is already active in her own interpretative effort, and that the spectator, as well as the director or actor, by virtue of her interpretation of the world, is always already in the process of reconfiguring reality here and now by challenging the current division of society and thus disrupting the established order in a political gesture.

Tue Biering criticises the left for being patronising rather than appreciative of *the others*, whom they at the same time want to lift onto the stage in order to bring them into the theatre. This approach corresponds precisely to the position criticised by Rancière, where the teacher tries to impart his own privileged insight to the ignorant pupil, or the intellectual tries to lift the worker to his own higher insight, rather than recognising the equality of talents. But how does Biering position himself as a director when he unfolds his critique from the stage?

A fundamental device in FIX&FOXY's contribution to a reconfiguration of the prevailing division of society consists in bringing about encounters between social classes and population groups that otherwise do not meet, by literally putting them in the same room and making them interact with each other. It is the equal refraction of different perspectives as such that keeps the (interpretative) space open and creates the dynamics of the performances. This is not to say that there are no strong opinions, uncomfortable truths and insurmountable disagreements at stake. In *Viljens triumf* (Triumph of the Will), we experience what happens when people become followers of a totalitarian power, and we realise how we ourselves have the follower in us. In *Dark Noon*, both aggression and irreconcilability are at stake. It is a central point that the Danish audience is challenged by encountering the experience of growing up and living with violence, which is the reality of the South African actors. The performance does not invite a soft, conciliatory exchange between Danish welfare citizens and South African post-apartheid reality, but a realisation that the violence is real. At the same time, we as spectators clearly experience that the perspective is fractured, partial, complex and inconstant through the scenic disposition of the space and our different access to it.

In *Rocky!* and *We the 1%* we also have this encounter between incompatible groups. But here there is another one-sidedness at work in the positioning of the spectator, where we are potentially reduced to a certain monolithic position in society, a certain class or segment. In doing so, the performance narrows the interpretative space in order to make a particular point. In *Rocky!* there is a certain aggression in the device of turning the gaze towards the audience and forcing us to listen to – and applaud – the xenophobic speech of the politician from The Danish People's Party. This very hands-on approach may possibly be conducive in conjunction with the performance's analysis of the mechanisms of populism and its basis in class differences – but it may also just be a thinly disguised confirmation of the prevailing populism. Cheanne Nielsen's function can be compared to the role of the prostitutes in *Pretty Woman Ltd.* But the premise is quite different. In one case, we are specifically confronted with the relentless social exclusion of a vulnerable population group. In the other, we are invited to accept a person who relentlessly advocates the social exclusion of a vulnerable population group. In *We the 1%*, however, the final scene's device of turning the camera on ourselves becomes a somewhat self-fulfilling gesture, despite the performance's intention to challenge our preconceived ideas about other classes and our limited understanding of the economic divisions we ourselves benefit from.

My concluding point is that audience dramaturgy plays a crucial role in relation to the overall statement of the plays. It is crucial to whether FIX&FOXY in a given performance succeed in opening up for a *reconfiguration of the sensuous here and now*, as Rancière describes it, where existing categorisations and divisions of people are experienced as changeable. This experience requires an open and critical space for reflection that can arise in an equal relationship where the spectator is free to form her own interpretations of the work between sender and receiver, director and spectator. In this way, the theatre realises its potential as a public space for shared critical reflection. In an interactive theatre such as FIX&FOXY's, the dramaturgical positioning of the audience becomes a decisive factor in the emergence of this complexity.

---

**Laura Luise Schultz**, Associate Professor, Department of Arts and Cultural Studies, Theatre and Performance Studies. University of Copenhagen.

---

### Works Cited

- Almbjerg, S. I. (2017. 16. 9.). "Venstrefløjen er præget af en enorm selvgothed" in *Berlingske*.
- Bishop, C. (2004). "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics" in *OCTOBER* #110, Fall.
- Christoffersen, E. E. (2017). "Tilskuerrelationen i FIX&FOXYs forestillinger" in *Peripeti* #27-28.
- Christoffersen, E. E., and Krøgholt, I., (2017). "Interview med Instruktør og dramaturg Jeppe Kristensen omkring Ungdom" in *Peripeti* #27-28.
- Daugaard, S. (2017) "Den venstredrejede teaterghettos auto-knock-out" in *Peripeti* #27-28.
- Mouffe, C. (2005). "Which Public Space for Critical Artistic Practices". Talk at The Institute of Choreography and Dance (Firkin Crane) published online.  
[https://readingpublicimage.files.wordpress.com/2012/04/chantal\\_mouffe\\_cork\\_caucus.pdf](https://readingpublicimage.files.wordpress.com/2012/04/chantal_mouffe_cork_caucus.pdf)  
(accessed 22 May 2022).
- Rancière, R. (2017). "Attacks on "populism" seek to enshrine the idea that there is no alternative" *The Verso blog*: <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3193-attacks-on-populism-seek-to-enshrine-the-idea-that-there-is-no-alternative> (accessed 15 June 2022).
- Rancière, J. (2021). *The Emancipated Spectator*. London: Verso.
- Rancière, J. (2014). "Den frigjorte tilskuer" in *Kultur & Klasse* #118.
- Rancière, J. (1991). *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Stanford University Press.
- Jacques Rancière, J. (2021). *Ti teser om politik*, Aleatorik.
- Schepelern, P. (2004). "Lidelse i et allegorisk univers" in *Ekko* #20.
- Schultz, L. L. (2019). "Dark Noon – er du bange for din egen skygge?" in *Norsk Shakespearetidsskrift* #2-3.



Rocky. Photo: Søren Meisner



# Article

## Love Theater: Intangible Conflicts

# Love Theater: Intangible Conflicts

By Jeppe Kristensen

When working with theatre productions, you are often faced with a fundamental problem. What do you do when the craftsmanship you have learnt and the conventions your profession is based on and applies in your daily work do not seem to be able to satisfactorily answer the challenges of the surrounding (or inner) world you want to deal with?

In FIX&FOXY we have had a wish to make performances that were politically and socially engaging, socially relevant and that *did* something. In collaboration with a large group of actors, production teams and other creative artists who loosely make up FIX&FOXY, we have created over 20 performances. All of them are about some form of societal issue. *Europæerne* (The Europeans, 2005) was about war, *Come on, Bangladesh, just do it!* (2006) was about outsourcing, *Pretty Woman A/S* (Pretty Woman Ltd., 2008) about prostitution, *Friends* (2009) about asylum policy, *Guldfeber* (Gold Fever, 2009) about class differences, *Parsifal – et operakorstog* (Parsifal – an opera crusade, 2011) about ghettoisation and racism, *Sex og Vold* (Sex and Violence, 2012) about the perversion of the media's entertainment approach to abuse and tragedy, *Viljens Triumf* (Triumph of the Will 2012) about political manipulation, *Love Theater* (2015) about sex tourism, *Det store adegilde* (*La Grande Bouffe*) 2015) again about class differences, *Ungdom* (Youth, 2015) a little atypically just about being young and *Et dukkehjem* (A Doll's House, 2013) just as a typically about modern relationships, *Velkommen til Twin Peaks* (Welcome to Twin Peaks, 2016) about the neglected and stagnant province and *Landet uden Drømme* (The Land Without Dreams, 2017) about our future.

The performances are characterised by the fact that from the beginning it has been social issues that we have been committed to. These are conditions where we have been convinced that something was wrong in the way social, political or economic relations have ossified, but not in what way this was problematic or what it would take to improve the situation.

How then, as an artist, can you approach the process of making a performance that does not just aim to describe the situation, but is a participant in it and tries to change something?

## Conflict as a Dramaturgical Concept

The theatre's approach to such issues has been to understand them as conflicts. The common thread of a drama, Danish dramaturge Birgitte Hesselaa notes, is "*the conflict in which the main character (the protagonist) becomes involved because helshe has a project that meets resistance. An opponent (antagonist) has an opposing project*" (Hesselaa, 2001, p. 23, original italics). In Michael Evans' *Innføring i dramaturgi* (Introduction to Dramaturgy, 2008) this is formulated as follows:

*"In dramatic narratives of all genres, the actions are conflictual. The characters act because of a conflict, otherwise they would stay still"* (ibid., p. 30)<sup>1</sup>

Evans places conflict as the central element of dramaturgy from which all action emanates – following Ferdinand Brunetière's *La Loi du théâtre* from 1893 (Brunetière, 1893) and thus sees all dramatic theatre since then as conflict-based. This is not only about drama as *action* on stage, but more importantly as the formal construction that can create meaning. That is, what can make a

---

1) All translations from sources not previously translated into English are by Marianne Ølholm.

theatre play about something. And can stimulate the audience to change their perception of an issue – and ultimately help to bring about change in the world outside the theatre. Evans introduces different levels of conflict: external conflicts, personal conflicts and internal conflicts (Evans, 2008, p. 31).

### **Working with Hyper-Complex Issues**

When we have chosen social issues to make theatre about in FIX&FOXY, one option would be to look for the essential conflict within them. We have chosen to go a different way. The issues we have worked on share some characteristics: first, they can be viewed as non-conflictual. When we set out to create a performance about outsourcing in *Come on, Bangladesh, just do it!* (2006), we thought that the globalisation of conditions of production was deeply problematic and that the exploitation of labour by slave economies was a quite extreme conflict between companies with almost unlimited agency and workers with little or almost no agency.<sup>2</sup> But this seemed reductive. You *could* see the issue as one of the most powerful and socially transformative forces in the world without seeing a conflict. That was essential. Second, these were issues that we soon realised we had opinions about, but not extensive knowledge of. The risk of creating a narrative or a basic conflict that simply confirmed what we already believed seemed far too great.

A basic idea in our work has been that the issues we find interesting are probably so complex or hyper-complex that it makes no artistic sense to work with them as a traditional dramatic conflict, because we cannot make any suggestions as to what a solution might be. And maybe it does not make sense to talk about solutions at all.

As a basic premise of our work, we have not been willing to give up the idea of the need for change. This has placed us in the particular position that we have wanted to participate in conflicts as creative theatre artists in a different way than through a classical, critical position; that we have wanted to create positive change without a positive end goal; and that we have wanted and needed to connect an agenda for change with an equally open-minded curiosity. We have had to learn along the way, not only research enough to be able to see the conflict clearly and choose, but understand the complexity of the situation and experience its intractability, as well as giving that intractability a form on the theatre stage that in some way initiates positive change. How do you do this?

Our only response has been to explore it during rehearsals. Our daily work of shaping a performance and making tiny choices about how to create the performance has been about staging this uncertainty in the face of the political or social situation we were dealing with, which we could at the same time recognise as constructive.

It has been essential for these thematic choices and creative processes that we have not carried them out alone. In situations where we did not think we knew what the right choice was – where we did not know whether our “Nora” should walk away or not but were curious about her own attitude to the situation, we have resorted to a double strategy: We have invited the people affected by the issue to participate in the creation of the performance. Often as actors and also as co-creators. In addition to using theatre fiction to give form to a problem (by making a performance that in fictional form presents a problem as a story with actors in conflict with each other), we have also turned the theatre situation itself and that is gathering spectators and actors in the same room, to

---

2) Our main source for thinking as we did about outsourcing was Naomi Klein’s journalistic insight into the mechanisms of outsourcing in her book *No Logo. Mærkerne, magten, modstanden* (Klein, 2001). The result was a performance by Bangladeshi actors at the Royal Danish Theatre in Copenhagen.

make the spectators watch the actors perform a performance, as part of our signifying material and as something we could work with artistically. In this way, we have tried to stage complex issues and maintain our own uncertainty as an essential element, while at the same time holding on to the idea – that it should somehow become a performance that leads its spectators through a change and thus, on a small scale, contribute to changing the surrounding world and the present time. In the following, I will take a closer look at *Love Theater* (2015) as a concrete example of this work.

### **Love Theater**

In the spring of 2014, I travelled with set designer Sille Dons Heltoft and our “fixer”<sup>3</sup> Hanne Thornager to Bangkok, Thailand, as the first step in the work of making FIX & FOXY’s theatre performance *Love Theater*. We each had our own area of responsibility for the trip. Sille was responsible for finding everything that would later make up our scenography in Copenhagen, which was to be a Thai hotel room. She spent her days in Bangkok seeking out Bangkok hotel rooms with her camera, and then working her way through the markets of the city in search of Thai electrical sockets, soaps, hotel towels, lamps, bed linen, incense sticks, bamboo leaves, dressing gowns, waving cats, mass-produced backlit pictures, porn films, artificial flowers, dried fish, disposable toothbrushes, slippers, preoccupied with small details to recreate a Thai hotel room when we returned to Copenhagen.

I was in Bangkok to cast. We had to find a Thai prostitute to play the leading role in our performance. A prostitute who was interested in coming to Denmark for a few months to develop and perform a theatre production with her as the only actress on stage. The theatre performance was to be based on her own life and her own experiences as a prostitute.

This kind of casting has been a central part of our work in FIX&FOXY. Our performances feature people who are all very different and (also for us personally) worth knowing as individuals, but who have appeared in our performances under some kind of label such as “Bangladeshi”, “prostitute”, “poor”, “social housing resident”, “asylum seeker” and the like.

This is an expression of our personal point of departure in working with the themes of the performances. The issues they deal with are not particularly relevant to us in the first place. We can go about our daily lives without worrying about prostitution or outsourcing or the continuing imbalance in housing opportunities between ethnic and non-ethnic Danes. These issues, which we genuinely believe are of great importance, appear in our lives first and foremost as stories. (And probably the same is true for a very large part of our audience.) We read about them in the newspaper, see them in the news, in films, as stereotypes in the music we listen to. The conceptual basis of our performances is often that we all come into contact in our lives with stories, whether imposed or acquired, about who we are and who others are. These stories vary from pure prejudice to more nuanced attempts at understanding. They are fictions we have about each other, but they are not just fictional, they seep into our lives and become real. They affect the way we perceive each other and the way we perceive ourselves.

In our performances, we invite people who are affected by such a narrative on stage, often to encounter a popular culture version of that narrative. Our idea is that popular culture narratives are

---

3) The fact that in the process of making a theatre performance, we use a “fixer” who, as a professional with skills in organising and carrying out work in difficult environments, often works in international business or in the development and humanitarian sector, is a very concrete example of how the shift from character-based conflicts to person-based issues not only affects what happens on stage and what theatre art looks like, but just as much how we have to think about theatre production and creative work.

not innocent. They are the sea we swim in in terms of our understanding of each other, and their way of smoothing, romanticising, or demonising affects the way we look at people we do not know.

FIX&FOXY's performances deal with the alien. We create narratives to fill in the gaps in our worldview and the impact these narratives have on all of us. In the performances, we work with a problematic, tension-filled discrepancy between the real life of a person, or a group of people, and the ideas the rest of us have about them. If the classical dramatic conflict can sometimes seem too clear-cut – and it clearly is in its pop-cultural variant – we experience again and again that the encounter between these all too simple stories we have about each other, and the real human being brings us into an incalculable and fascinating wealth of meanings, staging possibilities, and new discoveries.

In *Love Theater* we did not want to work with a pop story as a starting point. We thought that the preconceptions a theatre audience might have about a Thai prostitute and what sex tourism would be is a sufficient starting point for the work. We wanted to let the audience meet a Thai prostitute and her own stories. The question then became: which stories?

### **Casting**

In Bangkok, through a collaboration with the prostitutes' union, I was faced with the choice between three potential lead roles. And thus, also between three completely different potential performances. We carried out the casting by borrowing a hotel room and here asking the women to talk about their first experience as a prostitute. As they recounted situations, we also tried to recreate them with me as the client. I kept asking about details in the narrative and quite practical, small observations: How did you get into the room, what did you do then, what did you say, what happened next? The women thought it was incredibly stupid to ask about such things, because to them it was obvious how it was done. But I knew nothing about prostitution and sex tourism, so it was important to me. And at the same time, small situations began to occur between us that could be seen as a kind of realism, where the small details in the relationship between the prostitute and the customer began to make sense beyond the practical – small images of security, desire, care, anxiety, business.

One of the three women arrived several hours late. She was angry that we had planned to meet in the early afternoon. She had been up all night and was still intoxicated. When we finally started the audition, she repeatedly scolded me, refused to participate and several times almost fell asleep. At the same time, there was a great indignation about her own life situation; she was angry with the customers and quite explicit about seeing her work as a continuous violation. It was chaotic and wild, difficult to see how a further rehearsal process would go, but also a really good story, a personal commitment and an attitude towards sex tourism that corresponded well with my own.

The second woman worked mainly with Thai men. Her first prostitution experience took place in a local restaurant, where she and other young women sat behind a glass window in the restaurant room while local men came to eat and drink, occasionally picking a woman from the window. Her work as a prostitute in this Thai environment was completely different from the prostitution environment aimed at Western men. On the other hand, she was skilful at recreating situations. It was not just about details and facts. She also managed to create a relationship where it felt very intimate to be with her, and comfortable in a way that emphasised the attractiveness of prostitution.

The third woman was politically active in EMPOWER, a kind of local labour union for Bangkok's prostitutes. She was sharp and funny, competent in the situation we had set up. It was uncertain how much experience as a prostitute she actually had. Relatively good at English and

with a clear attitude towards prostitution, which she saw as a personal liberation project that could provide her with her own income and make her independent of Thai men whose views on gender roles she disapproved of.

Casting in a situation like this, where we had to choose to work with a person who will be our theatrical representation of a political problem, and thus a representative of a large group of other people, is a task that can only be solved by delimiting huge parts of the field. Everything cannot be included. For us, the important thing has been to continuously consider the criteria by which we should navigate. In all casting situations, including this one, we *must* be focused on the theatre experience for the audience. This involves some practical considerations. For example, we need to have a good feeling that it is possible to conduct rehearsals and performances without a participant dropping out. We are interested in the stories of our participants. Is it interesting for others? This can easily be the case even for small and undramatic stories. Finally, we spend a lot of time thinking about how a participant can convey this story, both in terms of their own ability as performers and our idea of what kind of performance we are going to make. The performance can be organised according to the participant rather than the opposite.

In the situation while casting in Bangkok, this appears as a balance between pure practicality on the one hand and the theme and message of the performance on the other. Seen from a distance I am less sure that this is the case, and our way of dealing with the dilemma is also shaped by experiences that the contradiction may not be so great. It is clear that the three women I met for casting in Bangkok represent the political issue of 'sex tourism' in completely different ways and would convey completely different images of what sex tourism is and what the consequences of this industry are. The considerations concerning production and theatre practicalities are essential because a performance *has* to come out of it. Considerations about the representation of the political problem are equally essential because we have a specific aim with our theatre. But at the same time, the work of giving form to a problem is also processual and is about discovering different aspects. The most important thing is almost to end up making a different performance than the one we dreamt of from the start. In the face of reality, practical considerations play a crucial role in our daily work, helping to lead us to new places.

In Bangkok, the idea that it is annoying that the only practically suitable candidate for the role is a supporter of prostitution, therefore also becomes the idea that this can become a quality of the performance.

## **Rehearsals**

Two months later, the third woman, Ping Pong, arrived in Copenhagen. We embarked on a rehearsal programme, where only the framework was in place. We knew that we wanted to continue working with the kind of scenes I had used for the casting, where a spectator and Ping Pong together recreate a situation from Ping Pong's life as a prostitute. And we knew that this would take place inside the hotel room that our set designer had collected elements for in Bangkok. Other essential elements of the performance were still to be determined. What would each situation be about? Which specific stories would be retold? What image of sex tourism would these present?

It also added an element of uncertainty to the rehearsals that Tue's and my own basis for the whole project was a very clear, critical attitude towards sex tourism, while Ping Pong's attitude was the opposite. How could we work together? How to make a performance we all liked?

In the traditional theatre production apparatus, some things are a given: you always work with professionals. The work is their profession, and they are interested in applying their skills.

## Love Theater: Intangible Conflicts

The people you work with know the elements and the process of a theatre production. They know what the different staff members are doing, they know the creative processes of theatre, and they know that there are good days and bad days. They know the specific routines of a rehearsal process, which makes it easier to organise collaboration. They are also part of the process of creating the performance because they have a professional interest in working in theatre and want to further their career.

None of this applies when working with a non-actor protagonist. A fundamental premise of the work changes. As directors, we cannot demand anything. We cannot push the actor to use her acting skills or professionalism or ask her to play a role she finds uninteresting or ask her to express thoughts she does not agree with. We have to organise a process she wants to be part of and make a performance she likes.

This does not mean that we are not ambitious. We find that when we are professional and fully committed to our performances, it becomes more attractive and rewarding for others to join in. People are nervous and have doubts, so it is our responsibility to guarantee the quality of the performance we have asked them to participate in.

Making a performance that is adjusted to the actor's personality, both in terms of acting skills and attitudes, is not very common in our field. We are used to thinking that we, as directors and concept developers, should conceive a performance and then stage it. But Ping Pong had not come to Copenhagen to do theatre. For a trial process like this to work, it was necessary to create a performance where she could show her views on sex tourism. The attraction and the reason to engage with Ping Pong and our other performances is that they can show or tell the audience something that they feel there are no other opportunities to see.

The most obvious point when working with people who are not actors is that we cannot get what we want. We have to accept that they play differently, that they act differently in rehearsals, and that they have different opinions than we do. Perhaps a more important point is that we are no righter than they are. We have to accept that we do not know what is right and wrong, even if we may have a clear political vision and a strong opinion. And what is more – this in itself is the whole basis of this kind of theatre. In our roles as directors, we are the spectators' representative in the rehearsal process. And we want to lead our audience to a world, a view of the world, an experience that is new to them. We want them to be uncertain, to question what they are convinced of. So of course, we do not know what is right and wrong, that is how it has to be, otherwise we would have no reason to make the performance.

In the rehearsals for *Love Theater*, this work began by getting Ping Pong to tell us stories. Tell us about situations she had experienced. She told us about her first experience as a prostitute, about funny episodes and about experiences where the men appeared a bit silly. Gradually we got an overview of a material that could become nine different scenes.

We had to rely to a great extent on Ping Pong's stories being true. There was no possibility of fact-checking. Our strategy was therefore to keep asking about details in the stories, and also to look for details that were not necessarily quite as positive as she herself presented the overall picture.

At the same time, we started on the physical staging. This was also very much about asking how it had happened in the original situation. How the customer had looked, how he had sat, how they had touched each other. We became more and more concerned with concrete details that helped us to transcend our own attitudes towards the subject matter and to understand the needs of some customers. When we stepped into the role of customer and were directed by Ping Pong and drawn

into conversations, touching or just being allowed to make eye contact, the situation seemed less like an assault than we initially saw it and more like a situation where Ping Pong was in control.

There are, of course several objections to this that are deeply relevant. As mentioned, it is problematic to let a single woman, who is resourceful and independent, appear as a witness of truth for an industry where many women probably have other experiences. It is also problematic to uncritically trust a woman's version of her work without taking into account that she may have a political or psychological reason to portray her life more favourably than it may actually be.

The details, the insistent form of documentarism, therefore became essential in our rehearsal process. It became a way of bringing us – politically engaged, humanist artists – into a landscape where our norms did not apply. And conversely, the details established a level of the performance that had a different narrative from Ping Pong's own versions. Much of this was in micro-situations that were repeated with each encounter with a new client. In every single situation, we see Ping Pong place a mobile phone with a friend on speed-dial as a safety precaution, so that in every encounter with customers she is only one keystroke away from getting help. Between each meeting, there is a constant repetition of mechanically putting on new bed linen and putting out new towels, and there is a constant repetition of exchanging money. These actions, as presented in the situation descriptions, were far more sad than Ping Pong allowed us to understand.

In this way, the rehearsals came to be about bringing narratives, physical touches, repetitions, and interaction together in a form where the political, social, relational phenomenon of sex tourism can be experienced as a hyper-complex conflict, and that the very act of entering into it and experiencing it is less black and white than normally - can be a step towards changing it.

The conflict we wanted to present to the audience was not necessarily part of the stories that Ping Pong recreated. Here there were not, in the classical dramaturgical sense, two characters in conflict with each other, or at least not on such a conscious level that an event or course of action emerged from it. It was rather the case that neither of the two characters experienced the situation as a conflict. Instead, we wanted to present the audience with a conflict between their own preconceptions and the narratives they encountered, between the narratives of the performance and the repetitive form of the performance, between being able to recognise the problematic in sex tourism and at the same time experiencing the positive in the physical contact and care from the prostitute.

### **The Love Theater Performance**

In the performance we ended up presenting to the audience, the prostitute Ping Pong performed nine scenes from her life. Each scene showed an encounter with a foreign sex customer, and each scene was performed with the help of one of the ten spectators to the performance, who were then given the role of the customer. The performance was staged in an industrial hall in Copenhagen. It took place inside a white box measuring approximately 6×4×3 metres. When, as one of the ten spectators, you were let into the box, you entered a paraphrase of a Thai hotel room: a Thai woman welcomed you at the door. Inside, it was warm. It smelled of curry, and the colours were differently garish than outside. Along one wall ten orange folding chairs were placed where you could sit with the other spectators. In the centre was a double bed with a bedspread with colourful cushions. A large mirror hung over the entire bed. To the left of the bed was a jacuzzi with a shower curtain in front of it and further to the left, all the way past the door you entered, was a cupboard full of towels. To the far right, up to the row of spectators, was a sofa, and in the back right corner, there was a small desk or dressing table with a mirror. On the wall next to it was a TV. Thai music was

## Love Theater: Intangible Conflicts

playing and the audience was surrounded by real sounds, Thai street life on the other side of the wall, footsteps above the ceiling, etc.

The Thai woman sat on the end of the bed and looked at the audience for a long time, smiling. Then she focused on a spectator, smiled invitingly and patted the bed, waiting for her or him to get up and sit next to her. Then she said the following <sup>4</sup>:

*PING PONG:*

*You are my first foreigner customer. Twenty years ago. I am 22 years old. I am scared of foreigner. They are ... everything is big. My friend told my foreigner they are very polite. You can get more money. And quick too. You can finish in five minutes. So, I would like to try. Hi, I am Ping Pong nice to meet you.*

*OK:*

*Anders. Nice to meet you*

*PING PONG:*

*Where are you from?*

*VISITOR:*

*I come from Denmark*

*PING PONG:*

*That time you come from Germany.*

*TILSKUER:*

*Okay, I come from Germany.*

*PING PONG:*

*You a big guy. Have a white hair. And you are sixty years old. And you have a big belly.*

*(both laugh)*

*And you have some beard in your face. You look like Santa Claus!*

She was very careful to wait to continue until she saw that the spectator realised that she/he had now been chosen to be an old German man with a white beard who looked like Santa Claus to her. And if she was nice and smiling in the conversation with this German gentleman, she could be quite determined in case the spectator started to improvise in the role. “*We meet in a beer bar. Would you like to buy me a beer? That time you said yes!*”, she explained.

In the scene, she recounted her encounter with this first foreign sex customer. The story was quite short. They met in a bar. She chooses him because he does not look scary. They go to his guesthouse where he has a small room that smells of bamboo. She takes a shower. Then he takes a shower, and while he showers, she tries to look sexy on the bed. He comes back, she puts him down. She does not know what he wants and tries to read his body language. She does her job, takes a shower and asks for money. Then she hugs him and tells him that he is a kind man.

The performance consisted of nine such scenes – one per spectator and a single one involving two spectators. The stories were all ‘small’. There were no big dramas or conflicts. In headlines the scenes were: 1) The first customer, 2) A customer who wants her to teach his wife about sex, 3) A man whose mother has just died, 4) A young man in love, 5) An older man she goes travelling

---

4) The lines are quoted from the internal video documentation of the performance. The exact wording changed slightly from spectator to spectator, depending on their reaction.

with, 6) Two threatening young men, 7) The customer who satisfied her, 8) A depressed customer who is weary of life, and 9) Her last customer who made her feel old.

All the scenes use the same devices, which gradually become quite familiar to the spectators. They become a special set of rules for this particular performance that everyone in the room learns throughout the performance: in each scene, a spectator is invited on stage with a smile, a little wave or a discreet “Come”. Ping Pong then tells the spectator where she wants her or him to sit. Often just with a gesture, a pat on the bed next to her or something similar. She tells the spectator who she or he now “is” in the fiction and where they are: “*You are young man. You very handsome. We meet in beer bar*”. Or: “*You are professor. You drink coffee*”.

As in the example of the elderly German customer, the spectator will often respond based on who they are. And as in the example, they will then be talked into the role of this particular customer. Their own life is not interesting as a generator of lines, and even though the individual spectator is on stage without any form of preparation, they are not given any room to improvise. If the spectator tries to improvise lines, Ping Pong will correct and stop this by talking about the role as for example “*No, you not laugh. You very quiet guy*”.

In this way, Ping Pong gets the spectator to recreate a situation in words and actions. This can take a long time. In the second scene, this little situation unfolds, where you can see the very special theatricality that the performance gains through the joint re-creation. Very set frames and stage actions are intertwined with an unprepared conversation. First, Ping Pong tries to get the spectator to take on the role of customer by addressing him as “you”:

*PING PONG (sits on the bed with a spectator.)  
I meet you in a beer bar. You are ...  
(She looks at him intently).  
... 35 year old.  
I'm 32.*

Ping Pong begins to give instructions about the customer's physique:

*Every time you sit comfortable like this.  
(She shows him how to sit, leaning back, resting on his arms, relaxed)  
SPECTATOR:  
I was a bit younger.  
PING PONG (sits up again):  
And that time ... every time I meet a customer in a beer bar, I do like this.  
(She slowly runs her hand up his inner thigh.)  
For check about your size for the condom.  
SPECTATOR:  
Oh.  
PING PONG:  
You're size ... 52.  
Yes?*

When they have come to a common understanding, Ping Pong can take the spectator into an intimate scene:

## Love Theater: Intangible Conflicts

PING PONG (*getting up*):

*I take mobile phone. I can call my friend very quick. If I have some problem.*

*(She places her phone on the bedside table and takes a towel.)*

*I would like to take shower.*

*(She wraps the towel around her, outside her clothes.)*

*Would you like to take shower with me?*

*(He hesitates a bit and she answers for him)*

*yes!*

*(She shows a towel on the bed and waits for him to wrap it around his waist, outside his normal clothes. Meanwhile she takes a packet of condoms by the bed.)*

*(To the audience) 52!*

*(When he is ready, she holds out her hand. He takes it and together they get into the bathtub.*

*She takes off her towel, then his, takes his hand.)*

*Can you sit?*

*(They sit facing each other in the empty bathtub, she on her knees, he more relaxed.)*

*I take care for you...*

SPECTATOR:

*Okay ...*

*(She washes his hand and forearm with a pink bath sponge that has been soaking in perfumed water. He closes his eyes as she does so. She reaches for a towel hanging by the bathtub and dries his arm and hand thoroughly and gently.)*

PING PONG:

*And you take care for me, too.*

SPECTATOR (*in a low voice*):

*Okay*

*(Without further instruction, he takes the sponge and washes her arm. She holds the towel near him, he takes it and dries her arm.)*

PING PONG:

*Then ... like this ...*

*(She puts him further down in the bath. And leans slightly over him.*

*I put a condom on you. And we have sex in the bath.*

*(She smiles at him.)*

Initially, again it becomes part of the performance that the spectator and Ping Pong have to “find each other” – the spectator needs a little time to figure out the rules of the game. The scene then unfolds as a re-creation of a concrete situation. The emphasis is on details that can be recreated. How they sat, what they said to each other, how and why Ping Pong placed her mobile phone within easy reach, that they washed each other clean, where they had sex and so on. Details that cannot be recreated are referenced or narrated. How old they were when the action took place in real life, what the motel looked like, the size of the condoms, and so on.

Ping Pong spends a lot of time performing the actions and waiting for the spectator to participate in performing their part of the actions.

The situation Ping Pong has experienced with a real customer is only hinted at as classical acting. Ping Pong sets the tone of what she said at the time so that it appears realistic and as a quite mimetic and empathetic form of theatre, and she also performs actions with identification and the

ability to create images in the spectators' minds of what it would have been like. There are scattered fragments of actions and acting mixed into a performance that consists equally of instructions, concrete actions in the space, retellings of things that cannot be seen in the space or that are clearly distinct from the space and the actions that take place in it.

In the first scenes of the performance, it is clearly not obvious to the audience where the boundaries are for what should be recreated and what should not. And how and with what degree of identification it should be recreated. This results in a number of awkward situations, but first and foremost a great deal of uncertainty, which probably stems from practicalities, but becomes the mood of the performance.

Much of the audience's experience in *Love Theater* derives from the theatrical situation rather than the dramatic fiction. There are few and brief opportunities for the spectator to forget themselves and their presence in the space and disappear into the narrative. The role of the spectator in *Love Theater* differs significantly from the classical spectator situation. Peter Szondi describes the latter as follows in his analysis of the drama:

*The theatre goer is an observer – silent, with hands tied, lamed by the impact of this other world. This total passivity will, however (and therein lies the dramatic experience), be converted into irrational activity. He, who was the spectator, is pulled into the dramatic event, becomes the person speaking (through the mouth of the character, of course). The spectator-Drama relationship is one of complete separation or complete identity, not one in which the spectator invades the Drama or is addressed through the Drama. (Szondi, 1987, p. 8)*

The ideal for Szondi is that the spectator forgets himself and his presence in the theatre and instead fully immerses himself in the action and experiences this action through the characters. In our performance, this is replaced by an experience where the actual theatre situation – being in an intimate space with the prostitute and nine other spectators – is far more significant.

This is a deliberate strategy that has to do with the kind of signification the performance offers the audience. And perhaps one might say, what kind of experience, if by experience one understands what it means to open oneself up to become someone else to some degree.

In the performance, the theatre situation continuously mirrors the action in the story. It was a circumstance for the performance that Ping Pong had to spend time creating a good relationship with the first spectator so that he or she understood the fictional contract and wanted to participate in the game. But it was also a reflection of the real situation, Ping Pong described, where she met a customer and spent time negotiating the terms with him. The same was true of the linguistic challenges that constantly characterised the performance and the way she dealt with the spectators and told them what was going to happen.

This meant that a large part of the spectators' perception took place outside the fiction, and that the meaning that emerged was often only associatively linked to the fiction. The awkward yet sensuous beauty of sitting in a bathtub being washed by a stranger *in the theatre space* mirrors the awkward yet attractive quality of being washed by a stranger *in Thailand*.

Compared to traditional theatre, and the theatrical modality Evans (2008) traces in his analysis of Ibsen, identification with character and action is here not replaced by but combined with a theatricality where one understands through the body and the senses in the interaction with Ping Pong in each scene. Through being in the social situation in this room with a strange woman and nine other spectators, and together being responsible for creating a performance, meaning is

experienced and created. Here, kindness, politeness, curiosity, understanding for others and similar social competences suddenly become as important as critical reflection. And at the same time, it is possible to sit on your chair and immerse yourself in the action, just as it is an essential part of the performance that you constantly have the opportunity to reflect on the very idea of paying a Thai woman to come to Denmark and entertain with her experiences, and why and whether it is okay that you are placed in this position as a spectator.

### **Conceptual and Drama Pedagogical Roots**

*Love Theater* is a form of theatre and a way of creating perception that can be considered in relation to two major trends in contemporary theatre. One is the conceptual and interventionist turn in contemporary theatre, with clear links to developments in the visual arts, and which is about *doing*. In conceptual thinking, the modal forms of the art forms become part of the material. The conflict is moved out of the treated material into the treatment itself *by doing*. In *Intervention og kunst – socialt og politisk engagement i samtidskunsten* (Intervention and art – social and political engagement in contemporary art), Solveig Gade (2010) pinpoints this development in contemporary art as a development from the media-specific to the debate-specific, and as being concerned with “intervening in and interfering with social systems and rationales other than those of art” (Gade, 2010, p.11).

The second tendency is the simultaneous, though not parallel, immersive turn with clear links to the artistic-didactic strategy of drama pedagogy, which is about *being in* and experiencing from within. This gives the participant a completely different empathic and reflective way of understanding complex issues. Through the artistic-didactic situation, the participant is given the opportunity to experience through his or her own senses and his or her own body, and this results in learning that is more nuanced and, paradoxically, more reflective (Bailin, 1993).

The interest of art theatre in experiencing from within, known as *immersed theatre*, remains intense. At one extreme of this field is the British Punch Drunk Theatre that can be mentioned, which creates overwhelming and eventful *feel-good* universes where you can move around and still be seductively led through a story. At the other extreme is Danish/Austrian SIGNA, whose immersive total experiences are far more challenging and problematic, forcing you to experience sexual, gender political, power-related themes from the inside.

*Love Theater* positioned itself between the conceptual and the immersive. In one out of nine scenes, the individual spectator was there – and then not. The immersive being-in-the participation in some scenes had its quality in the fact that you were given the opportunity to understand a conflicted situation from the inside, which was continuously challenged by the narrative form. You were precisely not this character but had the relationship with Ping Pong and the experience of the physical touch, the care, and her acting, moved to a private level.

In the other eight scenes we witnessed a conceptual doing – the re-creation of Ping Pong’s encounters with Western men with Western spectators. But even this position was not ‘safe’, partly because of the extreme intimacy of the theatre space, and partly because of the immersive awareness and discomfort of knowing that in a moment it would be your turn. Even here, where the other spectators lent their bodies, sympathy and kindness to the customer, no special space was given to normativity.

The hallmark and strength of this performance is thus to avoid narrating a conflict and to avoid depicting the positions in the complex situation as “good” and “bad”. It simply conveys –from an

immersive and conceptual position – experiences in which neither customer nor prostitute sees sex tourism as a problem or a sharply defined conflict. It is much more complicated than that.

And so what is really left? First, I think there are a number of important scenes about longing, caring, boredom, fear and the course of life that we would have missed or censored if we had been looking for a conflict.

In addition, a conceptual framework and procedural structure is provided in the form of the performance's almost tedious repetition. Each scene begins with a smile and a hello, then a beer, a shower, sex, another shower, payment, goodbye, all the time with rapid shifts between acting, joy and sober narrative. And then clean-up, preparation, next customer/next scene. In the repetition, the performance becomes discreetly political.

Finally, there is an immersive event that lies *in* the spectator's experience through her/his *being* in the situation. Here, the spectators were asked to represent sex clients. They were not in any way compared to them or held accountable. But they were placed in a non-normative situation where norms are common, and they were given the opportunity to feel, via their own sensory-emotional apparatus, these sex clients' need for touch, care and relationships – sex only to a very modest extent. This in a situation where others were watching and where others had been watched.

## Change

For me, *Love Theater* was about staging uncertainty. In the first instance to my and the spectators' attitudes, in the next to a worldview and an identity. The important thing was to create a form where you took the step into the uncertainty of what is *right* by being guided safely but challengingly into an unusual space of perception.

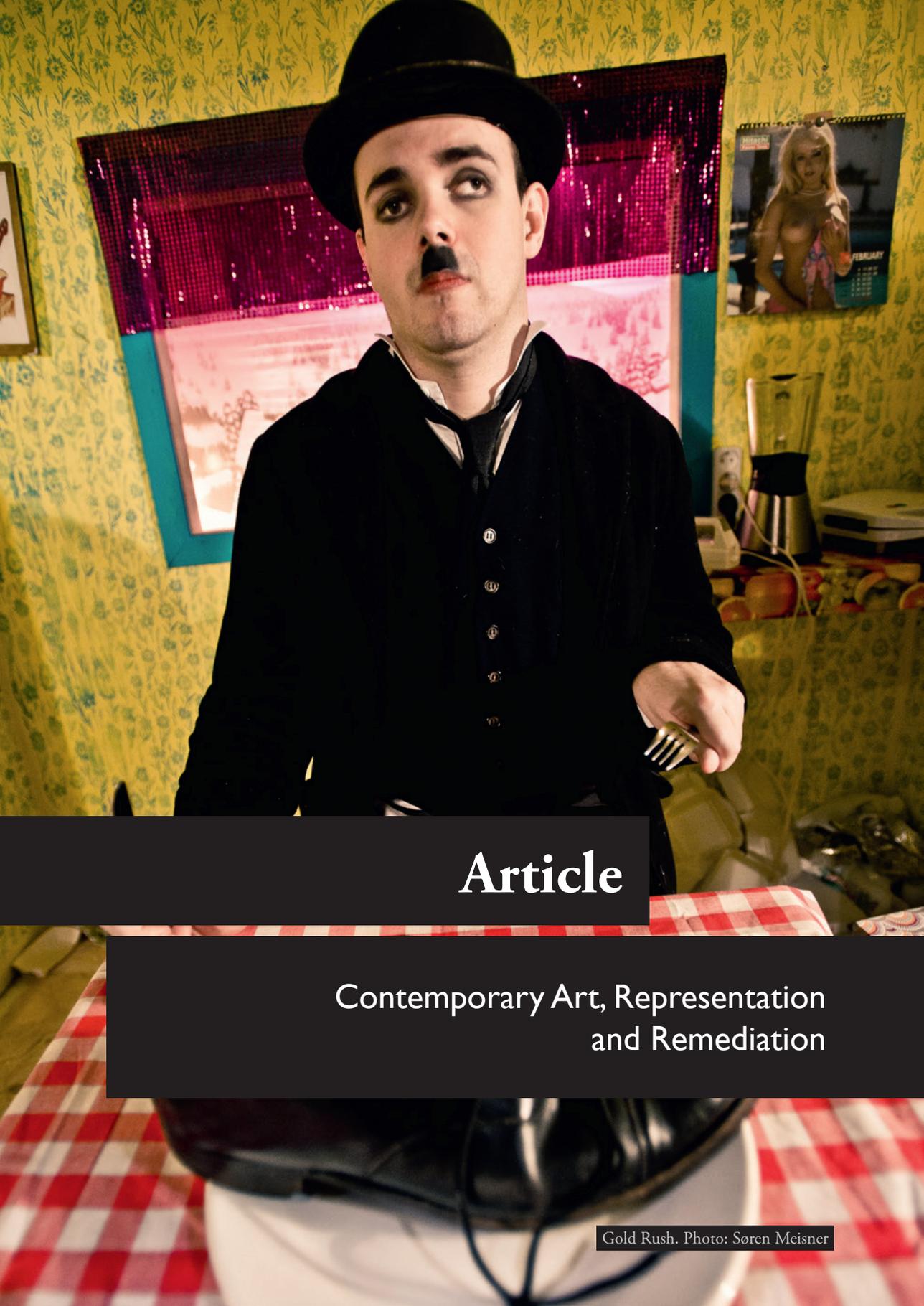
Perhaps, based on *Love Theater*, it could be said that there is an ongoing identity formation that takes place when we do something unusual. This is true in the theatre as well as in real life. We want to do the right thing and be seen as someone who does the right thing, knowing that we do not know what the right thing is. Instead, we have to step into the world and experience it and do it as best we can. So in *Love Theater*, we tried to refrain from staging a conflict and instead give shape to this mud, this fundamental uncertainty that underlies our position in all conflicts.

*Love Theater* does not have a dramaturgical progress in the classical sense. Compared to the dramaturgical conflict described by Evans (2008), *Love Theater* is static and without real development. Nevertheless, I think it makes sense to see the performance as an *event*, or at least to evaluate and criticise the performance based on this ambition. The particular idiom of the performance has emerged as a response to how we in FIX&FOXY feel that there are social structures and phenomena that are perhaps conflictual and certainly of great importance to us, and which our classical theatre tools do not seem able to handle. Instead, devices such as physical contact, re-creation, a shared meeting, repetition, sensuality and role-playing are moulded together into something that can happen for and with the spectators, and hopefully lead them from a state where they feel quite certain in their positions and at a safe distance from the problem to a new state where they are intertwined in the problem – and less clarified. The performance is thus a suggestion from our side as to why it is important in a theatre context to shift focus from the sharply defined conflict to the intangible conflict. It is about training the ability to allow oneself to change.

## Works Cited

- Bailin, S. (1993). Drama as Experience: A critical view. In *Canadian Journal of Education*, 18 (2, Spring), 95–105.
- Brunetière, F. (1893). *La loi du théâtre*. I E. Noël & E. Stoulling (Eed.), *Annales du théâtre et de la musique* (s. i-xx). Paris: L'Académie française.
- Castelein, T. (2013, 17. april). ALLAHÖ. Online at: <http://www.coroflot.com/teun/ALLAH%C2%AE> (accessed 01.04.2023).
- DAS BECKWERK. (2011). Das Beckwerk museum. Online at: <http://www.dasbeckwerk.com> (accessed 01.04.2023).
- Evans, M. (2008). *Innføring i dramaturgi* (3. edition). Oslo: J.W. Cappelens Forlag.
- Frost, M. & Lynch, D. (writer, director). (1990–1991). *Twin Peaks* [TV-series]. USA: Lynch/Frost Productions, Propaganda Films, Spelling Entertainment.
- Gade, S. (2009). Pretty woman walking down the street. *Peripeti: Tidsskrift for dramaturgiske studier*, (11), 103–112.
- Gade, S. (2010). *Intervention og kunst. Socialt og politisk engagement i samtidskunsten*. Copenhagenn: Forlaget Politisk Revy.
- Hesselaa, B. (2001). *Line Knutzons dramatik*. Copenhagen: Borgens Forlag.
- Klein, N. (1999). *No logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies*, Canada, Knopf.
- PUNCHDRUNK THEATRE. (n.d.). These things are mysteries not to be explained but you will understand when you get there alone. Online at: <https://www.punchdrunk.com/> (accessed 31.10.2018).
- Schechner, R. (1994). *Environmental theater*. New York: Applause.
- SIGNA. (n.d.) SIGNA. Online at: <http://signa.dk/> (accessed 31.10.2018).
- Superflex. (n.d.) TOOLS. Online at: <https://superflex.net/tools> (accessed 19.02.2019).
- Szondi, P. (1987). *Theory of the modern drama*. Cambridge: Polity Press.





# Article

## Contemporary Art, Representation and Remediation

Gold Rush. Photo: Søren Meisner

# Contemporary Art, Representation and Remediation

By Erik Exe Christoffersen

There are some features of FIX&FOXY's work that suggest that it may be meaningful to talk about contemporary art as something other than simply theatre.

*First*, in many cases the company has taken its starting point in films: from *Pretty Woman*, *The Gold Rush*, *Triumph of the Will*, *The Great Feast*, *Twin Peaks*, *Rocky* to *The Deer Hunter*.

*Second*, many productions involve non-professionals, for instance prostitutes or young people, thereby extending the concept of the actor. This also means that the director's craftsmanship and leadership, as well as the spectator reception itself, take on other technical and ethical dimensions in relation to the meaning of the work.

*Third*, many of the performances use video, which makes the performances cross-medial.

*Fourth*, many of the performances involve the spectators, which affects the staging as a work and makes the spectator relationship itself part of the work. There are several performances that are in a borderland between workshop and theatre, such as *Ungdom* (Youth) or *Viljens Triumf* (Triumph of the Will).

*Fifth*, there is an internationalisation inspired by German and British theatre. The company also aims to sell concepts and performances abroad that deal with international issues. This is a new form of theatre network, so to speak.

*Sixth*, and lastly, FIX&FOXY interacts with other media, the identity of the actors and cultural expressions, expanding the possibilities of theatre and its relations to the contemporary. The act of representation itself and forms of representation and their effects and techniques are continuously an artistic enquiry. One of the explanations for this is that FIX&FOXY actively relates to globalisation, which in simple terms means that one must constantly actively relate to from where one looks at the world, through which eyes and glasses.

To put it simply: FIX&FOXY is contemporary art that combines art forms and (tentatively) adopts a self-conscious position and relationship to the contemporary.

In this article I try to see a connection between these different features that I consider characteristic of contemporary art.

There is a historical development in this, which can make it quite complex because it is a matter of slow changes. The arts of theatre, music, visual arts, literature are obviously different in the way they mediate a given material. The creation of form and meaning has become an active practice. In the 1960s, an interest emerges in how the concept of art can have an impact on the individual art forms and, in particular, the relationship and influence between art forms. For example, between theatre and visual arts or between theatre and music. These influences have led to new hybrids, such as installation theatre, visual theatre, theatre concert and remediated theatre, which "translate" one medium into another. This development also means that we can talk about theatre and non-theatre that "play" with the fact that the performers can represent themselves, as opposed to the actor who represents a fictional character or figure.

### Focusing on the Mediatisation of Theatre

The disintegration of traditions and cultural identities by globalisation means that contemporary art must consciously consider its own “voice” and position, as well as its tools and effects in relation to the situation of the audience. This is what is known as conceptualisation. Different materials, media, spaces and actors are involved and the relationship between art and non-art is itself a boundary that is difficult to define. Something that is obviously not art is remediated as art. It is a “method” that goes back to the *ready-made* scandal linked to Marcel Duchamp: he selected certain objects that he called art. How was it possible to transform, for instance, a snow shovel or a urinal into art and have these objects exhibited in an art museum? This actually only happened in the late 1950s, some 30–40 years after they had been labelled *art* by Duchamp.

Remediation is slightly different from a traditional staging of a dramatic work. The term originates from Bolter and Grusin (1999), and means that old media such as record player, cassette recorder, slide and film projector, etc. are taken over or overpainted by new digital media. They distinguish between two remediation strategies. *Immediacy* utilises transparency, and the spectators see through the medium as if it were not there at all and immerse themselves in the manufactured reality. This creates an immediate closeness to the fictional world. *Hypermediacy*, on the other hand, creates an awareness of the medium, where the media screen draws attention to itself and allows the spectators to experience the reality and workings of the medium. Both strategies create a relationship (identification or distance) between sender and receiver. My point is that FIX&FOXY utilises both strategies, creating both intimacy and media reflexivity. This establishes an emotional and bodily experience of the fiction and at the same time an awareness of the remediation’s construction of the act of representation (see also Jeppe Kristensen’s article on *Love Theater*).

Remediation moves the dramaturgical elements from one medium to another, and this process becomes part of the new narrative. This creates a transparency in the presentation as with palimpsest. The concept of remediation is related to staging, and both concepts indicate that an everyday occurrence is given a new form and effect. The point of talking about mediation instead of staging is to emphasise that remediation has a duality and alternation between intimacy and media reflexivity.

When prostitutes take the lead role in *Pretty Woman A/S* (Pretty Woman Ltd.) without any preparation, a version is created that is characterised by the reality of the performers and at the same time by the fiction as part of our consciousness. Ethical questions follow: What and which actors can be staged? Are there any limitations that need to be taken into account? Who ultimately represents whom? FIX&FOXY has resolved this ethical challenge in different ways that touch on contemporary discussions about the relationship between identity, person and role.

### Pretty Woman Ltd.

*Pretty Woman A/S* (Pretty Woman Ltd., 2008) was performed in containers at Halmtorvet in Copenhagen, as a remediation of the film *Pretty Woman* (1990) starring Richard Gere and Julia Roberts. The play followed the script and the role of the rich man was played by Swedish actor Anders Mossling, while the prostitute, Vivian, was played by a street prostitute hired on the street before each performance and staged through an earpiece in relation to lines and movements. The prostitute was paid for one hour of the entrance fee, equivalent to the street price. The risk of not knowing who would be participating was part of the concept’s reality effect.

The stage was very intimate and small, with a view of the stage through a glass frame. Exactly one hour was allotted, which was videotaped and shown on TV-screens above in front of the audience. The piece was thus video, theatre and a version of the original film. The performance was

conditional on a series of coincidences and possibilities: the fictional layer was recreated through a staging that, through wireless ear microphones, created a delay in the lines and an artificiality between actor and role. The spectator could not forget that this was a remediation, created here and now, presented and commented on. There were certain omissions in relation to the film and specific changes, for instance the male protagonist is on a bicycle and not in a car. The female actor also demonstrated a lack of status, fragility and daring. The entire live recording was carefully planned in terms of camera angle, editing and zoom, and approximately resembled the original film.

The remediation of the plot meant that the performance simultaneously represented the identity of the performers and engaged the spectators in reflection through direct address to the audience.

It is obvious to see the effect of presence created by remediation in the context of what Charles Taylor (2002) has called the *ethics of authenticity*. He argues that this has been a prominent feature of staging over the last 50 years. The authentic is that which is consistent with itself and is what it says it is. The *ethics of authenticity* strives to be true to its own inner “voice” and seeks to realise personal potential in the best possible way. This can be found particularly in the creative industry of the cultural sector, in art and in self-help books with the title: *Find yourself*. The paradox is that authenticity is always a remediation and an effect which means that reality becomes “reality”.

The actor's qualities of presence, the interaction between the spectators' expectations and the actual event created an interaction between *Pretty Woman Ltd.* and the surrounding environment and not least the cultural public, where the performance generated considerable debate. Some politicians and critics called the performance “social pornography” (Pernille Fram, SF's spokesperson on culture from The Socialist People Party), and Hans Hauge, from the conservative daily newspaper *Jyllandsposten* criticised that the Danish Arts Council had supported the performance with DKK 987500 (132.515. Euro). The critic Per Theil lamented the lack of professional actors (*Politiken* 30 October 2008). The prostitutes were in fact unknown Swedish actors, claimed Lars Wredstrøm in the daily *Børsen* (3 November 2008). The directors maintained that the Swede in question, who played the role at the premiere, was in fact a prostitute, but had played the role before (Tue Biering in *Politiken*, 8 November 2008). The Arts Council's Committee for Performing Arts defended the production as an interesting experiment that “moves outside the framework of established theatre and meets the women in their own environment” ([www.kunst.dk/kunstradet/](http://www.kunst.dk/kunstradet/)). The playwright Christian Lollike emphasised that “the media coverage is part of the work, just like the process” (*Politiken* 8. November 2008).<sup>1</sup>

The performance was neither a romanticisation of the prostitutes nor a process of emancipation for the participants. The ethical dilemma of the original, between the prostitute and the societal power controlled by money was recreated, but the reality of the actor differed from the established role image (Julia Roberts). *Pretty Woman Ltd.* staged prostitution and theatre as different modes of observation. After the performance, the spectators went home, while the prostitute went back to work on the street.

The transfer from the film medium to the theatre medium requires a certain amount of effort on the part of the participants, and remediation must have a necessity that concerns both the film that is recreated and the action itself, which is a form of rethinking and reworking. Mediatization makes the world visible, and every medialisation involves choices and emphasises new selections and rejections. A particular mediation creates meaning as a particular communicative relation with

---

1) All translations from sources not previously translated into English are by Marianne Ølholm.

the spectators. Theatricality and authenticity are effects presented side by side in an enactment that tests art against non-art. These are stagings that can be provocative, create surprise, generate sensory and bodily experiences and confront other affective forms. The distance and difference between the original model and the performance act becomes an utterance orientated towards the effect and not a “content”. One could say that it is the process and the concept itself that becomes a point of debate.

This conceptualisation extends the medium of theatre so that the relation of meaning becomes an exchange and a bodily and cultural encounter in a specific space (containers on Halmtorvet, Kbh.). Theatre becomes a mediatisation of this particular space and precarious encounter.

### **Dynasty FO**

The American series *Dynasty* from 1981-1989 hit the world's TV screens, and *Dollars FO* (*Dynasty FO*, 2009) was a remediation of the TV-series, which was recreated in the Faroe Islands with local volunteers, cast on the same day as the filming. There was no fixed script, and events and locations emerged during filming. In preparation, the actors were questioned about their private lives, they sang and talked about their aspirations, talents, hobbies, etc. Fragments of this were written into the script.



Dynasty FO

The difference between the original and the local version was evident. In 14 days, 21 Faroese participated in 7 episodes of *Dynasty*, in 7 different locations, broadcasted via the internet on its own website and simultaneously shown in the evenings in the homes of the participants with friends and family. The social significance for the participants was emphasised by the party and celebrations that followed.

*“The Faroe Islands are largely a closed society, but when we talk about Dynasty, it opens up narratives that would otherwise be difficult to tell. The dream is to create an X-ray of Faroese society through something as trivial as a soap opera. And the actors’ own stories will be woven into the episodes. In this way, the cast will see themselves in new roles in each other’s homes. And we hope to create new encounters that wouldn’t otherwise happen. Their lives will be completely changed when they have been in an episode like this. Just like it happens in all reality programmes.”* (Tue Biering, Politiken, 2 August 2009)

In *Dynasty FO*, there were a number of breaks with classical film language codes that normally create coherence in fictional time and space: organisation of foreground and background, relations in space, entrance and exit. The real locations were visible: a private residence, a shop with signs, a football field, natural areas, etc.

The remediation showed the local identity of the actors and their pleasure in participating in the staging. The acting was deliberately inadequately rehearsed. The actors’ obvious mistakes when they correct themselves, accidentally look into the camera etc. were not edited out. In the performance space, notes were placed with crosses indicating where the actors should stand when saying their lines, which were brief and in English with a local accent. Dialogues between characters were often without eye contact and clearly more oriented towards the reality of the recording than the reality of the fiction.

There were many breaches of illusion: scenographic elements such as cardboard signs, a cardboard glass, a cardboard horse with added real sound etc. and the landscapes were sometimes filmed photographs. The performers wore small name-tags indicating their roles, and photographs of the original characters in *Dynasty* were shown. Costumes and wigs were only partially covering and private clothes were visible, as were camera men and microphones. Sometimes interviewers questioned the cast members about the role.

The random incidents, mistakes, misunderstandings, etc. created a *vulnerability* that emphasises an element of risk for the actors, who were used and challenged in relation to their secret dreams. This created a transparency between the fiction and the participants, making their personalities visible. It is this authenticity effect that is interesting in the context of the series’ ironising of the so-called *Method Acting* and the idea of becoming a star for a night.

### **Triumph of the Will**

FIX&FOXY’s *Viljens Triumf* (Triumph of the Will, 2012) was a remediation of Leni Riefenstahl’s film *Triumph des Willens* from 1935, commissioned by Adolf Hitler about the five-day Nazi Party Congress in Nuremberg in 1934. It is a propaganda film that is only partly documentary. The opening shot shows an aeroplane in the sky, an image of the “saviour” coming to earth in a monumental staging. The film follows the people’s accommodation in tents, preparation for the “initiation” and the mass spectacles with religious overtones, drawing the participants into the congress, which ends with the total surrender to the will and triumph of the *Führer*. The masses are like an aesthetically sensuous and anonymous subject. The film is original in its use of camera angles, editing and staging through lighting and a graphic use of space and crowds.

In *Triumph of the Will*, the spectators sit on wooden benches, and at one end a miniature model city, a small tent camp and other settings have been built. An actor (Anders Mossling) portrays the film’s characters and at the same time acts as a kind of director and narrator. He asks the audience to participate in a re-mediation and directs them around so that they can be recorded on video,

which is subsequently shown on a large screen. The spectators are extras, “playing” the 700,000 Nazis at the congress, and at the same time they are spectators of the video film, which is shot and shown scene by scene. The spectators see themselves staged and projected onto a large screen.

The actor, Anders Mossling, confesses that he is not a Nazi, but that he finds the film beautiful and fascinating and is looking forward to making this remake. Dressed in brown overalls, he explains: “We’re going to get down on our knees and wave and smile.” Camera positions are strictly defined, and the audience is kindly but firmly ordered to perform simple actions. “It’s not dangerous, don’t play, just wave!” You cannot help but smile, and a discrepancy arises between what is happening in the room, where the spectators are smiling at the situation, and the edited material on the screen, which shows an enthusiastic reception of Hitler.

Later, the spectators are instructed to sit around a campfire in a tent camp, eat soup and wash dishes. They carry spades and flags and take part in ceremonies, learn to march in rubber boots and to perform the Nazi salute. Three members of the audience are dressed in costumes and filmed against the backdrop of a green screen, and then everything is projected onto the screen with a background from the film.

### **The Ethical Choice**

As the performance progresses, a cheerful atmosphere develops among the spectators as a result of the community and the tasks. “Some people don’t want to participate, and that’s fine,” says Mossling. There is no compulsion, and they sit a little off to the side. Most of them want to, but slowly a suspicion creeps in. Are you being seduced into participating in something you should not be involved in? Can you be part of a remediation and at the same time distance yourself from *Triumph des Willens*?

The actor interacts with the audience. The audience interact with each other in the space where they are filmed and edited into the context of the film. There is an interaction between the original film, which we either know or imagine, and the remake, which for good reasons can only be a poor reconstruction that nevertheless astonishes by its resemblance. Finally, there is an interaction between the theatre and video media and between the spatial and the filmic surface of the projection. The quality of the performance lies in the fact that these different forms of interaction are not entirely “innocent” and disrupt the spectator’s sensory perception and intellectual and ethical reflection on the Nazi cultural heritage.

The effect of the performance lies in the space between film and theatre, where the spectators are split between being participants and observers. The original film is certainly disturbing, but the remediation is a process that creates intimacy and community, where the context of the film partially fades into the background. At the same time, the process is staged so that the manipulation is demonstrated more and more prominently. It ends with the film’s total endorsement and the Hitler salute: first we have to walk in step and put our right hand on the shoulder of the person in front. We have to keep our arm raised, create some distance and lift our legs as we walk, and there it is! It’s both ridiculous and alarmingly disturbing.

The camera crew always knows exactly where and how to film. Every single shot is planned, with camera positions and angle, cropping, distance, format, lighting, foreground/background ratio, etc. This instruction is normally hidden, but here it is visible, and the audience sees the tricks and effects that create the filmic result. At the same time, the spectators are “inside” the theatre’s performance space, where they do not have to “act”, but where the filming utilises their presence. The result is seen almost simultaneously with the filming, creating a feedback loop between the

performance and the filming. The remediation's identification with the film's "masses" is a way of creating a bodily understanding of the mass effect of the five-day Nazi Party Congress in Nuremberg in 1934.

### **A Doll's House as Home Theatre**

FIX&FOXY's *Et Dukkehjem* (A Doll's House, 2014) was based on Henrik Ibsen's drama (1879). This is not a remediation of a film, but of Ibsen's theatre and drama form, which originally had no audience participation or authorial direction. Ibsen's theatre convention uses the fourth wall and pretends that the spectators are not present. FIX&FOXY breaks this convention by staging the performance in private homes with non-professional actors in the leading roles of Helmer and Nora, and with the audience sitting around the actors. They are without any prior instruction or preparation. You can say that the private home and the actors are remediated in the performance. It is the technique of remediation applied to a traditional dramatic material.

We are standing on Store Møllevvej on Amager, Kbh. in front of a new housing complex. A woman in the Royal Danish Theatre's uniform and logo checks off the 30-35 spectators, and the actors Troels Thorsen, Thomas Hwan and Kitt Maiken Mortensen from the theatre introduce themselves, shake hands and introduce the evening's event. Ulla and Klaus have agreed to take part without knowing in what capacity. The contract stipulates that their apartment should be able to accommodate a certain number of spectators, and the furniture and decor are the theatrical setting. The whole concept requires trust, a good atmosphere and a certain amount of risk due to the unpredictable elements.

The actors lead the spectators up to the apartment with large windows, good views, art on the walls, beautifully designed lamps and furniture and two balconies. The spectators are placed in the corner sofa, on the floor and wherever there is space. The couple sits on the sofa and the actors question them. He is a banker working in risk assessment and she is a creative designer with her own clothing company. She has a slight penchant for chocolate and sweets. Unlike Helmer and Nora, they have no children.

The staging was created on the fly by the three actors with a script in hand, and they played the other roles in the drama: Dr Rank, Mrs. Linde and Solicitor Krogstad. The actors did not know the couple or the apartment and started by asking questions related to Nora's secrets in the text. "Do you have secrets from your husband?" The Nora actor replied: "I keep some chocolate in a drawer."

The actors outline the story in *A Doll's House* and stage the married couple, who repeat individual lines and actions. In Ibsen's drama, there is a conflict between Nora and Helmer. They are both hiding something from each other, she confides in Mrs. Linde. After they were married, Helmer fell ill. Nora borrowed money from lawyer Krogstad and signed in her father's name so that they could travel to Italy and Helmer could be cured of the illness that the doctors said he must not know about. He recovered and they have lived happily, although Nora knows that Helmer is strongly opposed to borrowing money and taking on debt. Krogstad now threatens to reveal Nora's forged signature. Nora tries to conceal the story to the end, and tries to enlist the help of the friend of the family Dr Rank, but he reveals to Nora that he is in love with her and therefore she cannot avail herself of his help. Krogstad and Mrs. Linde decide that the past can no longer be concealed. Nora ends up leaving her husband and children to find herself. This is an ethical dilemma. Is it right or wrong for her to leave the children? Ibsen at one point made an ending where he allowed Nora to return but regretted it and forbade the use of this version. As Ibsen said, he did not know



whether Nora became insane, an artist, a nude dancer in a circus or returned home. It was up to the audience to discuss the possibilities.

During the staging in the flat, there is music, and a few actions are played in slow motion. Other actions take place between the spectators, who are moved around during the performance. The performance is continually interrupted, and questions are asked about the couple's private life to suggest certain similarities and differences to Helmer and Nora. Similarly, a certain duality is also created between the actors and their roles. Actor Thomas Hwan, who plays Dr Rank, emphasises that Ulla is talented and that they have a good rapport. He enjoys acting with her and looks forward to the scene where she *exposes* herself to him. However, Kitt Maiken Mortensen asks him to tone down his enthusiasm, even though Rank is in love with Nora.

The two leads slowly immerse themselves in the fictional universe. The professional actors improvise, direct, rearrange and lead the couple and the audience around the real space of the apartment. The performance constantly slides between fiction and the real situation, just as we as spectators are both "flies on the wall" and drawn into the fiction: for example, we have to hide like children at the end of Act 1, when Nora plays hide-and-seek with her own children. It seems quite comical when 35 adults try to hide behind cushions or behind a curtain or a sofa. At the beginning of Act 3, we are at a party with Nora and Helmer. It is the masked ball, where everyone is dancing, drinking beer, and playing drunk up and down the stairwell. Back in the apartment we get to the showdown.

Helmer rejects Nora when the truth comes out, and she is deeply hurt by his reaction. It is a confrontation between bourgeois law and order and the law of love. Later, when Krogstad regrets and returns the promissory note, Helmer wants to forgive her, but for Nora they are now strangers to each other. The play ends with Nora choosing to leave the "doll's house" to investigate reality, and she slams the door provocatively.

Ulla and Klaus, who have been together for 18 years, are happy with their home and the parrot squawking in the background. Could they imagine a secret being revealed that would have those consequences? At first glance, they do not think so, but it creates a kind of contemplation and reflection for the two of them and for the spectators. The final scene becomes touching as it is played by a couple who in no way want to end up where Nora and Helmer end up.

The performance establishes an aesthetic space of reflection that is different from that of classical theatre, where there is a separation between the stage and the audience. The spectators are part of the stage and are momentarily drawn into the fictional space but are also observers of the protagonists' identification and the actors' direction. It becomes a demonstration of how the disaster of the fiction is confronted with their reality. What if the Nora performer actually walked out? The dramatic conflict is mirrored in the actual relationship, where differences and similarities become the performance's field of tension.

### **Between Fiction and Reality**

After the performance, we talk about the performance with other spectators, and Klaus shows his tame parrot, which he holds in his hand like a little lark and which is happy to be stroked. One of the actors tells us that this is the third home they are playing in, and that they have met very different couples. The dramatic structure itself is fixed, but there are big differences in how the interaction between the persons-in-characters and the spectators and the space takes place. One spectator remarks that it was great, for example, to hear the parrot in the cage squawk at just the right moment when Nora is considering whether suicide is the only solution. Another says that

dancing down the stairs in the hallway was quite a challenge. It was funny when a man in the street answered back to Klaus, who was calling after Nora out of the window.

Ibsen's opposition between the woman and the man, who follow two different laws, is clearly more or less dissolved, and the binary opposition between family and society does not have the moral weight. This also means that Nora's exit from her husband and children becomes neither an evil nor a good act. The intensity of the performance lies in the interference between fiction and reality.

### **The Ethical Dimension: Good vs. Evil**

FIX & FOXY has been criticised for exploiting vulnerable performers and placing them on a stage where they are exposed and observed. They have also been accused of conflating social and artistic issues. There has been a dispute about morality and ethics, which are themselves concepts that are perpetually under debate. FIX & FOXY has been part of this discussion, as this anthology shows, but it is interesting to see how this complex issue is given artistic expression in the performance *Det gode vs. Det onde* (Good vs. Evil), Aalborg Theatre (2020)<sup>2</sup>. The performance can be said to be a reflection on the ethics of theatre as an act of representation, written and staged by Tue Biering.

What is the difference between ethics and morality? Morals are the norms of *good*, truthful behaviour and a universal and unchanging value. But the question is who can or should define morality in a world that seems to be in constant change and influenced by different forces? This is, of course, a question that also relates to whether there is any overarching control at all. Ethics is an investigation of existing norms, but without necessarily judging what is good or bad. Ethics is therefore a dynamic and changing social construct that is negotiable and dependent on the contemporary world and one's own position. *Good vs. Evil* is a reflection on the binary of good/evil itself, which seems limiting.

The three actors are dressed in white costumes. They are super flexible and take turns playing the same role: *Hans*, who is illustrated by a wig that they can take turns wearing. In addition, a handful of extras play multiple roles and functions. The actors seem rather unsure of the concept – they are all pale and their bodies are displayed as “real and imperfect”, sometimes even completely undressed. They balance between being persons and roles. Their judgement of good or evil relate to how they feel. The character of *Hans* and the actors are slightly ashamed of being neither balanced nor perfect. They belong to the so-called *privileged white class*.

Hans has grown up with images of good white heroes and bloodthirsty Indians, as well as Germans, Russians, blacks, Mexicans and other *bad guys*. Good animals are kittens and small dogs, while snakes, spiders are evil. However, black cats can be evil, as can dolphins, which appear good but can actually be devious, and therefore are more evil than the otherwise evil sharks. These are exceptions that complicate binarity.

The performance begins with a *pure* white stage, which is slowly invaded by real and fictional characters and a chaos of objects: a sofa, a tent, a chair, a tree. A goat appears, the good Bilbo Baggins from *Lord of the Rings*, the *evil* Darth Vader from *Star Wars*, and good children quote Greta Thunberg. A “good” spectator is given the task of intervening and beating the “evil” actors with a plastic club each time one of them says the famous word *complex*. So the playwright may also be

---

2) *Good vs. Evil* is written and directed by Tue Biering, but is not a FIX&FOXY production. Cast: Marie Knudsen Fogh, Ena Spottag and Jacob Moth-Poulsen. Scenographer: Nicolaj Spangaa. Assistant director: Jara El Baz.

“evil”. The spectator is later thrown out because it is “bloody annoying” to be interrupted like that in the long run. Is it her or the actors who are “evil”? It turns out that the “spectator” is a staged extra who returns in the final applause as “good”. The white-clad actors are showered with all sorts of things – blood, vomit, semen – while the empty stage is gradually smashed as the actors, in a fit of rage, inadvertently kick a hole in the back wall or throw a wooden cross, causing a hole in the stage floor whereupon the devil himself appears and sits down nicely on a sofa with Bilbo Baggins and Darth Vader.

Good and evil is a polar dramaturgy known from fairy tales, myths, popular films, political programmes, etc. But the complex reality emerging on stage has disrupted the performance, so that no one can identify good and evil anymore. What about our mobile phone? Is it “good or evil”? What about the climate? Is nature “good or evil”? The questions keep piling up. The same goes for the basic situation: the actors are on stage and the spectators are in their seats. Is this in itself a story of “good” versus “evil”? Are the spectators being abused when some of them are pulled up on stage? Are the actors “evil or good” because they are acting in the theatre? Or are the spectators the good/evil ones?

Biering’s *Good vs. Evil* stages the conflict so that it becomes not just an abstract moral question, but an ethical investigation of dramaturgy, representation and the actors’ relationship to themselves, and to what and who the actors can and may represent to the spectators. The classic conflict-based dramaturgy is often referred to as the *good story*, and it is obvious that it functions as a demarcating factor in relation to other dramaturgies as for instance the irrational and rambling speech of the madman. The good story can simply be characterised by the fact that the conflict is both recognisable and highlights new perspectives, and that it creates a turnaround and new insight in an elementary dramaturgy where the ending is a form of purification (catharsis). But the *good dramaturgy* devised by Aristotle is, in Plato’s view, *evil* and a kind of illusion that distracts attention from the essential, which is the world of ideas beyond the material surface of the world. In *Good vs. Evil*, we are approaching a dramatic breakdown. As one of the actors says:

*“I have doubts about my role in this performance – I have doubts about what I am sensing. Yes, that’s something I have to say”, she continues, “I’m just saying what’s in the script. Now I’m getting it all mixed up and can’t remember my line. I apologise.”*

Is that last line also in the script? Several times along the way, the actor stops and gets cues from the prompter, but is this also part of the dramaturgy of the performance? Sometimes it leads to absurdities: Can you say that the male gender is evil? Will it require a sex change to become good? Are all adults evil, as the Greta character says: *“Shame on you! You have ruined my childhood!”*

We are caught in the narratives, and reality cannot be grasped directly, but only through (seemingly evil or good) representations that can be put together and create effects, meanings and realities. You can smash the stage, as the avant-garde did, and believe that it serves the good, but does it really?

## **The Complex Dramaturgy**

The performers are actors, a few spectators and stagehands who intervene on stage without any direct connection to the main narrative. The staging is a network of simultaneous actions. An epic dramaturgy is used in which the direction is pronounced: *He says* and then the line. The role is only rudimentarily represented with a wig, a costume and a little make-up. In a scene where the

three actors are supposed to represent black people, it becomes clear that not all expressions are equally good (or bad) and some forms are offensive, such as *blackfacing* where a white actor is made up black. *Good vs Evil* articulates the moral distinction between good and evil, while an ethical reflection shows the impossibility of distinguishing between good and evil. There are poles that can be twisted and turned and seen from both sides, and it is “annoyingly complex” – almost evil. The actors long for some kind of simplicity and unity, but they cannot escape the complexity. They sit silently and thoughtfully while the stagehands clear the stage, wash the floor and fix the wall. They do not seem to find a solution. One snaps his fingers and everything goes dark, without the spectators knowing whether it is good or evil.

### **Dark Noon**

*Dark Noon* (2019) has an enunciation that continues this problem of representation, speaking in multiple “voices” and from different positions. On a narrative level, it tells the story of how the Wild West was conquered, but at the same time, it includes other narratives that revolve around the cultural discussion of identity and representation.

Many people have grown up with Westerns and a classic representation between good and evil, heroes and villains. In *Dark Noon*, South African actors portray the classic scenes from their own experience: the immigration, the encounter with the natives, the emergence of a civilisation where lawlessness reigns, the creation of the railroad, gold digging dreams, the establishment of the city and the rise of slavery. All but one of them are actors with dark skin who are made up white to play the emigrants from Europe, and it is their narrative and view of the “conquest of the West” with famine in Europe in the early 1800s that sparked the emigration to “God’s country”.

FIX & FOXY’s staging is a remediation of a Western, reminiscent of a film I saw in the mid-sixties: *How the West Was Won* (1962) – an epic Western that follows a family for generations on their journey west. It is an epic narrative with sections on the struggle for survival with Native Americans on the prairie, civil war, and the lawless rampage to build the railroad.

*Dark Noon* uses video presentation, changing narrators, a dynamic set design that becomes a city, direct audience response, and the ongoing involvement of a handful of spectators. Role changes are used with simple devices such as wigs, hats and costume parts or make-up without total transformation with partial masks, just as houses are transparent as obvious backdrops. The staging is fully cross-medial and includes singing, dancing, mime and theatricalised fights and shootings. All at high speed, with the performers are practically running around the large stage with fantastic vigorous energy.

When spectators enter the stage, the presentation becomes even more complicated, because the video projection clearly affects several of the spectators, who become unsure of which medium or fiction they are part of. Are they acting for the camera or for the spectators? Perception changes from the opening scenes, where the spectators have a panoramic view of the action, to the confusing cityscape at the end.

The white makeup becomes an indirect commentary on *blackfacing*, which is used by non-black people to portray a caricature of a black person. In the United States, blacks were portrayed by white actors as stupid, happy and morally corrupt, and blacks were best served by being under the guidance of whites. In the US, *blackfacing* declined in popularity in the 1950s and 1960s and was generally considered disrespectful and racist by the beginning of the 21st century. With the conquest of the West from a South African perspective, a fundamental contradiction between an African and Western view of history is formed. Tue Biering explains:

*“When we make theatre, 99.9 percent of everything we do is representation. We have an actor who represents something else, may be a different age, a different gender, a different being. And I’ve always been fascinated by the fact that when I see myself portrayed through another human being, I can see myself more clearly. Because I am represented by someone else.”* (Simon Løber Roliggaard, Politiken, interview, 9 May 2019)

Biering has done several performances where the performers tell their own stories, but there is also power in telling the stories of *others*.

*“I’ve always been in the role of the privileged, so now I wanted to give that privilege to these actors who have always been asked to tell their own dark story to people like me. Now they have to tell my story and the audience’s story and at the same time bring their own heritage and their own reflections into that story (...) white face paint is a choice I made. But skin colour is a very basic starting point for almost all segregation, so it is, all things considered, interesting to approach it in this way. Also from their point of view.”* (Ibid)

The act of representation becomes polyphonic as the players take on different roles from the Western universe and are made up white and at the same time South African. The simultaneous actions on stage, where the actors talk about their backgrounds, contributes to disorienting our sense of representation because we lose track of things and lose the central perspective. The scene is viewed polycentrically.

### **Overpainting and Remediation**

What is characteristic of FIX&FOXY’s remediation is a kind of overpainting. A familiar narrative constitutes an utterance, and the remediation becomes a new utterance, with a certain transparency to the underlying original. The spectators can reflect on the difference between the original and the present version, where the actors and performance spaces become part of the new dramaturgy of the remediation.

This means that these are utterances of multiple artistic “voices”, each of which is ignorant of the other’s “speech”. They are organised into a whole, but do not necessarily speak the same language or say the same thing. One could call it a polyphony of voices: it could be chaos, but the different utterances are interwoven in a staging that creates a unity that allows the individual utterances to contradict each other or to be parallel. A recognisability and a dramaturgical polyphony emerge. Thus it becomes clear that given modes of observation intervene in each other’s narrative with unexpected perspectives.

I would therefore argue that FIX&FOXY’s dramaturgy contains several simultaneous representational effects. *First*, there are referential reality effects that refer to the reality that is re-presented. *Second*: There are references to the organisation and management of the artistic and creative process. *Third*: There are references to the artist as a kind of institution with a given status and authority that expresses itself in the work. *Fourth*: Works create and are part of a poetics of contemporary art that contains a specific address and relation to the spectators and combines different media (cf. Kyndrup, 2008, p. 83).

In continuation of these considerations about remediation, we can summarise FIX&FOXY’s poetics, and at the same time point to some general conditions for the theatrical medium and contemporary art that can be theoretically and practically useful.

### Singularisation and Poetics

FIX&FOXY belongs to a theatrical generation that reinvents the theatrical situation. All facets of theatrical production can apparently be rethought, and there is no single method; on the contrary, each work is singular in that it creates its own codes, rules and relations that are made visible as an act of representation: Who tells what, about whom and to whom? Who is the sender and who is the receiver and what is the medium? This means that the relationship between sender and receiver is incorporated as part of the dramaturgy of the work, where the spectators are actually co-creators. The so-called reception theory, with scholars such as Umberto Eco and Wolfgang Iser, introduced concepts such as indeterminacy and empty spaces in the dynamic open dramaturgy, which allows the spectators to create independent meaning. This approach has implications for modes of address, and it becomes possible to work cross-aesthetically and interweave different media, as for example the theatre's use of video as a live recording that is projected in the room, allowing for *close up* in the theatre.

Apparently, there are no universal, conventional or normative devices, and each staging creates its own framework, rules, spaces and situations.

This conceptual approach means that the director chooses the identity and behaviour of the actors, media, texts, music and spectator positions, etc. In this way, each staging becomes unique by virtue of the chosen materials, narratives and artifice. This is how FIX&FOXY can be considered *contemporary art*<sup>3</sup>, where utterances create communicative effects: artificial or so-called reality effects.

Some things may seem more real than others, and different hierarchies can be constructed in the work, where the choice of rules can be decisive. Rooted in avant-garde, event art, performance art and post-dramatic theatre, contemporary art emphasises the relation to a given social context and often addresses directly the identity and position of the recipient. It has been called relational art, interactive and immersive theatre, as opposed to the abstract and closed character of modernist works, with a summarising term: contemporary art. At the same time, there is the difference that contemporary art can actually also use quite classical dramaturgical approaches.

### Representation and Remediation

Theatrical forms of representation are actions that operate in relation to reality, whether it is true, fictional or an illusion. It is a statement that is a social address and therefore an important part of a democratic society. Acts of representation can be offensive, seductive, exclusionary, didactic, emancipatory or, for example, moralising. Representations also express a fundamental dichotomy between what is present and what is represented, which is secondary and derivative to what is real. The suspicion of representations is difficult to escape, as the one who speaks assumes a kind of authority that offers an understanding of reality. There is a power relation involved in being able to assume this authority, where some may feel misrepresented or unrepresented. The representation can be experienced as humiliating or just simply wrong. In any case, representation is a problematised practice in contemporary society due to the 'banning' of certain expressions that are assumed to be offensive to certain identity groups. This is a problematisation or critique that FIX&FOXY helps to highlight, among other things by emphasising that there are several dimensions to acts of representation.

---

3) My view on the aesthetic relations of contemporary art is mainly inspired by Juliane Rebentisch (2020). *Samtidskunstens teorier. En indføring*. Informations Forlag, Copenhagen. Reference is also made to Kyntrup, M (2008) *Den æstetiske relation* and De Duve, T (1998) *Kant after Duchamp*.

Representation can be discussed as artistic quality, but also as power in relation to who has the right to express themselves and why. It is about freedom of expression also for marginalised groups, who often have no opportunities to express themselves artistically. Is it an ethical artistic device to bring people on stage? Certainly, but it is also an ethical device to disrupt well-known norms, traditions and codes of good art.

Contemporary art, as in FIX&FOXY's version, can be disturbing, strange or attractive. The performers themselves create a kind of narrative that reflects the contemporary world and at the same time create an artistic distance from the norms, conventions and "moral truths" that we define ourselves through. This makes it possible to rethink the relationship between the particular *immediacy* of the individual and the *hypermediacy* of the community.

---

**Erik Exe Christoffersen**, Associate Professor at the Department of Communication and Culture – Dramaturgy, Aarhus University.

---

### Works Cited

- Barthes, R. (2004). *Forfatterens død og andre essays*. Copenhagen: Gyldendal.
- Bolter, J.D. and Grusin, R. (1999). *Remediation*. Cambridge.
- Christoffersen, E. E. (2009) *Verdensteatrets forhandling af fremmedhed Thatrum Mundi Ur-Hamlet*. In Baggesgaard, I. Krøgholt and L. Philipsen (eds.), *Hvad er verdenskunst?* Aarhus: Klim.
- De Duve, T (1998). *Kant after Duchamp*. The MIT Press
- Fyhn, M. (2009). *Fra kliché til stolte kolleger*. Interview with Biering, T in *Politiken* 8.11.2009.
- Kyndrup, M (2010.) *Teatret: medialitet, udsigelse – og hamlet*. *Peripeti* Vol. 14.
- Kyndrup, M. 2008. *Den æstetiske relation*. Copenhagen: Gyldendal.
- Rebentisch, J. 2020. *Samtidskunstens teorier. En indføring*. Copenhagen: Informations Forlag.
- Rolliggaard, S (2019). Interview med T. Biering in *Politiken* 9.05.2019.
- Taylor, C (2002). *Modernitetens Ubehag - Autenticitetens Etik*. Forlaget Philosophia



Dark Noon. Photo: Søren Meisner



## Article

### World Theatre and Theatre of the Moment

Come on, Bangladesh, just do it!

# World Theatre and Theatre of the Moment

By Jeppe Kristensen

“What exactly is world theatre?”, Milo Rau has the chorus of children he works with ask as he receives the International Theatre Institute’s 2016 award, and continues:

*[T]o actually explain what theatre or world theatre is for me I would have to tell a story that began sometime in the late eighties when my grandfather gave me a book of Chinese fairy tales and continued when my father gave me another book, *The Young Lenin* by Trotsky. I would have to tell him an extremely long and confusing story about me and my comrades-in-arms that spans from the nineties to today: Twenty crazy years that brought me to Chiapas, Cuba, Russia, Congo, Romania, Greece, Rwanda; to Euripides, Fassbinder and Gombrowicz; to Brussel’s Islamic quarter; to Brecht and Bourdieu; into the worlds of Pasolini, of Zapatist rebels, of judges in *The Hague*, of miners in the Eastern Congo, and of Russian Orthodox believers; to hundreds of farmers, proletariats, workers, hipsters, rebels, Nazis, actors, activists and crazies; to assholes and saints from Berlin to Bukavu; to Roger Köppel and Vladimir Putin; to nine and ninety-year-olds; to generals, CEOs, war criminals and the still warm bodies of the children they murdered. (Rau, p 265-266)*

It is a wonderful sentence. With brevity and linguistic pizzazz, there are links between poles: between childhood and life, between experience and action, between local and global, between political theory and activist practice, between good and evil, between art and life, the social and the geographical, between anger and pathos, between the anonymous masses and name-dropped heroes and villains, between coincidence and plan; but above all between the individual person, Milo Rau, and the whole world in its complete totality: “Worlding the globe” is what the English art philosopher Peter Osborne would call this dynamic exchange between the systemic, limited, socio-political geographical unit that is our globe and the individual perspective, the individual’s lifeworld, from which modernity is always experienced differently (Osborne 2010). World theatre, you might say with Osborne, is then the theatre that conceptualises this world making of the global.

## **Familiarities: The Cross-Aesthetic Context of FIX&FOXY**

I refer to Rau’s speech here because it mirrors the aspects that I myself find important in FIX&FOXY, which finds its dynamics in similar pairs of concepts. Local/global, theoretical/practical, good/bad, anger/pathos, coincidence/plan, experience/action – all can be identified as artistic fields of tension. And here too, most importantly – the relationship between the individual and the global systems is staged and given form: *Worlding the globe*. We see this when Bangladeshi actors are brought to Denmark (*Come on, Bangladesh, just do it!* 2006). And when a Thai sex worker recreates her client relationships with the audience (*Love Theater*, 2015). We see it when unemployed people talk about their everyday dreams on stage (*Det store adegilde* (The Big Feast), 2015) and when children outline their statistical probabilities (*Mod alle odds* (Against All Odds), 2019). But we also see it when random children who are not part of the performance shout after the audience in Brøndby Strand (*Parsifal – An Opera Crusade*, 2011) and when street prostitutes joke about how many times they have seen the Hollywood blockbuster *Pretty Woman* (*Pretty Woman A/S* (Pretty Woman Ltd, 2008).

With their own flavour and approach to the craft, FIX&FOXY's performances have linked the personal to the systemic. Another reason for including Milo Rau is to emphasise that FIX&FOXY's works are not particularly special. They share similarities widely in an artistic practice that originates in shared experience rather than in a shared art form. This family is made up of artists within literature, visual art and theatre who were teenagers when the Wall came down. Like Rau –and with him Superflex, Pelle Brage/Parfume, the various incarnations of Nielsen, Santiago Sierra, Teun Castelein, Schlingensief, Von Trier, Renzo Martens and many more – FIX&FOXY is part of a generation for whom the world opened up, for whom Ryanair took off, and for whom globalisation unfolded with all its possibilities and horrors, prosperity and oppression. The bling and fun, complacency, inevitability and pointless development of globalisation is the geo-political-cultural basis on which all these artists work and their field of investigation.

Here are three fine examples of art projects that are historically, stylistically, conceptually and personally quite closely intertwined with FIX&FOXY:

1. In 1996-1997, Superflex developed a small, simple and cheap biogas unit in collaboration with the engineer Jan Mallen. The biogas unit has a clear aesthetic dimension, almost branding-like, with elements kept in Superflex's signature orange colour. But otherwise, *Supergas* is an extremely practical project. It is focused on developing and distributing a well-functioning biogas unit that can be used in sparsely populated rural areas, with a focus on the often underdeveloped rural areas near the equator. In *Supergas*, international development, engineering, commercial interests and global opportunities are as much the material of art as the orange plastic that is the physical dimension of the work. The essence and creativity of the work is quite simple: that a problem can be solved.
2. In 2003, at the beginning of the Iraq War, Das Beckwerk sent two representatives, 'Nielsen' and 'Rasmussen' to Iraq with a small metal suitcase, which they said contained the European democratic model in the form of a nomadic parliament. On this basis, Das Beckwerk travelled through Iraq and conducted parliamentary meetings with the country's various groupings (Das Beckwerk 2011). Unlike the sober gasworks of Superflex, Das Beckwerk's journey has an impenetrable layer of irony, role-play and fictionalisation around its serious project, and there seems to be no way for the spectator to access the project without this layer of fiction.
3. In 2008, the Peoples Museum @ Birzeit opened in Palestine. This people's museum is a collaboration between the artists Pelle Brage, Finn Thybo Andersen, Kirsten Dufour, Lauritz Sonne and the inhabitants of Birzeit. It is a museum in a very broad sense. It exhibits objects as diverse as a model of the city, traditional or ordinary household objects, costumes, more conceptual works by the visiting artists (such as a boat on wheels conceptualising the area's being cut-off from the sea), a popularity contest between FC Barcelona and Real Madrid – and much more (Pelle Brage & Co 2019). The museum is, in the words of Line Rosenvinge, "in motion" and refuses to stand still (Rosenvinge 2018). It is not only a museum that continuously updates and changes its collection based on what its users think belongs in the museum. It is also in conceptual movement between a conceptual artwork or happening, a political statement and a real place of use for the city. Despite the serious context, several of the works are humorous and playfully executed.

I believe that FIX&FOXY's performances from the very beginning have been global theatre in a similar way. We have been concerned with making theatre that in some way related to a part of our

global contemporary world. The ambition has been to break down the boundaries of what theatre can be made about and how. Issues and expressions that, because they are global, have difficulty finding their way into the theatre, have been our main interest. Parallel to globalisation in general, FIX&FOXY has worked *with* and *for* the breaking down of global borders.

In the following, I will take a brief look at FIX&FOXY's work based on Osborne's ideas about contemporary art. These ideas are based on an analysis of contemporary art as an artistic formulation of the inherent contradictions between globalisation and the mindset of globalisation, and the equally inherent contradictions in the present-ness of the contemporary. I should emphasise that I am not looking at our work with a list of answers in mind. The interesting thing is not to see if FIX&FOXY's theatre can qualify as contemporary art. For me, the interesting thing is that it allows me to see some facets of our work – plus a *blind spot* in this work that is extremely important to me. Some of these aspects are in themselves quite banal, but I will nevertheless take the liberty of going through them, towards what I see as our and contemporary theatre's great challenge – from which this chapter also takes its title: The significance of the fact that, for better or worse, there is both world theatre and theatre of the moment. I will begin with Osborne's concept of *de-bordering* (Osborne 2013, p. 28):

### **Global Theatre: De-Bordering as Conceptualisation of a New World**

The breaking down of boundaries in our work has partly been a thematic form of de-bordering (outsourcing, global pop culture, imported refugee boats, internet-based global theatre, American history played by South African actors). At the same time, it is also an aesthetic breaking down of boundaries between high and low culture, between inside and outside, and between the traditional material of theatre art, between physical and conceptual art, between literature, theatre, film, visual art, new media, new technology – I hesitate to say that FIX&FOXY has *done* this – because to a large extent it has been something that many others also did and did for us. But in our own field, FIX&FOXY has contributed to an expansion of theatre art – and in general terms, the material of art – to what is in principle infinite. This breaking down of boundaries also applies to the boundaries between process and performance – it applies to the relations between audience and performance – and perhaps it also applies to ethical boundaries?

To Osborne, de-bordering is an analytical concept that can highlight concrete details of globalisation and thus of our contemporary world. How does the de-bordering of globalisation play out? It is striking, for example, Osborne points out, that in the age of globalisation the only thing that has built a truly global structure, that can flow freely everywhere, is capital. Another characteristic of globalisation that Osborne highlights based on the concept of de-bordering is that it is often a suspension of borders that only works one way. For the global north, opportunities for borderless movement have developed as never before, while for others, it is more a question of the cementing of borders (Osborne 2013, pp. 26-28). The fact that we have now started to export refugees to Rwanda within the refugee system shows how subtle and hard these borders are at one and the same time: While the geographical borders can be crossed in both directions, the social border that really counts has become even more impossible to cross.

De-bordering as an analytical concept can also be applied to the *specific performances* by FIX&FOXY as well as others, and not just globalisation in general. In that case, doubly:

First, as an analytical and political concept to investigate how thematics and practical production follow, are supported by and exploit globalisation in a world making of theatre art. In the case of FIX&FOXY, I think that the concept could be used to disentangle the complicated

relations between political activism, power exploitation, statements, production conditions and aesthetics from which the works draw their strength, in a way that can be quite differently precise than, for instance, postcolonial analysis, which might otherwise share many objections concerning representation, agency and profit.

Second, as an analytical and formalist concept to examine the aesthetic dimension of the works and how this conceptualises – and *exactly* how it conceptualises – the boundary-breaking aspect of globalisation. I use the term *conceptualisation* here as a term that both refers to an artistically well-known strategy of making theatre from a concept *and* alludes to an artistic affinity to conceptual art, *but also* directly alludes to the linguistic-cognitive nature of conceptualising and making comprehensible through theatre. De-bordering in this version can be used as an overarching analytical concept to elucidate aspects of the works – in the case of FIX&FOXY, work-internal strategies such as fictionalisation (Osborne 2013, pp. 24-25) and collectivisation (Osborne 2013, pp. 33-35) and their mutual relationship would be worth investigating. What is the fictionalisation that happens when a prostitute enters *Pretty Woman*, or an asylum seeker enters *Friends?* (In my opinion the movement in FIX&FOXY has gone against the fiction: to examine what stories we tell about each other, how and why – and not the authentic humanisation of fiction). How does this differ from the fictionalisation of the authentic that takes place in later works where more and more documentary material appears when, for example, residents of Odsherred talk about their lives against the background of the manifested strangeness of *Twin Peaks?* And how is the collective and co-creation in the works presented as an extension of the possibilities and necessities of the collective in the global?

### **Two Ways to Go I: A Globe of Increasing Diversity**

Concepts such as de-bordering, fictionalisation and collectivisation (Osborne 2013, pp. 33-35) can connect the aesthetic work of FIX&FOXY and our generation with an analysis of the global. And because globalisation and its concrete forms and challenges are the overarching movement of our time, the three concepts are, according to Osborne, also essential for understanding the concept of ‘contemporaneity’ – as bridging concepts between ‘contemporaneity’ and ‘contemporary art’.

Osborne constructs a critical concept of contemporaneity. That is, a concept that can do more than describe contemporaneity as what is happening here and now. And thus also contemporary art as something other than art here-and-now, or the most modern of modern art.

His ambition is a concept that can expose concepts in our understanding of the world by critically analysing our present – and thus also our community (Osborne 2010, pp. 1-2). Two aspects appear in this spatio-temporal concept.

One I opened with: There are several possible ‘datings’ for the contemporary; after the fall of the Berlin Wall, or at the emergence of American dominance after the Second World War, or perhaps after the conceptual art of the 1960s (Osborne 2013, pp. 17-18)? These different understandings of the contemporary operate side by side and intertwine with each other. The contemporary as a concept is quite contradictory. Yet, in its contradiction, it has established itself as an absolutely indispensable and influential concept that frames our understanding of the world. The modern, which was previously from a Western perspective was understood as a Western concept, has now spread to all of us, everywhere – *the globe* in Osborne’s conceptualisation. The most important discrepancy he asks us to look at is that the modern looks different depending on where it is viewed from (Osborne 2013, p 27) The different worlds we thus see, he therefore sets as a requirement for contemporary art to conceptualise – *worlding the globe*. (Which does not

mean that all art that is made now must conceptualise this, but that art that does not cannot be called contemporary art according to Osborne's criteria.) It is this global realism in the form of different positions in and perspectives on modernity that appears again and again in FIX&FOXY as a concept, process strategy and artistic expression. This combination is far from always transparent in its power relations, and it rarely results in the same expression. But in the vast majority of FIX&FOXY's performances, it is either the clash between the perspective presented in a work with global resonance and the individual's positioning in relation to this, or the perspectives of specific persons on global developments, that gives the works their conceptual strength and brings some form of aesthetic innovation to light. The process of creating *Love Theater* is a good example, where the Danish artists and the Thai prostitute's views on sex tourism were completely different, and these disagreements drove both the creation of the performance and shaped the final work (Kristensen 2019, see Kristensen in this anthology).

### **Two Ways to Go II: A World of Shorter and Shorter Time**

The second aspect is more difficult and unpleasant to recognise and to apply critically and creatively. It concerns the understanding of time of the concept of the contemporary. A few remarks are necessary in this short, somewhat tentative conclusion:

'What' I am trying to verbalise here is not alien to FIX&FOXY. It has been a consequence of the activist approach to art, with its belief that problems can be fixed in a foxy way. 'It' is what happens when the prostitute protagonist of *Pretty Woman Ltd.*, after leaving the stage at the same time as Julia Roberts and Richard Gere break up in their fake ending. And *after* Anders Mossling has acted out the film's final happy ending scene on the roof of the containers with her and brought her back into the containers for applause, and leaves the stage *again* and goes home. 'That' is what happens when the audience, after spending an evening in intimate company with the young people in *Youth*, is asked to walk into the artificial sunrise and leave the stage (Christoffersen 2015). In a paradigm of transformative aesthetics, our performances have often been characterised by articulating both that something has changed and that nothing has changed. A certain sadness has often been present, and although the performances are just as often articulated as socially engaged and aesthetically curious, this sadness is a crucial part of the performances, pointing to something other than the specific issue that the performances engage with.

'It', on the other – theoretical – side, is not very clearly articulated in Osborne's texts, although it is for this very reason that I find his ideas interesting for exploring and challenging FIX&FOXY. Let it be clear that in this little conclusion, it is me who brings Osborne into a mindset of loss of perspective and consequent depression. Osborne's analysis of time is all about speed – that this aspect of the idea of contemporaneity is crucial is on my account.

Osborne sees it as a consequence of the inbuilt self-understanding in the contemporary concept of the present as more modern than the modern, as the modern 'now' made even shorter and more essential; that one can see the present as the modern without the modern's contract with the future. The modern now, Osborne says, is to be understood as a transitory relation between past and future. Not so with the "now" of the concept of the contemporary. It stands alone, as a "disavowal of politics" (Osborne 2010, p. 4). Without an understanding of the future, no politics. Osborne states this quite coolly within a 'philosophy of time'. Combined with an emotional or existential view, however, it is a rather sad aspect of contemporary life. If at the same time, we take Osborne's demands on contemporary art seriously – that it must conceptualise and concretise contemporaneity – I notice two things:

First, that it is an important element of our work in FIX&FOXY that we have always endeavoured to be hyper-current. Not just to follow the news stream and make theatre about current issues, but to try to notice the forces that are shaping our world – both the local and the global – here and now. And try to make sense of it in a post-conceptual theatre. This work is fun, invigorating and engaging.

While the other thing I recognise probably is rather sad to an unspeakable extent. The lack of perspective, the loss of the future (which is essentially also the meta-analysis of my generation's world art and world theatre) is not only almost impossible to bear. It is also extremely difficult to give form to. Loss of future on a global scale and the parallel non-clinical depression are the great taboo of contemporary theatre. To me, this perspective is both quite paralysing and inspiring at the same time. It is an elementary, crucial part of our world that we have not yet managed to give form. For a theatre company that has in a way created an image of being able to accomplish a lot, this is a huge remaining dark area. It is my hope for the future – for FIX&FOXY, like-minded or newcomers – that this part of the present will at some point be given form and conceptualised. Not to fix it, but because there are simply limits to what you can ask contemporary art and contemporary theatre to fix – without this realisation that there is nothing to be done making us less relevant.

---

**Jeppe Kristensen**, Professor, University of Agder, Norway. Dramaturge and co-founder of FIX&FOXY

---

### Works Cited

- Christoffersen, E. E., 2015. Udflygt til stranden. Review of FIX&FOXY's *Ungdom*. Online at: <https://www.peripeti.dk/2015/02/18/anmeldelse-af-ungdom-ved-fixfoxy/>. (Accessed 22.09.2022).
- Das Beckwerk, 2011. *History of Democracy / 4 - Destination Iraq* (Website). Online at: [http://dasbeckwerk.com/History\\_of\\_The\\_Democracy/4\\_-\\_Destination\\_Iraq/](http://dasbeckwerk.com/History_of_The_Democracy/4_-_Destination_Iraq/) (Accessed 01.07.2022).
- Kristensen, J, 2019. U håndgribelige konflikter. En case i teaterarbejde med komplekse problemstillinger. In Böhnisch, S. and Eidsaa, R. M. (eds.) *Kunst og konflikt. Teater, visuell kunst og musikk i kontekst*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget
- Osborne, P 2018. *The Postconceptual Condition*. London: Verso.
- Osborne, P, 2013. *Anywhere or Not at All. Philosophy of Contemporary Art*. London: Verso.
- Osborne, P, 2010. *Contemporary Art is Post-Conceptual Art*. Online at: <https://silو.tips/download/contemporary-art-is-post-conceptual-art> (Accessed 01.07.2022).
- Pelle Brage & Co, 2019. *Peoples museum@Birzeit, Palestine* (Website). Online at: <https://pellebrage.com/peoples-museum/> (Accessed 01.07.2022).
- Rau, M, 2018. *What Is World Theater?* In Rau, Milo, *Globaler Realismus / Global Realism: Golden Book 1*. Berlin: Verbrechen Verlag.
- Rosenvinge, L 2018. *Kunstværker, der ikke vil stå stille*. Online at: [https://pellebrage.com/kunstvaerker\\_der\\_ikke\\_vil\\_staa\\_stille/](https://pellebrage.com/kunstvaerker_der_ikke_vil_staa_stille/) (Accessed 01.07.2022).
- Superflex, 2011. *Supergas. Don't Waste Waste* (Website). Online at: <http://www.suprgas.dk/introduction/> (Accessed 01.07.2022).



Welcome to Twin Peaks. Photo: Søren Meisner



## Essay

### FIX&FOXY's Distribution of Management

# FIX&FOXY's Distribution of Management

By Ida Krøgholt

How does FIX&FOXY involve, curate and facilitate the people who participate in the performances? And what does this say about FIX&FOXY's poetics?

FIX&FOXY has developed an interesting form of participatory curation and facilitation of their performers, which interacts with the theatre's directorial concept and poetics. The participatory approach is expressed in production processes where the performer-participants are each other's co-producers and in performances where they showcase each other through handheld video recording and mutual interviews. It is the link between the participatory directing concept and the poetics of FIX&FOXY that I explore in this article. The investigation is based on conversations with Tue Biering, interviews with the cast of *My Deer Hunter*, and observations from the performances *Ungdom* (Youth), *Mod alle Odds* (Against All Odds) and *My Deer Hunter*.

During the work on performances such as *Youth*, *Against All Odds* and *My Deer Hunter*, there has been a redistribution of dramaturgical responsibilities and organisational positions. As concept developers, director Tue Biering and dramaturges Jeppe Kristensen and Tanja Diers, are strongly bound by their performers' material, and in order to promote the production of material, they distribute the management of part of the process from the director and dramaturge to the participating performers.

I examine the devices and methods by which this distribution takes place and the issues it raises. In particular, the challenge of the director's position of authority in relation to deciding the form of the final work is highlighted, and how FIX&FOXY balances managerial authority and distribution of management while working with the live actors.

## The Emotional Community of Youth

The above-mentioned redistribution of responsibility interacts with several factors that define FIX&FOXY's productions. In one of our conversations, we ask Biering what has been the incentive for making productions like *Against All Odds* and *Youth* with children and young people: What is the knowledge that the participating children gain that makes them interesting for FIX&FOXY? Does FIX&FOXY intend to perform a social critique through the young people's narratives about their precarious lives?

Biering takes the conversation in a slightly different direction. He explains that the concept for the performance *Youth* came about when he and Jeppe Kristensen, after a series of works dealing with economic and political issues, wanted to do something that could touch the spectator in a different way – something emotional:

*"In that sense, we are not interested in working with young people. It's sort of a consequence of the concept. We identify the area we want to delve into, and here it was the emotional, our efforts were aimed at, and consequently we need some people to be in that place. Because, what does it mean as a young person to be in that place and state of mind? It is, for example, lying in a tent, being completely open and sharing thoughts. That's why it became a performance that was about getting the audience to go back in time and for a moment be where you once were in your life yourself."* (Biering, 2022)

Here, Biering describes how the performers are suppliers of a piece of reality that is intended to bring the spectators into an atmosphere and an issue. Distribution should be seen in the context of this, as characteristic of the way FIX&FOXY organises the actors' contributions. Biering goes on to explain how the actors in *Youth* were distributed responsibility for the narrative:

*"When we were casting and from the first rehearsals, I clearly remember saying that 'we are these aging men, and to be honest, this shouldn't be about our youth, but about yours. It has to come from you. You're the ones who are experiencing something now that we may have forgotten, so you're the ones who have to deliver it'."* (Biering, 2022)

What Biering describes here is characteristic of FIX&FOXY's directorial concept, where the actors' realities are combined and made accessible through the performance. It is the actors' social conventions, forms and expressions of emotionality that Biering, as director, provides a framework and space for in part cultivating and in part communicating to the theatre's spectators. In *Youth*, the directorial concept is based on the fact that something emotional actually *happens* in the relationship between the cast, which the spectator both becomes witness of and takes part in. About the performative element, Kristensen has stated that FIX&FOXY's performances often have a double plot:

*"One is, for example, to tell the story of the nice prostitute or Parsifal's experiences in the vicious Arab world, while the other is about 'making it happen'."* (Kristensen, 2022)

Several other logics are connected to the double-plotted starting point of the theatre. Since it is the performers' realities that form the basis of the concept, the performance process cannot begin with a script and a reading rehearsal. The script develops quite naturally through working with the performers, which also explains why the concept of 'rehearsal' is clearly of no interest to Tue Biering. On the contrary, one of his essential techniques as a director is to create opportunities for resonance and response. He typically asks the actors to perform very specific tasks and *show* something in the room that others can relate to and give feedback on – like 'the worst and the most beautiful thing you have experienced'. From this starting point, the actors are invited to build each other up, and this method proves to be a significant resource in the direction process. Biering talks about working towards *Youth*:

*"We worked in groups and let them watch each other, and they reacted with a 'wao, this is really nice' – and we can do it this way and that way. All of a sudden, things moved really fast. Then we brought others in and let them watch, and in this way they built each other up. We have discovered that they facilitate each other by watching and being each others' audience."* (Biering, 2022)

### **The Poetics**

Ideally, the performers in FIX&FOXY's performances are involved as co-facilitating dramaturges. Biering, in collaboration with Kristensen and later Diers, develops the concept and brings the threads together, while the performers are established as respondents to each other's work. The concept provides the answer to what kind of people and realities are to be cast, while the performers'

expert knowledge as actors is not a quality criterion for casting. Often the concepts are oriented towards marginalised worlds, which through staging can challenge the spectator's view of their own reality. During an interview, when we touch on FIX&FOXY's protection and challenge of often vulnerable performers, Biering brings the process of *My Deer Hunter* into the conversation:

*"We realise that the whole engine of the story is that people put themselves in an extremely pressured situation with the audience on either side, where there is no exit. The performers are not supposed to be protected. They must be vulnerable."* (Biering, 2022)

In line with this, FIX&FOXY's theatre poetics is about presenting certain more or less invisible realities and people in an unprotected position, but viewed through and shielded by the theatre framework. As an art form, theatre has an ability here, FIX&FOXY argues: it can create a space for voices that are rarely presented in the performing arts *"because we believe that we can make a difference when people meet face to face"* (<https://fixfoxy.com/om/>). This argues for the diversity perspective that is substantial in FIX&FOXY's idea of what the function of theatre should be – that is, their practice and poetics.

### **Optimism in Spite of Everything**

*Against All Odds* like *Youth* is based on a team of quite young performers. As in *Youth*, it is not the representation of children and young people that is the basis for the performance concept, but the thematisation of a problem and the creation of an atmosphere, touching togetherness, discomfort or tension that the cast can give access to. In *Against All Odds* it is about fate, injustice and unequal social conditions. Biering explains that the initial idea for the concept was to create an installation with far fewer children involved than the final performance: the spectator would enter a room, a drug addict's flat, where a 10-year-old child would sit and talk about the statistical evidence that he or she would become a drug addict as an adult. During the development of the concept, another agenda also emerged, which was that FIX&FOXY had so far made performances that appealed to quite few spectators. This concept they wanted to challenge. Tue explains:

*"It was getting smaller and smaller. But I wanted to reclaim the theatre as a site-specific space. I wanted to see a statistical representation. When we were casting for the performance, I did an exploratory workshop, because how the heck can we do this? Then we got a whole class in and I tried saying to the children, for example: How many of you sleep badly at night, and then you step forward to this line... I also did some different choreographies with them, and then it was amazing that there were so many children. I knew then that we have to have at least 20 children."* (Biering, 2022). With 22 children, it became necessary, as in *Youth*, to think through how to work with such a large group, and here the idea for the statistical performance, similar to the German theatre group Rimini Protokoll's performance concept, *100 % City*, was born. *Against All Odds* is about children's living conditions and is performed as a statistical study of the cast, with the performers acting as numerical data. Based on their sociological circumstances, their individual futures are predicted, and the performance depicts, with the statistics' mixture of cruel and optimistic prophecies, how each child's personal history in childhood determines what kind of life the child will have in the future. In the performance script, there is an introductory note which is noteworthy as it points out that it is crucial that *"everyone contributes truthful information, and that the text will be coloured by the actual cast, their individual personalities and characteristics"* (*Against All Odds* script). The script's explication of the actors as truthful and personal, but also distinctive exponents of a given reality, connects

with the diversity perspective of FIX&FOXY's poetics and theatre vision. It is about the actors, personally and relatively truthfully within the theatre fiction, taking ownership of the presentation of their own generation. This is reflected in the finished performance in the way the children are made their own and each other's co-narrators: they hold the microphone for each other and help to frame the performance of others by asking questions and summarising conclusions on behalf of each other. In this way, they are perceived from the outside as competent and responsible for the performance, which is emphasised by the fact that the group of children, despite the pessimism of the statistics, act as a coherent and optimistic community: "*We are united in believing that the future is open to us*", they proclaim, and at the same time they discuss whether and how statistical patterns can be broken, and how chance can play a role in one's fate as an uncontrollable factor.

The gloomy prophecies confront the spectator as the 'adult' and privileged who has established the governing premises for the fates of new generations, and the adults (read spectators) become involved in the gravity of the theatre situation, both explicitly, as a spectator is cast during the performance and interviewed by the children about his childhood, and implicitly. For it is hard to avoid feeling complicit as responsible for their future adulthood. As one (childless) reviewer wrote, the performance made her "feel like a parent of someone" (the daily paper *Information* 25 January 2019). With the children as co-producers, interviewers and narrators, the spectators are woven into a dramaturgical confrontation with their own position, where the roles and perspectives they normally find themselves in are turned upside down.

### **Actors in Each Other's Hands in *My Deer Hunter***

In an interview with the four cast members of *My Deer Hunter*, one of the performers describes what it was like for him to relive, edit and thus fictionalise a violent experience in a war zone:

*"I described it detail by detail. How I was sitting. What was around me. How I held the shotgun. That also made it tangible for myself (...). The fact that I could re-enact my own experiences in a more theatrical setting has in a way allowed me to tell it more honestly."* (Palle Würtz, in Christoffersen, E.E2022).

*My Deer Hunter* brings four war veterans together to re-enact their experiences, and here there is a similar distribution of the directorial and dramaturgical function, as the performers interview and videotape each other as part of the mediality and expression of the performance. From a spectator perspective, the explicit use of live video means that the staging device cannot be overlooked, and in this way an experiential meta-view is offered: we gain knowledge of what is happening 'behind the screen' as we follow how the situation is constructed and mediated. The use of live video is a recurring device in FIX&FOXY and is discussed in several of the articles in this anthology. As in the German director Frank Castorf's theatre, there is basically no separation between actors and cameras, and the filming is not hidden, but takes place as an integrated element of reality on stage. The video filming means that the actors for the sake of the spectator can be observed in close-up on a screen, and that the actors meet and approach each other when they film and witness each other's stories with a hand-held camera. In this way, the live video concept intensifies the production process and affects the mutual relationship between the actors and the potential mirroring of each other's narratives. However, the relationship-building part of the directing concept can also be quite challenging, and in certain situations tensions arise that make it necessary to interrupt the work. One of the performers describes a situation where telling a story to a fellow

actor resulted in discomfort and shame related to the situation the person was talking about. On the whole, the construction of the community does not necessarily flow smoothly by itself but requires determination and discipline of the performers. The actor Sara La Cour describes in the interview how their expectations of each other can be a driving force, but also a quite tough obligation:

*“One of the things that was crucial was that we went into this together. I remember one of the first times when Jonas says: I don’t want to do this if we do it halfway (...) I knew then that I had to talk about the accidental shooting experience that has tormented me, even if no one was hurt.”* (Sara La Cour, in Christoffersen, E.E, 2022).

The situation described by La Cour illustrates how the performers negotiate, engage and pull each other up, while at the same time they can put each other under pressure. When the process was nevertheless possible for the relatively affected participants to carry through, I assume that this must be seen in the context of the distributive approach, where they are given responsibility for both the relationships and the production of the performance. Another important aspect of the actors’ work with the process towards *My Deer Hunter* is FIX&FOXY’s engagement of psychotherapist Sasha Kempinski. Kempinski is trained in therapeutic work with actors in connection with film production, and the performers in *My Deer Hunter* had the option to consult her during the production process, just as she was present in the rehearsal room during the development of the material and influenced the process through her professional approach. The alliance with Kempinski can be seen as a delegation of work between the theatre space under Biering’s direction and the therapeutic space that she manages. In this balancing of art and therapy, the performers participate in creating the performance, and the result is a work in which the spectator can observe both the participants’ energy as performers and their simultaneous struggles to deal with the effects left behind by their wartime experiences. Jonas explains how the theatrical doubling can have a kind of catharsis:

*“I feel much stronger than the person on stage, and it’s good to be able to say that I have taken back the power. It’s a crack that gives hope to other people”* (Jonas Hjort Andersen in Christoffersen, E.E, 2022).

La Cour points to something similar:

*“Bringing your story to light is an antidote to shame, but also empathising with the toughest soldiers you meet every night is important. It’s the feeling of being a unit but also retelling your story so many times”* (Sara La Cour, in Christoffersen, E.E , 2022).

### **Distributed Facilitation**

FIX&FOXY’s distribution of the director and dramaturge function has a number of advantages at the production level in terms of building performers’ relationships, commitment, participation and creativity, and at the work level in terms of the spectator’s encounter with the performer’ realities. However, the method is not without a certain risk, as there may be a dramaturgical and instructional void, a conceptual weakening or conflicts that need to be resolved at management level. The method is commented on in the interview by Würtz:

*“It was funny to see that Tue had lined up a lot of military toys on a table and Tue says: ‘See what you can do with that.’ Then we just started playing, and Tue sat there and said: ‘What does it mean when you do that?’ ‘Well, aren’t you in charge?’, but Tue didn’t answer. ‘Well, what the hell do you want, and now you have to step up as a leader and drop that socialist bullshit’ .” (Palle Würtz, in Christoffersen, E.E, 2022).*

You could call the way of processing that FIX&FOXY primarily engages in distributed facilitation. When Biering *“lines up military toys”*, it is presumably to turn the performers’ possible expectations of the direction towards a so-called fusion assumption. To put it simply, Biering simultaneously makes the performers play together by giving them ownership and fusing them with FIX&FOXY, so that they can ultimately contribute to the realisation of the theatre’s poetics. This not only gives the performers influence as participators, but also provides them with knowledge of what theatre and dramaturgy are. In the shift that takes place for the performers between being intuitive creators of a material and analytical observers of the realities of the other performers, an awareness can potentially be formed of where it is that one looks from when observing one’s own and others’ realities. In the creative position there is the possibility of presenting oneself and acting, while observing the material and process of the others is a reflected position where the performers can be encouraged to see what is being formed. Therefore, it is plausible to assume that the production processes, in which the performers are given a facilitation responsibility and ‘build each other up’, can create a dramaturgical insight and a theatrical awareness, where they are offered an understanding of what happens between one’s gaze as an observer and the scenic element that is taking shape – and how the scenic looks back at the spectator and *affects* the viewer. In that way, this way of working introduces the performers to the particular expression of the theatre medium, while at the same time there can be a certain release for the performers in being re-enacted in the theatre medium. And it is the result of this duality that the spectators might encounter in these theatre performances.

At first glance, this way of working with performers makes them less dependent on the director, who acts as a kind of positive reinforcement. But at the same time, the method reinforces the performers’ understanding of or surrender to FIX&FOXY’s concept, premises and values, because even though FIX&FOXY bases its poetics on a principle of diversity, the processes can hardly accommodate performers who do not accept the concept of directing as well as the concept of the performance. It is arguable whether there is a conflict in this. Tue averts this by describing the special agreement that the performers enter into concerning the power structure and form of democracy of the direction concept:

*“I hope that everyone has the experience of being involved in the process. I would find it boring if it was only my words that counted. I think it makes people calmer in a room, and the most important thing is that I never say that I’m in charge, because that would make the situation less fun for everyone. But if everyone knows that that’s how it is, you can play flat structure, and everyone can feel that they are being heard and being included.” (Biering, 2022)*

FIX&FOXY’s distribution of responsibility for parts of the theatre processes to the performers is, as illustrated here, a method of *making something happen* between the human beings and realities that the concept of the performance revolves around – with the spectator in mind. From a management perspective, Biering’s management style can be called a facilitative form of power (Frode Andersen 2017, p. 17), which is in line with his formulation that distributing responsibility

to the performers does not compromise his responsibility for curating them and his authority with respect to deciding the form of the theatrical work. As the director, he makes the final decisions for the form and expression of the work. However, the partial distribution of power can be seen as a rather probable advantage, as the performers' knowledge and suggestions for the development of the material are part of the investigation of the whole process of the production and therefore, at best, can contribute to sharpen the projection of the artistic concept. But balancing distribution and managerial authority is a cardinal point:

*"I don't believe in democracy in my own artistic work. I'm very fascinated by Superflex and Gob Squad, for example, who have an open democratic structure and an open form of management. I've tried it, but it really doesn't turn out well because my theatre requires some kind of management. I think people are deluding themselves when they say that it's not managed, it's not run by a manager. My main job is to be a curator and a manager of some talents. There should be no doubt that ultimately, I am the one who decides. If I behave wrongly towards other people, that is also my responsibility"* (Biering, 2022).

As a director, Biering along with the dramaturges set the premises and create the framework conditions for the concept-exploring collaboration with the performers. The curation of live actors requires a very particular understanding of the performers' processes, combined with the ability to incorporate the emerging material into a stringent aesthetic concept, which FIX&FOXY with Biering's directing concept has created a sensitive method for. In the curation of actors, the distribution method interacts with the whole idea of what FIX&FOXY's theatre is – that is its poetics – and it is this idea that the director and the dramaturgical team lead the performers towards the realisation of: a theatre space where people meet face to face, with the audience on either side and without exit, and where the performers' realities are given the status of unique knowledge positions.

---

**Ida Krøgholt**, Associate Professor at the Department of Communication and Culture – Dramaturgy, Aarhus University.

---

## Works Cited

- Biering, T. (2022). *FIX&FOXYs poetik, metode og organisering*. FIX&FOXY, Peripeti, Særnummer 2022.
- Christoffersen, E.E., I. Krøgholt og K. Winkelhorn. (2022) *My Deer Hunter. Interviews med de medvirkende og det kreative team*. FIX&FOXY, Peripeti, Særnummer 2022.
- Boye Andersen, F.: *Ledelse af Ledelse*, Systime (2014).
- Kristensen, J. (2022) *Hvad har vi egentlig haft gang i? Ethiske, sociale og kunstneriske undersøgelser*. FIX&FOXY, Peripeti, Særnummer 2022.



## Essay

# FIX&FOXY's Representation Strategies

# FIX&FOXY's Representation Strategies

By Anne Liisberg

*Who can we represent? Who is never represented?*

This was the question posed by director Tue Biering, who in his role as moderator of the Bikuben Foundation's art salon *De repræsenterede* (The Represented) was represented by actor Troels Thorsen. The salon took place at Teater Republique's small Reaktor stage on 21 May 2019. The theme was directly related to a thematic paradigm shift that has only become stronger in the past three years, and which, with a simple but effective approach, was highlighted and discussed in the salon. FIX&FOXY's performance *Dark Noon*, which, like the company's other works, also revolves around the theme of representation, played at the theatre at the same time. We will return to the two approaches to representation, but first we turn our attention to the beginning.

## Just do it!

In 2006, Jeppe Kristensen and Tue Biering kick-started what would eventually become FIX&FOXY with the performance *Come on, Bangladesh, just do it!* Nike's slogan was a reference both for the global capitalism that the performance was about and for a performing arts credo about venturing into new formats that interact with the world and the audience in new or at least rethought ways.

Involving the audience in the performance was not in itself innovative in 2006. Political theatre had long been dormant, and *Come on, Bangladesh, just do it!* was not received with open arms. The theme of the performance was outsourcing, which was realised in concrete terms by having Bangladeshi actors perform Johan Ludvig Heiberg's Danish national play *Elverhøj* (Elves' Hill, 1828). The actors were paid 10% of the Danish rate, and among other things the audience was invited to leave the theatre to demonstrate against the concept in the street instead.

## Mirror Images as a Space for Reflection

A seed was planted for a contemporary political theatre and has since been refined – and challenged – through a series of performances that involve the audience in a contemporary issue set in a known aesthetic frame of reference, typically a film script, that meets reality and the audience. Often only with the title of the original as a reference space, while the performance itself takes other directions. In other words: a concept where the known frames of reference and the recognisable audience positions are twisted to create a third surprising space for reflection.

FIX&FOXY's works are often characterised as provocative. They are not political theatre in the classical sense, but performing arts that stage contemporary political dilemmas such as poverty, globalisation, differences between rich and poor with an open view that carries the possibility of dialogue.

In 2006, *Come on, Bangladesh, just do it!* was received as a remake of the political theatre of the 1970s. Today, it would probably have had a stronger resonance in the light of the actualisation of the confrontation between the privileged and the non-privileged. The actors from Bangladesh painted their faces white to give a convincing impression of Danes in *Elves' Hill*, but not many people took notice of this at the time. Unlike today, where representation, and especially misrepresentation,

sets the agenda – in society and in art. Meanwhile, representation has been at the centre of most of the works that FIX&FOXY has put on stage over the past 16 years.

### **Art Salon VISION – THE REPRESENTED**

For a number of years, the Bikuben Foundation has organised salons on current themes in the visual and performing arts. The foundation's concept *The Art Salon VISION* covers both classic debates, artist interviews and salon formats where artists take the lead. The salons all focus on dialogue, but use different approaches to put art in a societal perspective.

Tue Biering had previously criticised the Bikuben Foundation's salons for being conformist and boring, so it was an obvious choice to invite FIX&FOXY to give their take on the artist-run salon. With a simple, effective device that was identical to the salon's theme of (mis)representation, FIX&FOXY took control in a salon conceived in 3 acts and an epilogue.

### **ACT I**

On the small Reaktor stage, we meet the doubled panel. Four actors representing four other people present who feel misrepresented in art. The last four were not allowed to speak themselves, but sat among the audience and could confer directly with the actor who represented them by summoning them with a bell. Actor Peter Flyvholm did not reach the second sentence of his first speech before the bell interrupted him and, in a whispered conversation with Eja, whom he was representing, he corrected his presentation of "Eja" from transsexual to transgender.

The stereotypical provocations were repeated in several of the panel's contributions. "*Why is fat almost always associated with stupid or funny, it's just a neutral word?*"<sup>1</sup>, asked fat "Frederikke", represented by Ene Øster Bendtsen, for example. The same point was made by "Rasmus", represented by Elliot Crosset Hove, and "Amina", represented by Amira Jasmina Jensen. Rasmus has muscular dystrophy and finds that people with a disability are typically represented either as pitiable or, conversely, as an inspiration. Amina is a Muslim with a Somali background and has similar experiences being represented either as a terrorist or as a variant of the straight A girl, a super Muslim.

That it depends on the eyes of the beholder becomes apparent when "Amina" refers to the character Sana from the Norwegian TV-series *SKAM* (Shame) as an example of such a super Muslim. "Rasmus", on the other hand, has experienced Sana as a successful representation based on statements by the actress behind Sana, who developed the role herself and is happy with it. "Amina" believes it is not only about the actor's experience, but in this case about how the stereotype character is portrayed. While the panel and the audience, predominantly made up of professionals from the theatre industry, agreed that it is primarily about being and portraying people, the audience is inclined to believe that acting is just that – portraying different characters – while the panel points out that nuances are lost in representation when minorities are portrayed without sufficient research. Why are transgender people often portrayed by cisgender people, and why do slim actors in fatsuits (full-body suits) have to represent fatness, the panel asks. Why do you not just hire a fat person? It is because you sell more tickets if there are celebrities involved, is a laconic response from the audience, while there are also voices arguing that the industry must take responsibility and set a social agenda by actively seeking out and using both stories and actors from minority groups.

---

1) All translations from sources not previously translated into English are by Marianne Ølholm.

## **BREAK – 2. ACT**

“Tue Biering” tries to sharpen the focus of the debate by handing out props to the four representatives so they can look a bit more like the people they represent: a wheelchair, a fatsuit, a scarf, studded straps and blue hair colour. A few of the couples agree to the provocation to show “how stupid it is”, while “Amina” refuses: *“It’s like being put on a headscarf by an imam”*.

The audience registers the provocation, but is more interested in asking questions about what many perceive as a narrow focus on making representation look like what it represents. The main consideration is whether 1:1 representation would limit acting and at the same time fix identities. “Frederikke” says that for her it is not about resembling, but about challenging the clichés, while “Amina” points out that it is not the responsibility of the actors, but of the theatres and directors to bring out diversity.

## **BREAK – 3. ACT**

Now “Tue” becomes Troels and also lets the panel be the actors they are, while the four represented are allowed to speak for themselves. And there was a need for that. Eja found it “extremely provocative” to be represented by someone with a completely different language for emotions, while Rasmus thought “it was a bit caricatured and that Elliot was much more quiet than he would have been”. Amina was angry about the privilege blindness she experiences in the room. *“You never experience what I experience”*, she points out, while Elliot agrees that representation of minorities can easily become clichéd because there is too little time to prepare roles in general.

## **BREAK – EPILOGUE**

Tue Biering now calls for the panel to break up and talk to each other across the room. Food and drink are passed around and the conversation flows pleasantly, before rounding off with a collective reflection on the form of the salon. Rasmus is positive, as *“the whole set-up shows that nuances are lost in the misrepresentation”*. In the audience, too, the form has had an effect. To some, the actors’ uncertainty has become a point in itself, highlighting the artistic responsibility for representation and for using all types of stories and actors. Other spectators insist that direct representation is only important in some genres, while Ene points out that *“all acting is fake, but I can understand the need to break the clichés”*.

## **Dialogue or Booring**

With the artist-run salon, FIX&FOXY pushed the professional debate about representation out into the industry. The simultaneous presence of represented and representing made different aspects of the complex issue visible and opened it up to a sober and attentive dialogue. Despite Tue and “Tue”’s inbuilt provocative gear shifts, we were light years away from the atmosphere of the Bikuben Foundation’s more traditional salon on identity politics, held at Sort/Hvid the previous year in connection with the performance *Black Madonna*<sup>2</sup>. Here there was no dialogue, it was drowned out by booing. At Reaktor, the dialogue was open both to those who want 1:1-representation, to those who want to see all the nuances and to those in the audience who are stuck in their role as a “white, heterosexual man with feelings”. The salon thus condensed in a format other than the aesthetic

---

2) Originally called *White Nigger. Black Madonna*, but the theatre cut half of the title after the salon. Reumertsalon: Kunstscenen i en identitetspolitisk tid (iscene.dk).

FIX&FOXY's particular take on the body's empathy as a path to enquiry and understanding without ready-made answers.

### **Entering Biering's Universe with Trepidation**

Actress Ene Øster Bendtsen had worked with Tue Biering a few times before, so she was familiar with his way of working when she agreed to participate in the salon as "Frederikke". "It's always with a little trepidation that you enter his universe, because you know that he wants to give you a hard time. He doesn't like rules, but of course that's the fun part", she says. From her point of view, the theme of the salon is still relevant, but she also experiences that more projects are being created with a broader representation, bringing other stories on stage and in front of the camera.

*"It wasn't an issue like that at all in 2019, so even though the ideas were not foreign to me, I wasn't 100 % familiar with the topic. Tue's concept carried representation to a head, so I was out of my depth",* says Ene Øster Bendtsen. According to her, this experience was due to the fact that part of the concept was based on ignorance: *"I was contacted at short notice, there was an intro talk but no rehearsals, and I only had half an hour with the person I was to represent, so I could feel my own incompetence in presenting Frederikke's messages. She probably wasn't too happy with me".* The actors' lack of knowledge acted as a motor for the salon, both concretely in the form of visible perplexity and as a more general point about (mis)representation.

Ene Øster Bendtsen's participation in the salon made her more aware of her own attitudes and the many possible ways of looking at the subject: *"You have a great responsibility when you represent other people. Representation is extremely important on stage and in film, because as human beings we connect to each other. But we also have to have freedom as actors, because the essence of acting is to portray something you are not. You try with every role to understand it and the body it has, and I would die slowly if I only were to represent myself"* she says and summarises her current position as follows: *"The salon shook us up and we have to keep talking about representation so that it resonates with us and makes us wiser, but we also have to be gentle with each other and forgive. These are muscles that need to be exercised, and we are all practising to get better".*

### **A Frenetic Frontier Epic**

*"If you want to kill an African story, tell it in English"* was the last line in *Dark Noon*, which played in the theatre space next to Reaktor in May-June 2019. With *Dark Noon*, Tue Biering makes a connection to *Come on, Bangladesh, just do it!* Both performances have actors from other continents portraying Danish and Western history respectively, but where the focus in 2006 was a critique of the obvious effects of global capitalism, in 2019, Biering works with the subject fully integrated in the particular Bieringian approach to the identity politics agenda that has crystallised more and more clearly in FIX&FOXY's works. Representation is the *device* in *Dark Noon* – as illustrated in the performance's closing line.

*"Western movies are boring"*, says one of the seven South African actors staging the show's settler universe, which is literally constructed before our eyes in a high-tension *High Noon* atmosphere with a sprinkling of *Little House on the Prairie*, another hard-wearing mythological account of the settlers' journey west. The line is delivered at the end of the performance, when the audience has taken their seats on stage with the actors, who reflect the performance through their childhood memories and presumably appear as themselves. The "boring" refers to the repetitive narrative that perpetuates the white race's self-image and violent assertion of the right of the strong. In continuation of this, another of the seven actors wonders why his parents shielded him from the

apartheid he was surrounded by as a child, but not from the American westerns, which he sees as a cultural expression of the same fundamental worldview of might is right.

### **A Call to Open our Eyes**

Violence breeds violence and must be fought with violence, one might conclude? This conclusion is obvious after two hours of mental, but especially physical violence in a merciless universe filled with suffering, need fulfilment, fear and the death drive. Fist blows, tar and feathers, cannibalism, gunshots in response to any disagreement, brutal rapes and the oppression of anyone of a colour other than white, which the actors maintain in their own faces with large amounts of kaolin.

Perhaps there is a faint hope in the final lines, which also announce that the end has come. The end of the West, the end of romanticisation. Perhaps there is another small hope in the fragments of South African culture that momentarily creep into the actors' gestures, lines and songs along the way. Maybe there should not be a hope, but a call? A call to open our eyes and see Western and South African history from other perspectives?

### **Disorientation as a Device**

*"When we are finally brought in to sit in the middle of all the colonial construction rubble and racial mishmash, it feels exactly as if one's whole awkward attempt to find a position in the middle of the representation debate and the history of repression is effectively short-circuited"*<sup>3</sup>, wrote Monna Dithmer in her review in *Politiken* on 18 May 2019, which, in line with most other reviews, had difficulty orienting itself in *Dark Noon's* universe.

It was not a provocation to whiteface in 2019, but with disorientation as a device *Dark Noon* sparked reflections on representation. Disorientation understood as the company's brutally subtle way of involving the audience, where one first senses what is examined with the body, and then distances oneself in reflection.

Ene Øster Bendtsen – and to some extent the audience – had a similar experience of perplexity at the Bikuben Foundation's Vision Salon, which brought the representation debate to a head. Here, among other things, by integrating non-actors and their stories and by letting actors alternate between representing others and themselves, just as it is also done in *Dark Noon*, where the actors' final dialogue as themselves provides one of the keys to navigating in the universe of the performance.

The article is based on Kunstsalon VISION - DE REPRÆSENTEREDE - Iscene (Art Salon *VISION – THE REPRESENTED – Iscene*) published on ISCENE 23 May 2019 and the review *Tue Biering Turns the World Upside Down in his High-Voltage Western with a South African Tone* published in Berlingske 18 May 2019 (not digitally available).

---

**Anne Liisberg** is a reviewer and co-editor of Iscene.

---

---

3) <https://politiken.dk/kultur/art7177187/Hvem-bliver-egentlig-misbrugt-i-kontroversiel-instruk%C3%B8rs-white-facing-western>.



# Reviews

# Pretty Woman Ltd. in a container at Halmtorvet

By Monna Dithmer

*Politiken, 4<sup>th</sup> November 2008*

Handheld Cinderella theatre and a challenging media stunt when the drama about *Pretty Woman* unfolds both on Halmtorvet and in the media. Thanks to all those who wanted to participate. Politicians, media people and professionals from the ranks of the prostitutes and the theatre have, with enthusiastic advance announcements, contributed to a terrific piece of media theatre, just because a prostitute was going to act in a performance.

At the centre of this is the container that stands here on Halmtorvet, glowing with coloured lights, as the scene of what is for some shamelessly offensive, for others socially enlightening or artistically ground-breaking. Every evening, a team of theatre people – including director Tue Biering and dramaturge Jeppe Kristensen – bring in a prostitute from the street to act in a remake of the all-time emotional drama, *Pretty Woman* from 1990.

Is this “social pornography”, as SF’s (Socialistisk Folkeparti (The Socialist People’s Party) culture spokesperson Pernille Frahm and our own Per Theil (Politiken) call it, abuse of women who do not understand what they are agreeing to participate in? Or is it rather “reverse discrimination”, as *Berlingske* wrote in an editorial, to victimise the prostitutes who voluntarily participate? In any case, there was not much victim about the opening night’s version of Julia Roberts, and it was hard to believe that she was served lines and arrangements via a headset on the spot.

With disarming naturalness, no-nonsense charm and a twinkle in her eye, Swedish Anna confidently took the stage in the salmon-pink hotel interior, shielded from the audience by a large glass pane. About 50 of us sat there and watched the scene from a voyeur-like, intimate distance. On an exotic social safari with a purchased body at our mercy as prey? No, rather on an entertaining collision course with a piece of reality theatre.

As the whole thing is simultaneously recorded live, as if it were a film shooting, and shown on small screens above the stage, the performance becomes an exploratory play with the theatre medium. Different forms of fiction – the film, the theatre, the video recording – collide with an authentic, socially exposed body at the centre, giving it all substance. Layer upon layer of staging, pointing to whether Anna is not already, in her daily life, staged as a ‘street hooker’? It is fun to be served the familiar *Pretty Woman* escapades in a live, raw re-enactment, from the bubble bath scene to a Cinderella makeover where shopping creates transformation, not least when the evening’s Julia Roberts in a black cocktail dress has jewels put around her neck by her prince.

Richard Gere looks handsome and slightly awkward in the guise of Anders Mossling in a black suit, as he fearlessly sets off on his bicycle to track down his discovery on Hollywood or Istedgade Boulevard. *Pretty Woman A/S* (Pretty Woman Ltd.) is handheld theatre with low key acting and the spotlight on a piece of neglected reality. We are a long way from overdone acting or polished psychodrama, where tonight’s guest star might more easily have been out of place. So there is no need to worry, as the critics of the performance have suggested, about the misuse of state funding or the degeneration of the art of acting. On the contrary, it is a sharpening of the theatre as an art form, an examination of its effects when the performance in line with a lot of other theatre – as well as visual arts and film – confronts reality.

As our everyday life is increasingly experienced as staged, it is obvious that the borderline between theatre and reality has become a red-hot zone. Of course, it would not have had the same effect if the performance had advertised Sofie Gråbøl or Trine Dyrholm. When the artificiality of theatre meets an authentic body, something special happens. Now, in this case it is a particular socially vulnerable body, but it is not just any random, on-the-ropes drug prostitute who has been brought in. These are women with a surplus of strength that the theatre people have found through outreach work. Eight prostitutes are supposedly taking turns at the job – unless, as a further media stunt, it turns out that they are not prostitutes at all, but just ordinary extras, as in the infamous Dutch realityTV donor-show, where the lucky winner of a new kidney turned out to be just an actor.

Without lapsing into pure ‘Pretty Woman’-romanticism, where the theatre has to go out and save reality, it is nevertheless the essence of the film’s transformation to show that pretty woman is given the chance to become something other than a street prostitute. In fact, here in the container, we experience that the guest star of the evening, instead of just being exhibited to be stared at on Istedgade and otherwise totally repressed from the public sphere, is given the opportunity to take action and become a person in front of the audience. The whole media drama surrounding the performance clearly shows – apart from the fact that sex sells – that we can accept a lot in the theatre, but the limit is apparently the prostitutes. Well done, Tue Biering & co. for using *Pretty Woman Ltd.* to show what society apparently does not want to look at, and for allowing the drama to unfold both on stage and in the media.

---

**Monna Dithmer**, external lecturer at Roskilde University and critic at Politiken.

---

**Pretty Woman Ltd.:**

**Text:** Jeppe Kristensen.

**Staging:** Tue Biering.

**Scenography:** Christian Friedländer.

## Parsifal from Copenhagen Central Station, tracks 11 & 12 to Brøndby

By Monna Dithmer

*Politiken, 13<sup>th</sup> April 2010, Section 2 (Culture)*

The other day I stood on a platform at Copenhagen Central Station and was served champagne. You have to brace yourself for the start of an expedition to the suburbs – in the wrong direction, unlike the bliss of the coastal railway going north from Copenhagen. What else but art could drive a cultural hag like me to such a place. All parades of prejudice are up. What else, when we audience members have been appointed “knights of good taste” and have travelled to *Parsifal – An Opera Crusade* with destination Brøndby. It is almost a bit of a ‘slumdog’ safari.



Photo: Søren Meisner

When director buddies Tue Biering and Jeppe Kristensen invite you to a travelling performance of Wagner, you know that this is not just another day at the office. They have previously managed to bring audiences at odds with reality by playing *Pretty Woman* in a container on Halmtorvet with a real street prostitute, performing the TV series *Friends* with rejected asylum seekers. And what better way to cross swords with reality than a high classical chivalric romance, “a pinnacle of civilisation”? Of course, it is a huge parody when, for three long hours, we have to follow at the heels of a two-metre-tall Parsifal cloaked in armour and rubber sword. We ourselves are no less ridiculous in our formal opera dress – required in the invitation – in the middle of the wasteland of civilisation.

Resolutely singing, Parsifal fights his way through the concrete landscape of grey stairwells, motley flats and extinct underground car parks – while he is quarrelling with three other accomplices. In search of the Holy Grail... with the good Danish coffee.

But it actually makes perfect sense to pair one crazy quest with another. After all, a Wagner performance like this is already a real punishment drill. So why not transplant the Grail castle and a quest full of obstacles to the concrete housing complex that towers up in impassable height and breadth? I had not in my wildest imagination pictured that the whole motley patchwork of a Wagner story – with swan, spear, saviour knight, alien maiden and more could be matched by a visit to Klitrosen! This centre for elderly, coffee-thirsty citizens is so lavishly decorated with plates, lamps, bell pulls and gold-framed landscapes that it bears witness to a peculiar uncontrolled attention to detail and unity. And in the middle of it all, a coffee table is laid for us Grail knights of good taste, surrounded by a large choir of singing residents.

I was genuinely moved by these ordinary, everyday people singing their hearts out about holy anguish. So far from pure parody. A redemptive shared moment. That is how I found the Holy Grail in Brøndby at the bottom of the coffee cup.

IT WOULD be easy to dismiss the ‘Opera Crusade’ as a harmless pointing of fingers at us cultural snobs with our silly opera cult and not least at all those from Brøndby in their concrete caves. A safe, recognisable division into us and them. You could feel a bit cross about that if you were from those parts. Pure cultural arrogance.

But the fact is that we actually live incredibly compartmentalised lives, each in our own sector. While it is obvious that people at the nice addresses go on another trip to Berlin or New York, we never set foot in such exotic places as Brøndby and environs. That is why I can only be happy to be sent out sightseeing by train. “Go see” (the title of the DSB passenger magazine *Ud og se*) with art as a pretext. Because even though the opera crusade delivers a bitter commentary on Wagner and his xenophobic ideas of pure blood, it is most of all the surroundings and the audience ourselves, with our limited horizon, that the performance directs its spotlight at. Not to romanticise how authentic it is ‘out there’, but to use the theatre to shed light on reality and all the other crusades you can have going on. In Brøndby as well as in Østerbro. “Have thanks!”, Wagner & Co. sing. I am just saying: Thank you for the coffee grounds!

---

**Monna Dithmer**, external lecturer at Roskilde University and reviewer at Politiken.

---

## Gold Rush. NyAveny

By Monna Dithmer

*Politiken, 12th November 2010*

Pure slapstick and a good laugh. Reality theatre is sent out on a cheerful camping trip with Chaplin-spaz, turbo dwarf and other 'poor wretches'. It is not easy to be a gold digger when you can barely hold a shovel. It has an unmistakable air of loser theatre. Precisely. We need losers. And they are showing us just that at Ny Aveny at the moment in a blizzard of popcorn and silent film melodrama. Multi-disabled, dyslexic, disability allowance recipient and Muslim second-generation immigrant. It does not get much better than that.



Photo: Søren Meisner

Amir Becerovic, installed as the Chaplin vagabond in *The Gold Rush* and actually resembles him with his rocking, lopsided gait, is “the minority of minorities”. So say directors Tue Biering and Jeppe Kristensen, and they should know. Over the past five years, they have confronted audiences with one group of outsiders after another in various forms of reality theatre.

“This is not an actor, but a real wretch”, says Daniel Norbak’s pale-faced director, an indomitable know-it-all with wildly growing whiskers and a home organ. He strums away in the manner of silent

films while he narrates and directs Wretch & Co. sent out into Alaska's 'icy storm'. Of course, the gold-digging fool has to be a wretch, otherwise he cannot eventually get to the top of the American dream, just like in Chaplin's 1925 classic. So he gets beaten with his own cane. "That is how they treat poor wretches in Buenos Aires".

We are indeed dealing with authentic 'reality theatre'. No cheating here. We can see for ourselves how the sound technician in his booth is capable of delivering various storm forces, duck cries and gunshots, while the equally noble gentleman across the stage, supports the story on the big screen with weather maps, dollar signs and famous film clips of the gold digger's cabin perilously balancing on the top of the mountain. In every way, the engine room of the theatre is in full swing. It is subtitled and acted for the hearing and visually impaired and all of us brain-damaged people of all kinds. In short: fun and games.

HAPPY DAYS in the starved out gold digger's cabin, which rolls in complete with the berserk Big Jim. Søren Poppel stumbles around in his inflated fatsuit-costume like an Obelix gone wild and tries to stuff those famous shoes that have to be eaten down the Poor Wretch's throat. Particularly eager is the cowboy villain, a sharp-as-a-dog dwarf who does not want to know about any wretches here (including herself).

Hell no! At the height of a five-year-old, Sigrid Kandal Husjord is capable of shooting and disco-dancing anyone out of the way. Just look at how, as a polar bear without a head, she can cross the wasteland of the floor on her belly in no time at all. Or, like Marilyn Monroe with her own storm under her skirts, make the poor wretch weak at the knees.

But the perpetual passive loser finally gets hold of the long end of the shovel and gets his hands on the gold, the girl and the microphone: "I've done the best I could". Quite touching, really. He is the only one who is not supposed to be funny. But not someone to be pitied either. The performance keeps its balance like the cabin balancing on the cliff. Ultimately, of course, it is the director who is the real wretch. He needs the Wretch to be able to be on top of things. And how exactly can he squeeze himself into the performance as a superhero? In this way, Tue Biering and Jeppe Kristensen criticise their own mission of bringing the outsiders onto the stage. But it seems more like a joke, just like the performance in general. It is a bit of a shame that the two's "final embrace of 'reality'" at the end of their radical reality projects is probably the performance with the least edge.

But fun it is.

---

**Monna Dithmer**, external lecturer at Roskilde University and reviewer for Politiken.

---

**Concept and staging:** Tue Biering and Jeppe Kristensen.

**Scenography:** Sigurdur Oli Palmason.

## Rocky! The Left-Wing Theatre Ghetto's Auto-Knock-Out

By Solveig Daugaard

Reviewed in *Peripeti.dk* 2017

A raw stage space, a bucket of red paint, a meat hook with a dead pig in it. The devices are few in Tue Biering's newly written one-man performance *Rocky*. Husets Teatret's stage appears as a slightly dirty black box, where Morten Burian is alone with a few props and Biering's text and direction. Alone with his fascination with Rocky – the original 1976 film starring Sylvester Stallone – about the loser who becomes a winner in the end. And yet not. In fact, Burian is far from alone. He has the audience with him at all times.

It is impressive how captivating his opening paraphrase of the Rocky film is – and how fast he manages to establish a sense of connection between himself and us in the audience. Partly through his infectious enthusiasm for Rocky, but even more through the comfortable distance he immediately puts between 'us' and the Rocky character. His fascination – and ours with him – is sustained by our distinct difference from Rocky. In the performance's initial interpretation, Rocky is thus the story of how the loser at the bottom of society, the one no one bothers to listen to because he is a big dumb brute who has never opened a book, the one no one reckons with because he has failed so many times, quite unexpectedly gets a second chance and seizes it, to finally defeat everyone who has underestimated him, laughed at him and humiliated him. The rest of us, on the other hand, sitting here comfortably in a Copenhagen theatre, we are not like him. We have education and strength. We are rolling in chances – in opportunities – every day of the year.

### I love Rocky

As a leftwing, educated artist type, our narrator loves Rocky, cheers him on with all his heart: the little man against the big bad world. And he wants so much to understand Rocky. Rocky has not had it easy, it is no wonder that he has turned out that way. But the monologue also reveals, both through the precision of Biering's text and through Burian's – at once charming and quite deliberately overly self-infatuated – delivery of it, the disgusting condescension that lurks in the left-wing intellectual's worship of the loser:

*"I have the energy and strength to feel how Rocky feels. Even though I'm not Rocky, I can empathise with him, with his pain, his powerlessness, and I love being there. Inside Rocky. Because when I'm there, I'm free from being smarter than average, and when I see the world through Rocky's eyes, the world is so simple."*

Although this self-revealing gesture comes quickly, the performance still manages to maintain the connection between performer and audience. We are in it together.

Quite quickly, the text turns to the basic concept of the performance – which is also its scoop – that is the similarities between, on the one hand, the Rocky character: the loser nobody takes seriously, but who comes back, despite what the smart people say. And on the other hand: the currently popular political notion of the 'ordinary man', who, with his/her ordinary concerns and inferiority, has been excluded from the political debate for years, only to reappear in recent years

and take revenge through his adherence to right-wing nationalist currents. Thus, in the narrative of the performance, Rocky the boxer slips in and out of unnamed but recognisable European anti-immigration movements, from violent militias to legal, almost housetrained parties. They are all held together by two things. First, by the dislike of external destructive elements such as refugees. But, even more strongly, by the contempt for the cultural elite, who are the ones who obscure the true state of things and shame Rocky for his attitudes and actions. And who are represented here by Burian and all of us watching.

### **Politically Significant Theatre**

One of the things that makes Rocky politically significant theatre is that it recognises this fact. That the 'foreigners' in this context are a tool in a strategic power struggle in which two social groups, on the one hand "us" and on the other hand "Rocky", who do not in principle have an economic or distributional conflict of interest in Europe's current political landscape, are played off against each other so hard that it is difficult to see where a relaxation of the situation would come from. The fact that it is also difficult to see that it is actually the case that the left-wing creative class holds power in society is irrelevant. Because the object of the performance is not an actual analysis of economic and physical power in society, but an analysis of this very issue. Of the value-political consequences when the empathetic artist is confronted with his own picturesque loser figure who suddenly has the 'wrong' ideas. Instead of focusing on racism and the foreigners and dwelling on the victims, as it were, as many other works of art dealing with society's shift to the right have done, Biering chooses in Rocky to see the invulnerable victimisation of the loser figure (the fact that "Rocky is so good at being human", as Burian says) as the core of the problem. And it is precisely this narrative that the left-wing intellectual has repeated more tirelessly than any other.

In revolutionary circles in the 1970s, the intellectualisation of the worker was a much talked about danger. Nowadays, it is an unconditional goal: we want more education, more art and culture, and thus to educate everybody to the genuine, good, empathetic mindset. The romanticisation of the worker, now the loser Rocky, is still an important part of the left's rhetorical equipment. It is part of the self-understanding of the cultivated theatre audience that we can identify with him, understand him and wish for him to be lifted up to us, but at the same time a string has been cut. The old Marxist admiration for the working class is gone, and this has had the unfortunate side effect of alienating the cultural left-wing class from the loser. All those who feel threatened by globalisation, do not feel taken seriously by the left, they see only a desire to change them, not a desire to hear them. As a result, the theatre play Rocky is also not particularly interested in exploring the feeling of inferiority, the powerlessness of the losers. Rocky is far more interested in ourselves, the intellectuals, and what will happen to us as the hatred towards us intensifies. One could wish that the text of the performance reached out more by trying to tap into similar feelings, as, for example, the author Christina Hagen did when she published her controversial monster of a coffee table book *Jungle* in the spring. That Biering, in Burian's incarnation, also explored his own human fear of losing not only his privileges but, like the Rocky character, his entire livelihood. Despite its relentless self-criticism, and despite the gradual disintegration of Burian's confident narrator as he is confronted with the return of the loser in right-wing national colours, the text of the performance never departs from the division into a them (the losers) and an us (the passive-aggressive, self-righteous cultural elite) that is established from the first minute. Rather, it clings to it.

### **The Sound of the Body in Anxiety**

But if the text stays in the them-and-us rhetoric, something else and more happens on the scenic level. In Burian's incredibly strong bodily acting along the way, and in the physical and technical tricks the performance uses. When Burian, towards the climax of the performance, takes the microphone in his mouth and almost swallows it, it is not a technologically crackling, musical game, as when Laurie Anderson, for example, does something similar. What the audience hears are the violent guttural sounds of the body from the inside when it is at its most wracked with panic, anxiety and anger. This is what the body – our body – sounds like when it is on the edge. The same is the case when Burian himself hangs on the meat hook in the final scene, but the most violent effect is actually earlier in the same scene when the ever eloquent man takes a dead pig's tongue in his mouth and thus actually assumes the position that was Rocky's in the opening scene, and which he has so far only flirted with. Namely, the humiliated, unfeeling and powerless position of the man who is unable to speak for himself because he is simply unable to utter a coherent sentence. Speech only flows freely again on the stage of Husets Teater when, after the dramatic final scene, we meet one of those who, as Rocky, actually feels looked down upon and smeared ("racist") and also feels a palpable anxiety about the threat of globalised reality. Having failed as planned in his sickeningly empathetic attempt to speak on behalf of the loser, and having obviously given up in advance on getting the loser to speak as part of the performance's potential audience, Biering instead has a right-wing politician step in front of the audience. When I saw the performance, it was the Copenhagen municipal politician for the Danish People's Party, Cheanne Nielsen.

### **Getting in Touch with Rocky**

In a way, what must be a declaration of failure for critical, experimental theatre as an art form, is that it is unable to access a broader, not in advance politically initiated audience, even though in its own self-understanding it takes a deep interest in them – bordering on worship – and is therefore obliged to bring them on stage if it is to get them through the door. But if so, it is a declaration of failure it shares, not just with a number of other serious art forms, but with a whole political segment that is finding it harder and harder to make sense of their own worldview. As it says in the generic rightwing speech Biering has written in the play's programme, but which in the performance is replaced by the actual politician on stage:

*"The truth is that you are no longer the revolutionary force that creates the new ideas. The cultural left has done nothing but intensify the slogans of the 60s: more feminism, more multiculturalism, more passive aggressive. Today, the right is driving the world-changing, anti-authoritarian cultural revolution, which is labelled both punk and rock n' roll, while an adolescent left is crying and covering its ears, convinced of its own goodness. Perhaps that is why the left is afraid and so intolerant of the views of others. Because they have a lot to lose."*

That is why the most violent effect of the play is not the dead pig's body, Burian in the meat hook or the severed pig's tongue that stops the speech of the eloquent character, but rather Cheanne Nielsen, who enters the stage after Burian's exit. First, because her physical nervousness is so palpable: Her hands are shaking, her voice is determined but fragile, and the shrillness lies just below the surface. The hall is against her, and she knows it. If Burian was never truly alone, even when he was hanging in the hook, Cheanne is from first to last. But even more so because of what she says. Her speech tempers the contempt for the audience she is facing, and even the resentment at the police report

of racism she is facing and the contempt that follows in its wake. Yet her views are so unreasonable that I personally could not swallow them. Not even as a starting point for debate. For example, she kept coming back to the resentment she feels when sunshine stories about refugees and immigrants who, for example, crochet and feel good about it, are allowed to “steal headlines” in the media from the many stories where members of the same group are responsible for criminal acts that threaten the peace and cohesion of our society. When such a story made the front page of any national media last time is left to blow in the wind. Such attitudes obviously help to spread hatred and distrust between population groups, regardless of whether they can be legally judged as racism or not.

### **Theatre as a Left-Wing Echo Chamber?**

Still, the fact that I am so indignant at the sheer unchallenged stupidity I am sitting in front of that I can hardly contain myself should probably give me pause for thought. I was reminded of Lars Norén's criminal neo-Nazi cast in the scandalous production *Sju:tre* (Seven:three) back in 1999. How does Biering's approach compare to Norén's participants, who were cast as radical elements? They were avowed neo-Nazis, avowed anti-democrats, declared supporters of violence over dialogue. Norén's experiment in giving them a voice in the theatre ended, as we know, in the worst possible way, with the cast using their escorted exit to run away, rob a bank and kill two police men. Against this stands Cheanne Nielsen, who is legally a legitimate player in our democracy, with whom many people sympathise and some will vote for. The simple conclusion of her speech is that we should respect her because she respects us. Where does it place me that I find it difficult to honour that wish? It is a powerful theatre experience to sit there, so close and be confronted with the distance between the theatre space and the world Cheanne Nielsen represents. Regardless of whether Mungo Park had Pia Kjærsgaard's words on stage in the performance *De stuerene* (The housetrained) last year, Tue Biering knows his audience well enough in advance to be able to count on their (our) relative education and leftism, and it reflects on the theatre space as a ghetto that this is the case.

Perhaps what Biering's performance shows us is that the echo chamber of the left-wing artist types is hardly worse and more “distant from the world” than the echo chambers of all sorts of other groups, but it is nevertheless more dangerous, both to ourselves and to society, because the cultural capital, the shine of something desirable and glamorous associated with this segment makes it easy to stage us as elite, and together with our own arrogant analysis and disgusting sentimental worship of Rocky, this is what makes it so easy for the actual centres of power in society, the economic ones, to turn Rocky against us.

---

**Solveig Daugaard** is a PhD student in Literature, Media History and Information Cultures at Linköping University, where she is researching Gertrude Stein's cross-aesthetic reception.

---

**Text and direction:** Tue Biering.

**Scenography:** Peter Schultz.

**Sound design:** Ditlev Brinth.

**Lighting design, realisation:** Mathilde Niemann Hüttel.

**Cast:** Morten Burian Cheanne Nielsen and Kasper Frederik Mortensen.

## Land without Dreams, 2018.

Co-produced with Eventministeriet/The Royal Danish Theatre.

By Erik Exe Christoffersen

Reviewed in *Peripeti.dk* 2018

### How do We Imagine the Future?

The performance is a long monologue performed by a female actor in an empty theatre space in front of the audience: “I am the woman from the future, and you should not be afraid – everything will be fine. The future is neither bright white walls with blinding LED lights nor women in tight sexy sci-fi outfits. The future will be just fine.” Many of us are worried about the future. One crisis after another is emerging, and there is little faith that anyone is willing or able to try to solve the problems of the future. Rather, many politicians seem to be busy magnifying the problems. *Land without Dreams* takes a different approach, trying to conjure up a future that is a kind of dream. Lise Lauenblad is the actor who leads the audience through a theatrical universe with supreme confidence and great credibility. The audience follows her suggestions for dreams about the future.

The monologue is addressed directly to the audience. At the same time, however, there is also an implicit address in the text. The “I” of the text, a woman, speaks to the *audience* of the text, but at the same time a relationship between the actor and the spectator is created in the specific performance itself in front of those who are present that particular day. As the actor says, “imagine an empty room, spectators come in and then this woman comes in and says: ‘I’m from the future’”. But the actor regretfully says that no one takes her seriously, no one believes her. It is just theatre and she is an actor. On this metafictional level, she goes on to say, “It’s just so as not to scare you or frighten you that I look like you”. And she predicts what will happen: “A spectator gets up and leaves. She’s angry that it’s not getting any better”. But there will also be a spectator who feels “that she is the one being spoken to. That she is the chosen one”. Should we trust the woman who says she is from the future?

### The Future Begins Now

Putting it briefly, I suppose it means that the future begins *here and now*. Here in this room where we are watching theatre. The future is conditioned by what we say, think and do right here and now. The future has already begun and the performance has a number of suggestions about what will happen to us, the spectators, because we have come here today for the performance. Some will start a relationship because of this unexpectedly powerful experience, one will get up and leave because he receives a call on his mobile phone that his daughter has had an accident, another will go into politics, and one will regret that the time was not spent on something other than this ridiculous piece of theatre. Theatre is made up of illusions and fantasies, beginning with the notions and imaginations that the play conjures up. Will they, as a form of reality, actually change reality concretely?

It is a pure, minimalist performance. No set, no costumes, not many light effects. The imaginations, the so-called “magic ifs” that we as spectators experience, we have to evoke ourselves, asking ourselves: What if this woman is actually from the future? The performance plays with fiction



# LANDET UDEN DRØMME

21. APRIL – 2. MAJ Skuespilhuset

[fixfoxy.com](http://fixfoxy.com)

Support of **STATENS KUNSTFOND** Konst Højgaard's Fond

Photo: Søren Meisner

**Fix&Foxy**

*Enkeltmindedt*  
©

and real time. She goes out, comes back in, repeats lines, looks at the audience, smiles and repeats I am from the future. The actor tells us everything that is going to happen on stage. And she praises herself for remembering the text.

What does the future look like? Will there be hungry bears? Will there be floods? She tells us that there will be drops of water from the ceiling, and soon the room will be filled with water and the audience will drown. It is just theatre and theatrical imaginings, dreams. But we can relax, because the future will be without the crises we know.

“When does the performance begin?” The actor tries to understand what a spectator is thinking. But it *has* begun and the spectators *are* the chosen ones. She imagines that some spectators are considering if they should walk out and try to get their money back. She is the future and there are no crises or catastrophes, but is that not rather naive, the actor herself suggests?

### **Transformation for the future**

She scratches herself like an animal. She is credible and seems sincere when she dances. Something changes when she enters. Is she transforming into another (future) being? Are there leaps in time? It is a performance about coincidence; something may fall into place in the future. It will be good, but different. But it is not a coincidence that we are here and we will determine the future.

She takes off all her clothes. Naked, she stands with a bucket. It turns out to be white clay, which she covers her whole body with. She becomes another being: an organic being unlike anything we have seen before, neither man nor woman, neither animal nor human, it looks like a foetus, perhaps a creature of the past, perhaps a creature of the future? She is reborn, wrapped in slime and mud, wordlessly trying to find her footing on the slippery floor. She rises as a creature that speaks to us across time, reminding us that the future is being formed now – and that we are the ones who must create it. In the future, we will be able to sail on water, walk on the moon, fly and talk to each other at great distances. No one will starve. She walks on two legs, but at the same time is reduced to organic dream life.

Here the performance ends, but before the usual curtain call, a woman stands up from the audience, walks on stage and say, “I am the future”. Several spectators follow and repeat. The spectator sitting right next to me also stands up and goes up on stage and says “I am the future” and adds “don’t be afraid”. I actually feel like going up on stage and repeating “I am the future”.

### **Director and Writer Play Together**

Tue Beiring has created an intriguing performance in which the roles of playwright and director enter into a kind of mirroring interaction with each other. The text and the performance create an infinite reflection of each other. The text and the audience are mirrored in the actual actor and the actual spectators. The fiction of the text is mirrored in the real space. This is called *Mise en abyme*. It is a form of dramaturgy that inserts a story within a story. Here, the spectators, who are actually present, are slowly inserted into the fictional universe. It is a technique familiar, for example, from Shakespeare’s famous scene in *Hamlet*, where the actors perform a mimetic mirroring of the plot of *Hamlet*. In *Land without Dreams*, fiction mirrors reality, which means that the future is created here and now by the spectators present.



Photo: Søren Meisner

### **The Late Modern Tragic Subject**

*Land without Dreams* is in many ways reminiscent of several performances by the British theatre group Forced Entertainment, especially *First Night* and *Tomorrow's Parties*. What these performances have in common is that an actor addresses the audience directly in a largely empty space. *Land without Dreams* centres around the subject without dreams of the future in the late modern age.

What is disturbing is how easily the stable reality can seem to slip if our capacity to imagine a different future is not actualised.

---

**Erik Exe Christoffersen**, Associate Professor at the Department of Communication and Culture – Dramaturgy, Aarhus University.

---

*Land without Dreams* is produced by FIX&FOXY in collaboration with Eventministeriet at The Royal Danish Theatre.

**Actor:** Lise Lauenblad.

**Director and writer:** Tue Biering.

**Dramaturge:** Tanja Diers.

# AVATAR ME, 2020.

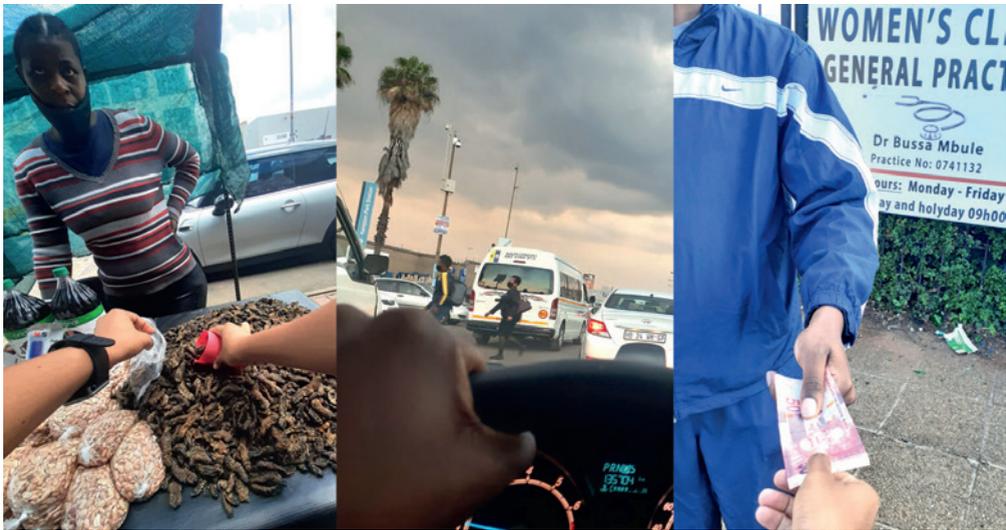
Co-produced with Teater Nordkraft

By Kathrine Winkelhorn

*Reviewed in Peripeti.dk 2021*

## Mumbai from above

The mediatisation of theatre is not a new phenomenon and has a long history. In the middle of the twentieth century, the Radioteatret became one of the country's biggest stages, where lots of people sat with their ears glued to the radio to listen to the weekly presentation of new drama written or adapted for radio. Radioteatret was the invisible, but very much alive theatre. It has now been closed down and replaced by documentary podcasts that use a range of sound effects familiar from radio theatre, film and TV.



During the corona epidemic, mediation is on the rise. Theatres are closing down and looking for new channels and formats without a physically present audience. The most common has been filmed theatre that is streamed and perhaps adapted for film. The Royal Danish Theatre established the digital stage Kgl. Xtra, where you could watch previously recorded performances at home in your living room for free. Aalborg Teater established a digital stage to complement and expand the existing artistic activities in order to create a different interaction between spectator and performer and with a long-term goal of reaching a wider audience. In the winter of 2020, Teater Republique invited 14 writers to each write a monologue as virtual theatre. The texts were performed by actors who recorded themselves with a mobile camera. It was available free of charge on the web and was appreciated by a large audience with a total of 500,000 views.

AVATAR ME is one of three performances that were screened at the first-ever digital theatre festival RE:LOCATIONS, which took place 21 April-9 May 2021, just before the live opening

of the theatres on 6 May. The digital theatre festival is shown in cities all over the world, where people can open a computer and log in to have a theatre experience. In the press material, RE:LOCATIONS presents the digitally born performances as a new genre within performing arts that has an independent value.

AVATAR ME is a 1:1 live-streamed performance, where for 45 minutes you live another person's life, somewhere else in the world. It is an interesting concept at a time when people are becoming isolated and interaction with the rest of the world is limited. The participants are from South Africa, Brazil, Moldova, India and Malaysia.

I imagine it will be interesting to see what a digitally born performance can do as performing art. But how does it work? I book a ticket and receive a link, which, at an agreed time, gives me access to experience *AVATAR ME* on my computer. Fifteen minutes before the performance begins, I meet four other spectators on Zoom, where we are instructed in how to enter the show correctly and how to act as avatars. Then we are asked to switch off our cameras. After that, we are on our own, and each spectator 'travels' to their own performance. The performance takes place in my living room – and at the same time in another living room/in another room somewhere else in the world. To which city and country, you arrive, you do not know. The language is English.

### **Arrival in Mumbai**

All of a sudden, a voice says: Hello. I am asked to close my eyes and take a deep breath. *Press the button*, it says. Then an image appears of two hands dancing poetically with their fingers. Now you are me, and my name is Bertwin and I live in Mumbai, says a voice insistently. My eyes are fixed in the camera on his forehead, and I am eager and curious for contact. At no point during the performance do I see his face. The camera zooms down on his strong legs and he asks what job Bertwin has. My guess is that he is a dancer. Yes, Bertwin is a dancer and choreographer working in Bollywood and has performed several times in Lyon and Paris, which he happily points out. But Bertwin has been suffering from malaria and has been ill for two years, unable to dance. Now he is finally well. He shows me a beautiful picture of himself as a dancer, as well as pictures of him as a child, and family photos of his parents and three siblings. It is homely, intimate and safe.

But where am I? The camera pans around in a space that is impossible to decode. Is it a messy theatre wardrobe with a lot of objects scraped together, and what about the bed and the many teddy bears? We are in his former childhood bedroom, where he was born and grew up. I tell him I am hungry and want to eat dozas, the good Indian pancakes made with rice flour. We go into the kitchen, and here hot mazala prepared by his mother is being served. He eats elegantly with his fingers while a dog looks on and licks its mouth. It is an intimate and sensory interaction that you would not find in the physical theatre. But the house feels stuffy and I cannot quite breathe.

Mumbai represents something extraordinary to me. I know that about 22 million people live there, and that it is built on seven islands and is one of the largest harbour cities in the world! That in itself is fascinating. I get impatient and want to get out into the city and feel its pulse. I have been to India several times, but never to Mumbai. We walk out of the house and in the small garden before the front door, there is a high lattice gate with beautiful ornamentation that is carefully locked, which surprises me a little. He points to a four-storey pink apartment building where the family lives, located in one of Mumbai's many small 'village neighbourhoods'. "As a child, I used to jump around like a monkey on all the balconies. Look at that balcony, he says. Do you want to see me jumping from there now?" A little scared, I say yes and watch his long shadow from the balcony. It is nerve-wracking. I think he jumps, but it was hard to see.

### **On a Scooter in a Village**

Outside the gate is a scooter and I suggest that we go for a ride. I ask for a helmet, to no avail, and slowly we drive off into the night. I have a nice feeling of sitting on the back of a scooter. We pass a hospital, where there are a couple of stretchers and an ambulance. The city is completely quiet and closed due to the sky-high corona infection. There is not a single person in the streets and it feels strange. Like Bertwin, I sense a tense atmosphere in the city. Shutters have been put up in front of most shops and the city seems to be under siege. At a large, round lattice cover, probably 8-10 metres in diameter, we stop. "Can you guess what's under the cover? It's a well, and when we were boys, we loved to swim and bathe there". But it was strictly forbidden as the water was not clean and was severely sanctioned by mum. There had been suicides in the well and some people believed that the well was inhabited by evil spirits.

On the way home we pass a large Christ figure at a Catholic church. Bertwin asks me about my religion, and it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain the illusion that I am him. His girlfriend Chasma is a Hindu, and it is a serious dilemma that his parents can in no way approve of him marrying a Hindu. "Would you go against your parents' wishes? Because that is quite difficult for us". I get the feeling that it may be difficult to be a Christian in Mumbai with Narendra Modi as Prime Minister of India. It is a delicate question, but I ask why he was so careful to lock the lattice gate. "Well, it can be challenging not being a Hindu here", Bertwin replies diplomatically. Slowly we pass the hospital and the show is over. I take a deep breath and switch on the camera so I can see who I have been with. I see a handsome man of about 30 years of age.

### **AVATAR ME as Performing Arts?**

Already 10 minutes into the performance I am fascinated and confused. For what does it mean to be an avatar. Normally, it is a small figure that you use for example in the online game *World of Warcraft* as your gaming piece that can communicate with the other players. In the ancient Indian language, Sanskrit, avatara means descent. So maybe you could say that during the performance I 'descend into' Bertwin's body, but not into his soul. This is difficult to grasp. For who is the other when I am Bertwin? Where is the line between 'I' as spectator and participant, and the living Bertwin on my screen in Mumbai? But it is precisely at this intersection that tension arises in an ongoing inner monologue between myself and my avatar Bertwin, but also in the real and ongoing dialogue we have. In AVATAR ME I am both a spectator and an active participant. It is unusual and exciting.

In the encounter with Mumbai, I feel a creeping disappointment because I have an inner image of what it will be like to ride a scooter in Mumbai. A kind of preconception of what I can or could experience. The people, cows, bikes, chickens, carts, pigs, etc. with lots of colours that you see in other Indian cities.

It is strange but fascinating to see a performance that is faceless and without a visible body. Is this even performing arts? Here there is no narrative, no beautiful costumes or sets, no stage. here you do not encounter beauty, but unadorned everyday life in a 1:1 interaction with a stranger from another continent. It is both challenging and fun. In Tue Bering's construction, the dramaturgical effect lies in confronting the idyllic home in the apartment with the 'dangerous' outside, but also in the fact that the 'stage' reacts to its audience, just as in physical theatre. I am left with a completely new sensory experience of a performance that I remember in detail. Would my experience have been very different if I had arrived in Moldova or Brazil, where I have not been before? I do not think so. It will be exciting to see how a digital format can evolve, and there is little doubt that online performances have the potential to reach a larger audience with lots of innovative international

perspectives and collaborators. Yes, maybe in time you can also have an income. It is great that FIX&FOXY dares to explore completely new paths with their performing art.

---

**Kathrine Winkelhorn** has for a number of years been responsible for the Master's Programme in Culture and Media Production at Malmö University and is chairman of Copenhagen International Theatre.

---

The festival is produced by Wildtopia and presented in collaboration with theatre partners, Teater Nordkraft in Aalborg and Teater Viirus in Helsinki.

**Cast:** Marcela Nistor, Robin Khor Yong Kuan, Bertwin Ravi D'souza, Lalisa Costa and Lillian Tshabalala.

**Director:** Tue Biering.

**Producer:** Annette Max Hansen.

**Dramaturg and co-director:** Linn Haldrup Lorenzen.

**Coordinator and co-director:** Camilla Gürtler.

## Dark Noon

By Thomas Rosendal Nielsen

Reviewed in *Peripeti.dk* 2022

In a film studio in Aarhus harbour, a group of South African actors act out the myth of the Wild West based on the Western film genre. Six of the seven actors are Black, playing white immigrants, pioneers and cowboys in a constant violent clash with Native Americans, Chinese guest workers and enslaved Africans. In a *coup de théâtre*, the latter are played by the audience, who, after being dragged onto the stage for a frantic folk dance, have a black line painted on their foreheads and are sold to the highest bidder. It is spectacular, it is surprising and often funny, but at the same time it is also deeply serious, because what is on display here is not only the story of The White Man's violence against other ethnicities in particular, but also the ease with which this story is turned into entertainment.



Photo: Søren Meisner

The performance was produced by the project theatre FIX&FOXY in 2019 for Revolver-scenen, Teater Republique, and has since toured Germany (Düsseldorf), France (Paris, Lille) and Spain (Gran Canaria) until this performance, which took place in Aarhus in early September 2022. It is directed by Tue Biering together with choreographer and co-director Nhlanhla Mahlangu. It combines a number of previous FIX&FOXY devices in a quite complex dramaturgy: remediation of Western popular fiction, outsourcing of Western roles to Global South actors, audience

participation, live video mediation, combination of theatre space and film set, montage techniques, demonstrative yet playful acting style, frontal address, accumulation of materials and references in the stage space, etc.

### **Double-Standard Civilisation**

The progression of the performance can be illustrated by describing how the theatre space is transformed in accordance with the development of what is, after all, a relatively coherent narrative. The narrative starts with the immigration of poor Europeans to the New World and develops as the construction of a materialistic and double-standard civilisation based on opportunism, competition, violence, exploitation and vigilantism, but justified and naturalised through manifest buildings and institutions. Spectators enter a large black box, Studio 1 in Filmbyen in Aarhus, and take their seats around the sand-coloured performing area, surrounded by rows of audience on three sides. On the fourth side, a large screen on the wall initially simply states the title of the performance: *Dark Noon*. (A reference to Fred Zinneman's 1952 western, *High Noon*). Various equipment is lined up along the fourth wall in particular: a hangers rack with costumes, a kind of TV recording box – slightly larger than a phone booth, various undefinable folded wooden constructions. The arena set-up emphasises the theatre situation. We see the other spectators enter and take their seats, an usher encourages everyone to move to the front benches, where the performance is supposedly best experienced. Suspense is built up around the form of participation, and the audience's presence for and with each other in the theatre situation is continuously emphasised and utilised throughout the process.

The first few minutes establish the playful and complex fictional contract of the performance. The actors enter the room and stand at the edge of the performance area in front of the audience rows, facing the centre of the hall. The lights dim until only a single lamp glares like the sun over the desert casting long shadows from the two actors Mandla Gaduka and Siyambonga Alfred Mdubeki, who, now wearing cowboy hats and duster coats, move towards the centre of the performance area to the sound of Ennio Morricone's iconic theme from *The God, The Bad and the Ugly* (1966), which a third actor, Joe Young, whistles into a microphone from the sidelines. A fourth actor, Bongani Benedict Masango, rolls across the stage like *tumbleweed*, completing the image while establishing a playful distance. After a long *stare down*, the duellists move away from each other in slow motion with exaggerated long strides, pistols are drawn, the sound of gunshots, one falls, the light is turned up, the impact is over.

A fifth actor, Lilian Tshabala, appears on the big screen – at the same time, we see her standing in the recording booth below – and asks the audience to applaud the two “amazing South African actors”, and, as host and narrator, she introduces us to the premise: that to understand this time when human lives did not matter, we must begin the story with the poor white European immigrants. Meanwhile, the other actors enter the stage, put on white wigs and quickly cover their faces with white powder. The fictional contract is established: we are all participants in an entertaining game of recreating the Western myth. But the black actors' appropriation and inversion of the racist Blackfacing device is not only entertaining, but also confrontational and disturbing: of course, it is not only the poor white immigrants who are caricatured, but also the racist white entertainment culture, specifically the American Blackface convention, but I wonder if there is not also a sting directed at the present, primarily white audience? The latter is not unambiguous, as the contact with the audience is playful and filled with appeals for solidarity, but it does trigger an important play on identity and non-identity.

### **The Romance of the Wild Wild West**

The story goes on to describe the pioneers' violent confrontations with natives, enslaved people, guest workers and each other. A high tempo football match between *natives* and *settlers*, mediated on the big screen, where an actor, Katlego Kaygee Letsholonyana, as an energetic sports journalist comments on the match and interviews the audience along the way. The scene changes to pathos when, after losing, the settlers shoot the natives. The audience laughs nervously. When one of the natives keeps getting up, he is shot again. And again. And again. Silence. More nervous laughter. An entertaining representation of a genocide? The poor pioneers struggle on to make a life in the Wild West and fortune smiles upon them when one of them, played by Thulani Zwane, strikes gold. A mine and a railway sprouts up in the middle of the prairie and with each subsequent scene, more is added: a saloon/a brothel, a store, a church, a jail, a reservation, a bank, in short: a Western town as a symbol of the entire Western civilisation. The violence and exploitation continue and takes on new forms as lawlessness is met with institutionalised violence and exploitation and 'brave' acts of vigilantism.

As the stage space gradually becomes more and more filled with scenery, materials and audience extras, the arena transforms into a theatre installation. The theatre space becomes a film set, the mine cart, for instance, is used as a camera dolly, and the staging makes the entertainment industry both the medium and the object of its critical gesture. The story ends in an aggressive patriotic "We are the people" speech (Letsholonyana), after which the narrator (Tshabala) observes that "the end of the frontier also meant the end of the romance of the wild wild west". The big screen ends the performance: "The End". Applause.

But the performance adds an important epilogue in which the seven actors, one by one, recall their relationship with Western films from their upbringing in South Africa. The common thread in the stories is the fascination with and contempt for the gun and the violence it represents, which Lilian Tshabala, for example, quite explicitly identifies as a direct factor in the real violence in South Africa. Joe Young's – the only white actor – story stands out: to him, Westerns represent a justification of the white man's violence in America, which he despises, but, he adds, a violence that is completely parallel to that of his parents' and grandparents' generation in South Africa, and in this way they mediate a kind of identity between himself and the white soldiers of his own age who, only a generation ago, were killing black children in the streets. The final narrator, Madla Gadukas, adds another layer to the connection between representation, language and violence when he talks about how he was made to learn English in order to be able to navigate in the white man's world by watching the same violent Westerns, where the white man was always the hero, over and over and over again. The final scene of the performance emphasises the connection between the physical and the cultural violence.

### **Africa America Europe**

The dramaturgy of this "triangular drama" Africa-America-Europe not only means that this double crime, the White Man's violence and its reproduction as entertainment, is exposed; it implicates the cheerful and well-meaning audience in it. The implication<sup>1</sup> happens first through the geographical displacement logic of the staging: South African experiences of the Wild West myth played out in Denmark. The performance points out the elongated and problematic historical and geographical

---

1) Inspired by Maike Bleeker, I draw on the theory of American literary historian Michael Rothberg: *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators*, Stanford University Press 2019.

connections between the continents, not only in the dramatic fiction, but in the geographical intersection that the theatre situation constitutes by virtue of the casting and the specific location.

This is further intensified by the logic of racial interchange inherent in the white-facing device and the audience participation. Both, however, complicate the issue of guilt by preventing a simple reduction of the actors and spectators present to the victims or executioners of the story. In the situation, the South African actors are undoubtedly the ones who have the power to tell the story and literally drag the Danish audience around in the arena. They do not hide their own fascination with the violence, and in their roles as the White Man, they do not appeal to pity. We are not allowed to simply see them as victims. The Danish white spectators can evade any direct accusation by identifying the violent White Man with the American, but they cannot evade their complicity in the reproduction and consumption of violence as entertainment. The staging emphasises the audience's implication – not as executioners, but – as *bystanders* and *beneficiaries* (Rothberg) of the crimes depicted on stage. The audience's actual participation in the theatrical situation reproduces the violence as entertainment: most explicitly, of course, for those who are dragged onto the stage, but as the situation where the audience laughs uncomfortably or simply remains silent while the settler shoots the native illustrates, the performance makes us aware that the spectator position is never innocent.

When the narrative traces the threads back to the European continent, it does so with a double gesture that on the one hand points to European colonialism as the root of the problem, but also suggests a similarity between the European colonisers and today's vulnerable immigrants, thus appealing for solidarity. The short here-and-now implication is coupled with the long there-and-then implication, on both levels without a one-sided distribution of victim and executioner roles.

### **Breaking the Distance**

The question is what comes out of it: a well-placed slap in the face for the White Man, which should also sting the cheeks of his unwilling accomplices? A growing sense of solidarity across the subject positions that history has assigned to us? It is certainly something like this that the dramaturgy of the performance appeals to. A bit like FIX&FOXY's *Viljens Triumf* (Triumph of the Will, 2012), where the audience was drawn into a re-creation of Leni Riefenstahl's Nazi propaganda film and was led or seduced into observing a kind of identity between themselves and the Germans who were both executioners and victims of German propaganda. FIX&FOXY's dramaturgy appears here as a kind of reverse *Verfremdung* effect. The social engagement and devices – the demonstrating acting style, the role changes, the montage, the humour, the direct appeal, the emphasis on the medium – originates from epic theatre. But where Brecht would interrupt identification to create reflection in preparation for action, FIX&FOXY undermines our ability to distance ourselves from uncomfortable subject positions. Not in order for us to identify with the victims or the perpetrators. We – the white European audience – are not allowed to rise above the crime through penance by assuming the role of executioners and showing our compassion for the victims so that we can get “moral relief” and return to our bystander positions. The appeal to responsibility and solidarity in FIX&FOXY lies in *Dark Noon*'s theatrical play with identity and non-identity, most clearly manifested in the white-facing device. The African actors are *not the White Man* and neither are the European spectators. But we are not the *non-White Man* either. And it is this uncomfortable difference that the performance forces us to consider.

## Dark Noon

---

**Thomas Rosendal Nielsen** is Associate Professor at the Department of Communication and Culture – Dramaturgy at Aarhus University.

---

*Dark Noon* premiered in 2019 at Revolverscenen, Teater Republique.

**Director and script:** Ture Biering.

**Choreographer and co-director:** Nhlanhla Mahlangu,

**Scenography:** Johan Kølckjær.

**Cast:** Bongani Benedict Masango, Joe Young, Lillian Tshabalala, Mandla Gaduka, Siyambonga Alfred Mdubeki, Katlego Kaygee Letsholonyana and Thulani Zwane.

## The European Slaughterhouse Odense Theatre

By Erik Exe Christoffersen

*Reviewed in Norwegian Shakespeare Journal 2022*

*The European Slaughterhouse* at Odense Theatre is a power machine in five parts by director and concept creator Tue Biering. It is a five-and-a-half-hour-long performance about war as a chronic condition. Biering freely rewrites Shakespeare's cycle *The Wars of the Roses* under the impression of the war in Ukraine, and along with lines from the kings, sound the voices of Biden, Putin and Zelenskyj.



Photo: Emilia Therese

Biering is the artistic director of FIX&FOXY, but also a freelance director at Odense Theatre. With *The European Slaughterhouse*, Biering continues a theme that he turned and twisted at Aalborg Theatre in 2019 with the play *Good vs. Evil*. One of the points is that this simple dichotomy is both real and at the same time a distortion of the complex reality where the poles of good/evil

can be turned and twisted depending on the social context and situation. It is a dichotomy that is important in classical drama and well suited to creating a simplification and often a moral discussion. This, however, is not Biering's intention. It goes deeper and is more of an ethical reflection on the actuality of the Shakespearean fiction. Everyone wants peace but ends up in the violence of war to protect themselves from the enemy.

The production is a rewrite of Shakespeare's eight royal dramas, from *Richard II* to *Richard III*, which deal with the War of the Roses and unfold in a brutal universe of earth, water and mud. The 14 actors in the cast are on stage throughout the performance, playing several different characters from the fictional universe, but also with a number of references to actual people, symbols and speeches. For the first couple of hours, the stage is largely empty except for the royal chair, which is moved around. The characters are in costumes that denote the hybrid: shorts, sports equipment and t-shirts combined with fur, swords, wigs and royal crowns.

### **It is Meaningless**

The narrator begins the performance with a warning as the team stands at the back getting ready:

*"It's pointless. There may be an occasional connection that can be pointed out, a cause and effect. But there is no deeper meaning. The great mill wheel is constantly grinding, drawing the circular path of history. And if it becomes too moralising, it's unintentional, because there is no morality beyond what the individuals represents".*

It all begins in the large, bare theatre space. Every now and then, we see the door at the back open out to the real Odense, like a flash of light in the darkness. In the second part, a set is built that is a white modern minimalist space that gradually becomes more and more messy, and along the way, several characters become aggressive and punch a fist through the wall. Finally, several people jump in and out of new openings or throw dead bodies out in body bags through the holes.

The theme is the perpetual cycle of violence, but it is not an anti-war or pacifist performance. On the contrary, it is a recognition that we all have a fascination with, and cultivate, violence – not least in film. In this way, the performance has quite a lot in common with film director Quentin Tarantino's portrayal of violence as a visual art form as for instance in *Kill Bill*. The performance moves towards an ethical discourse on why violence can be justified?

### **Fragments of Reality: Making England Great Again**

The performance uses a number of devices that concern varying degrees of theatricality. From a real horse and a big dog to the touchingly authentic chorus of senior citizens in their underpants, shoulders and bellies sagging as they step in as conscripted reserves for the next war. Underlying the entire performance is a dark and melancholic musical composition.

As one of the prominent real-life characters, the *QAnon Shaman* from the attack on Capitol of 2021 appears. He shouts: *"I no longer want to be the cozy teddy bear, a little stupid, a little funny, a little on the margin. So you can laugh at him or think 'what an idiot'"*. He is threatening and drags a group of young spectators on stage and forces them to drink beer and cheer him, while one of them gets his phone smashed because it suddenly starts ringing. He beats the youngsters with a plastic pipe, so you almost think the performance is cancelled and that the man is acting in real life. Other actors try to stop him: *"Stop it. You're nothing. You just want to cause a lot of trouble and ruin it for the rest of us because you have nothing to say. Now go away so we can move on. Get lost!!"*

But the *QAnon Shaman* continues: “We start with academics and lawyers, because the swamp must be drained of government officials, the upper class and of parasites. Burn all bridges and burn the Tower. Tear down the mansions. Burn the libraries. I am the one who will drain the swamp”. The Trump reference is clear. Significant Putin lines also mean that the performance jumps between West and East without it making much of a difference.

In *The slaughterhouse* stagehands also participate who sweep the floor in the middle of a scene, and several times the actors step out of character and address the audience more or less directly: “This is a meaningless mess, and you must try to make sense of it when you get home”, just as there are meta-lines directed at the cast: “How many female roles are there really in this play?”

## **My Horse**

The performance ends with a longer sequence based on text from *Richard III*. The actor is right at the front of the stage and speaks directly to the audience. He is tired of his role as “ugly”, and you almost think it is the actor, Kristoffer Helmuth, confessing his disgust at the situation when a person sneaks out from the wings and puts in a cardboard sign with the handwritten message: “Fuck you, Kristoffer Helmuth”. The actor is also humiliated and belittled by his mother (in the fiction), who regrets that he was ever born, and you cannot help but sympathise with the character as he becomes increasingly desperate.

In the final scene, Richard runs around backstage in the theatre’s storeroom looking for the horse that was previously on stage. He is filmed on video, and the image of the desperate man is projected onto a giant screen at the end, with a *close-up* of his desperate eyes. *Richard III* concludes the whole war machine and is the drama that gets to take up the most space in the dramaturgical totality of the performance.

## **The Game of Thrones Generation**

The actors at Odense Theatre are really good at moving from the credible, intimate and personal confession to the overly theatrical role. In a strange way, it is as if these degrees of different forms of authenticity and theatricality rub off on each other, so that we see and feel the difference between fiction and meta-fiction, but the meta-level enhances the experience of the performance. The ensemble at Odense Theatre has something to tell us and lets us know that we are in the middle of a Shakespearean chaos in a world that is *out of joint*, like Hamlet. He may not be in the performance, but his story and his diagnosis of society, reflecting the violent wheel of forces and history, are mirrored in the royal dramas. The point is that the actors and the theatre itself are part of this chaos, and they too are affected by the doubt and desperation.

Richard III is killed and someone new takes the crown, promising that the time of war is over: “Now we shall all live in peace. I believe in the possibility of change. The only constant in human history is change”.

This is how the new king speaks through a video projection, with blood already trickling from the crown and down his forehead.

It is a magnificent staging, with the theatre ensemble making a huge effort in this orgy of violence, where the actors walk around with buckets of blood and, with a brush stroke across the neck, mark the killing of one traitor or liar after the other – only to be crowned a little later and suffer the same fate. After the interval, the killings are marked in a new way, now they are executed offstage with a shot or two, and in this way the changeability of history is represented.

## The European Slaughterhouse

An extra dimension of the daytime performance on 28 September was that the audience was largely made up of young high school students. They were audibly involved from start to finish. In this staging, Shakespeare was just the thing for the *Game of Thrones*-generation.

---

**Erik Exe Christoffersen**, Associate Professor at the Department of Communication and Culture – Dramaturgy, Aarhus University.

---

**Script:** William Shakespeare.

**Staging and adaptation:** Tue Biering.

**Dramaturg:** Mathias Rosenkrands Bech.

**Set and costume design:** Nicolaj Spangaa and Marie Rosendahl Chemnitz. Composer: Daniel Fogh.

**Sound design:** Kim Malmose.

**Lighting design:** Simon Holmgren.

**Cast:** Frank Thiel, Kristoffer Helmuth, Benjamin Kitter, Klaus T. Søndergaard, Freja Klint Sandberg, Natalí Vallespir Sand, Anders Gjellerup Koch, Nicolai Jandorf, Louise Davidsen, Malene Melsen, Mikkel Bay Mortensen, Githa Lehrmann, Niels Skovgaard Andersen, Cecilie Gerberg and others.

<https://iscene.dk/2022/09/01/tue-biering-det-er-er-mit-personlige-waterloo/>



Sex and violence. Photo: Rebecca Arthy



The Best Show In The World



FIX&FOXY has in 15 years produced around 25 performances, demonstrating in an original manner how theatre as a medium can address and investigate difficult issues such as diversity, representation and spectator participation without losing audience and artistic impact.