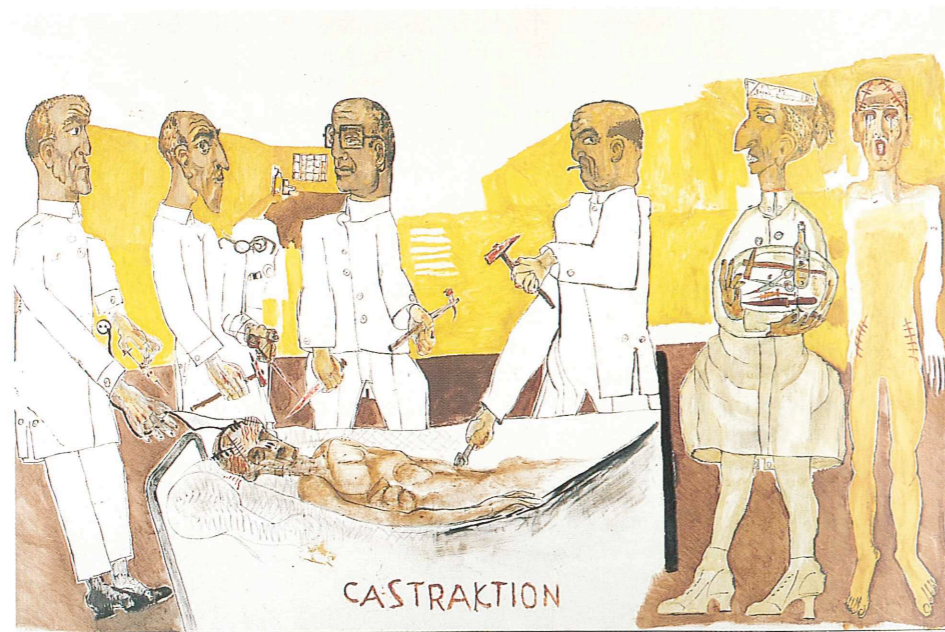


# Baktruppen

Norwegian project theatre combining visual drama, performance art and recycling

Knut Ove Arntzen



Bendik Riis: *CASTRATION*, 1950. Photo: Jacques Lathion.

in Fredrikstad, where he was born in 1911, the family's eviction after his father went personally bankrupt in 1928, admission to Gaustad Hospital in 1946, his sojourn on Malmøya from 1952-61, until he was again admitted to hospital for mental illness in 1962, first to Gaustad, later to Dikemark, and finally to Rishaugen nursing home for the mentally ill.

As an artist, he had a reasonably successful career from the age of 22 onwards, when he made his debut at the 1933 *Høstutstilling* – an unremarked debut with a drawn portrait of the town eccentric Frida, until 1984 when he represented Norway at the Venice Biennale. This career has a feature very typical of the reception of artists in Norway – it occurs in a series of 'breakthroughs', where every one of his 'breakthroughs' was followed by a new period of oblivion, until the next round in the glare of publicity. His proper debut took place in his home town of Fredrikstad in 1942, and a major exhibition in Oslo in 1943 made such a strong impression he was awarded a state grant, and the exhibition was remembered by people of his generation. When Riis took part in the *Høstutstilling* in 1952-55 he met with a favourable response. In 1958 he made his first 'breakthrough', when his works were included in two shows at the *Paljetten Restaurant* in the *Kunstneres Hus*. He had now acquired the reputation of being an 'interesting outsider', but it was to be a long time before he was recognised by a broader public, in the form of acquisitions for the national art collections. His art was miles away from the lyrical abstraction that was the dominant artistic expression. It was to be a decade until his definitive breakthrough with the critics, with an exhibition at the *Oslo Kunstforening* in 1969. In museums, people continued to be uncertain up until the 1980s, when his position was confirmed by

exhibitions at the *Kunstneres Hus* in 1983 and by participation in the Venice Biennale. Major acquisitions by museums, however, initially came through the commitment shown by the Gallerist Jon Dobloug, when, after the death of the artist, he arranged a large showing, from which a large part of the works ended up in various public collections.

The interest in Riis during the 1980s came at a time of renewed interest in narrative painting, and his art was felt to be relevant in a totally new way. He had become something more than an interesting outsider, now his art was felt to be contemporary and no longer extraneous. The wave of neo-expressionist painting of the 1980s can be seen as the background to the choice of Riis to represent Norway at the Venice Biennale. His art, however, has nothing to do with the *Wilde* painting of the 1980s. The 1980s expressionist painters were conscious manipulators who used an art-historically established language to paint something that looked soulful and impassioned, but which was primarily rhetorical. Riis' sincerity must have seemed almost naive in this context (in the same way as the late *wilde* works of Arne Ekeland or Kaj Fjell).

Riis used his own life as the starting point for his choice of themes, but his pictures go far beyond being interesting human documentaries. The basis for this lies in the way that he, like Lars Hertevig, Carl Fredrik Hill and Ernst Josephson, had a solid artistic training and a legacy of art-historical references to draw on, which gave him the ability to formulate his ideas in an artistically achieved language. His painting always retains an element of articulatedness, which makes it into something other, and far more, than subjective experiences poured over canvases.

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In 1993 Baktruppen bought azure blue contact lenses for PEER, YOU ARE LYING. YES!



Baktruppen: Publicity picture for the production *TONIGHT*, Hamburg, 1994.

BAKTRUPPEN is a prime example of the new development in theatre at the point of intersection between performance art and theatre. Initially they worked a lot on actions of both a conceptual and a commentary nature, in cafés and open spaces, such as the Cafe Opera and The City Square in Bergen, but it is as a project theatre that they have gained international recognition. Yet, their working method has taken in the action form as well as obvious elements of live art or performance art, not least in the use of 'real time', or of presence in a communication process without creating the illusion of plot. This move towards using approaches from both performance art and direct, loosely narrative drama, often paraphrasing textual material, could be termed recycling.

From a Norwegian perspective, Baktruppen has pioneered innovative art, at the point of intersection between various artforms. Other Nordic project groups they could be compared to are the former Billedstofteater, now Hotel Pro Forma, in Denmark, while in the Swedish context an obvious counterpart is Remote Control Productions.

Baktruppen was started up in 1986 by Tone Avenstroup, who was then a student of drama theory, and the author Øyvind Berg. The composer Jørgen Knudsen, the scenographer Worm Winther and the musician Erik Balke joined later, along with actors with backgrounds in both university studies and the art academy. These included Hans Petter Dahl, Trine Falch Johannessen, Gurå Mathiesen, Ingvild Holm and the Swede Bo Krister Wahlström. Their first producer was Sven Åge Birkeland, artistic director of the Bergen International Theater (BIT). They have since been invited to a long series of international festivals and theatres, such as the Theater am Turm in Frankfurt am Main, the Zürcher Theater Spektakel in Zürich, Felix Meritis in Amsterdam, and, most recently, the Kampnagelfabrik in Hamburg. They have also appeared at Eurokaz, a festival in Zagreb, and in Tbilisi, Georgia.

Visual drama can be explained by saying that various aesthetic

elements such as space, frontality, textuality and visuality, are no longer related in a traditional way – in a hierarchical system with the text as the predominant element – but here they are equal, and no longer hierarchically ordered. It was necessary to get away from traditional ways of making theatre, and that included the working process, as Baktruppen explained it in a press release in 1989. This also means that the actors can have a direct influence, which they can only have in a non-hierarchical theatre. In this way, spontaneity becomes a part of the investigation of the potential of theatre. Their earlier major production, after *Ja, jeg går over til hundene* (Yes, I am going over to the dogs), from 1987, and *Kjøter* (bastards), from 1988, was *Germania Tod in Berlin*, from 1989, which was based on the play of the same name by the German dramatist Heiner Müller. This used images from German/Prussian history, and emphasised the problems of revolution, Stalinism and the situation in East Germany immediately after the Second World War. Baktruppen tried to adapt the play to the Norwegian situation by reworking the text, and aided by props like an elk, a spruce and slides of typical Norwegian themes. The staging could evoke memories of the Wooster Group's production of *North Atlantic* from 1983, in which a large bench weighed down with technical equipment was the chief installation. This was also the case with Baktruppen's production, and in this respect they were very close to the typical mainstream theatre of the 1980s.

Otherwise, new movements have emerged in the form of visually oriented project theatre based on small, stable working groups. This thus involves a new way of working with text, by mediating textual references in a way that does not have as its goal a dramatic plot in the traditional sense. Theatre's visual, tableau-like possibilities are investigated, frequently using techniques drawn from performance art. The form is to a great extent based on improvisation and on the personal resources of the actors.

To the extent that these possibilities are investigated, we partly



Baktruppen: Action in *Niederkirchner Strasse*, Berlin, 1991.

get away from the conceptual mainstream theatre of the 1980s and enter into a new, more direct way of telling the world. It is not a matter of creating reworkings of texts that are related 'legitimately' or 'correctly' to their starting point. Baktruppen has already come quite close to these ways of working and thinking in new theatre in its early productions. We could say that they are seeking to bring about a 'conscious' recycling that tries to break down all forms of illusion by using textual and pictorial paraphrases. One good example of this is their production from 1991, which was shown in Amsterdam in March of that year. The title was: *Uten Tittel* (Untitled), that is, it had no title at all. The production was based on a paraphrasing of texts by Gilbert and Sullivan, Samuel Beckett and others. The actors themselves, including Avenstroup, Berg, Jørgensen and Winther, contributed their own material. The basic structure of the performance followed fundamental anatomical and astronomical patterns, which in the final arrangement, were invisible to the public except that they were situated in relation to them. These fundamental patterns thus took on a metaphorical character, at the same time as they formed the basis for the actors' patterns of movement. There were also powerful audio elements, such as electronic patterns of sounds and musical improvisations by Erik Balke. The structure became in a way cabaret-like, with numbers and sequences that were apparently 'accidental', thus emphasising the improvisational aspect of the piece. The audience partly formed a section of the acting area and partly sat on chairs arranged in a semi-circle, something which was again part of the underlying metaphorical pattern. They were allocated the function of 'peepers' or voyeurs, something that may again remind us of a recycling of devices from the work of Grotowski and Barba from the 1960s and 1970s. *Peer du lügst. – Ja* (You're lying Peer. Yes) is a series of productions from 1993 based on the Peer Gynt figure from Ibsen's famous play. Here they demonstrate recycling, paraphrasing and improvisation techniques. Peer is used as a

pictorial or metaphorical figure who turns up and is given various functions in different stagings. There were five in all, so that in Frankfurt am Main, where at the Theater am Turm, Daimlerstrasse, he performs in an erotic educational show, and later in Zurich during the Zürcher Theater Spektakel he takes part in finding out what happens when Hong Kong becomes a part of China: *In 1997 Hong Kong will be incorporated into China*. In Bergen, in the Teatergarasjen at the Bergen Internasjonale Teater, Peer sells used cars, and finally in Antwerp, at the Monty Theater, he takes part in the opening of an institute for happiness research.

As I see it, Peer can be understood as an urban nomad. In his article in *Hybride Magazine*, David Hughes comments on this production by saying that Baktruppen's Peer Gynt series is a sequence of variants or "fake" quotations from the famous first lines of Ibsen's play, since in the original he replies "no" when he is told he is lying. I would like to quote a little from Hughes' article in which he says the following: "/.../ despite the seeming lack of work, Zurich proved to be an important event: pieces of material and concepts that continued through the rest of the series, and which also hinted to next year's Super Peer shows, were devised and introduced there." (Dec. 1993/Mar. 1994).

And *Super Per* (with only one e in Peer's name), from 1994, was to be the summarising production. This premiered in Oslo and toured Norway, from Bergen to Northern Norway, and then on to performances in Frankfurt and Amsterdam. This highly cabaret-like production sums up not only Baktruppen's Peer productions but also the whole of their working method to date.

Dramatically, *Super Per* proceeds with the actors presenting the main themes from the *Peer du lügst. – Ja* series, and also, in an improvisation, Erik Balke tells us that Peer went to New York to buy all the Elvis stamps he could get his hands on.

Their working method thus sets out to relate and present stories and anecdotes as a part of an attempt at "telling the world", using



Baktruppen: from the performance " ", Berlin 1992. (" " is a performance in 11 sequences).

various means, including acting, dance and vocal distortion. They achieve this last effect by inhaling helium from a gas-bottle. Another effect is to fire loose gunpowder from a small toy cannon. Markus Payer, in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, writes that there is a great deal of madness in *Super Per*, but not without a certain dose of slyness (Schlauheit), since they do not create rituals that can be repeated or reproduced, and each feeling in this expression is exaggerated and given a comic effect (FAZ, June 5, 1994).

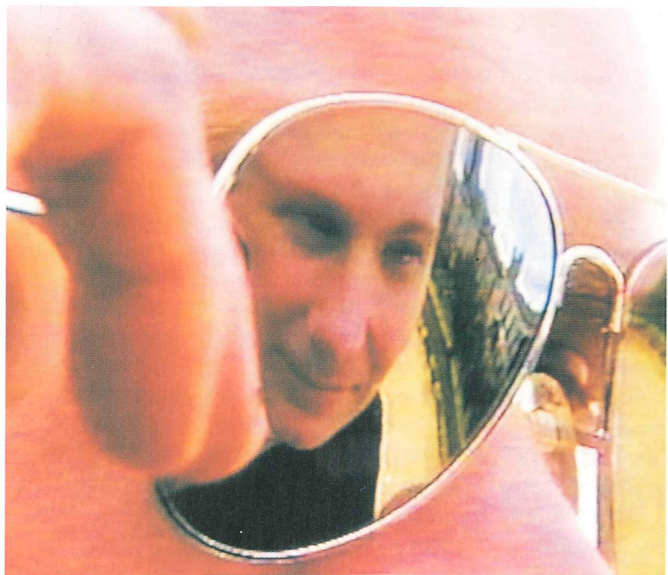
Baktruppen's capacity to surprise indicates how far they have come from conceptual or self-referential drama, as was typical of the stiff, formal 1980s. They have found their own special style for telling the world, in which different expressions and devices are given equal status in their own artistic 'Landscape'.

Many people are sceptical about this work and this form, while others are 'seduced' by it – and slide into this 'landscape' that they create.

Professor Luk van den Dries of the University of Antwerp carried out an audience study at the *Peer du lügt. – Ja* performance in Antwerp, together with an international group of students. It became clear that a large section of the audience found it difficult to understand or to become involved in the performance, and that for many of them it was "non-theatre". On the other hand, it emerges that some reacted directly and personally in a positive way, and projected their own stories into what they saw. In this way it was the "non-theatre" effect that came through in relation to the "real time" or performance-art aspect of the performance. And it is specifically here that it has an important function in changing conceptions of theatre, through the use of quotations, patterns of movement and improvisation.

This was also expressed in Baktruppen's participation in *Prosjektet i Gamlebyen (PiG)* in Oslo, in which the actors had dug themselves into holes in the ground, and made statements about the significances of an "opening". Theatre can open up.

Baktruppen: from the video *DIRECTIONS FOR USE*, Palermo, 1993.



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Anders Tomren, 1993.