

The Other Eye #3

Germany versus Norway:
The Actor's Work/The
Actor's Life. Articles
from the seminar.

The Other Eye #3

Performing Arts Hub Norway (Oslo) and Nordwind Festival (Berlin), arranged the third in a series of four seminars addressing the theme *Germany versus Norway: inter- changing theatrical strategies*. This third seminar was focused upon the work and life of actors in both countries. Their respective positions are changing within the aesthetics as well as the social conditions, and the seminar opened with lectures on the actors role in the esthetical process. This was followed by a panel discussion, consisting of both actors and directors.

The seminar was initiated by the Norwegian Embassy in Berlin, due to their observation of an increasing artistic dialogue and collaboration between artists and representatives from the vibrating performing art sectors in both countries.

Location and time for the third seminar was:
Hebbel am Ufer 2, Berlin.
30th of November 2013, at 11 am-15.30 pm.

The seminar was supported by: The Norwegian Embassy in Berlin, Performing Arts Hub Norway, Nordwind Festival.



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The work and life of the actor



BY ANETTE THERESE PETTERSEN

The third seminar in The Other Eye series was dedicated to ‘the life and work of the actor’, and held as a part of the program of the Nordwind Festival in Berlin, on the 30th of November at Hebbel am Ufer. The first part of the program consisted of four lectures by directors Heiner Goebbels, Tore Vagn Lid, Susanne Øglænd and Fredrik Hannestad, followed by a short panel discussion. The second part consisted of a panel discussion between actors Lars Eidinger and Torbjørn Davidsen, actor and director Anders T. Andersen and choreographer Helena Waldmann. The seminar was led by theatre critic and scholar Thomas Irmer.

Part 1: directors

German director Heiner Goebbels’ lecture is available as an article in this publication. As Irmer later called it, the topic of his speech was ‘the aesthetics of absence’. The title of his article is also a quote from his lecture on how he works with actors: «If I want an actor to cry, I give him an onion.» Goebbels both works with trained and non-trained actors, and is searching for a theatre where all the elements of the performance work together rather than illustrate each other. Goebbels was followed by the Norwegian director Tore Vagn Lid. As Goebbels, also Lid works with music theatre and with postdramatic strategies. In his article Lid describes different acting traditions, and discusses how it is possible to use parts of Stanislavski’s acting methods without turning it into an ideology.

Lid was followed by a lecture by the Norwegian director Susanne Øglænd. She works both within Germany and Norway, and also primarily works with music theatre and opera. Her lecture was a

presentation of a theatre project she did in 2006: *Henrik, lyver du?! Henrik, lügst du?!*. The project was bilingual, and consisted of both Norwegian and German actors. The last lecture in this part of the seminar was held by Norwegian director Fredrik Hannestad. His company, Verk Produksjoner, started out as an initiative from three actors who wanted to express themselves without directors. In his article he describes their background (the Odin Theatre, Grotowski and Ingemar Lindh), as well as their acting methods.

Panel discussion I

In the following discussion, the director’s differences and similarities were elaborated on. Goebbels highlighted how he is trying to avoid the organic actor, whereas Hannestad in the past has searched for it. The educational practices for actors became a recurrent topic, and Goebbels was encouraging people who actually don’t want to become actors to apply acting schools – as he saw this as an opportunity to introduce some changes in the institutions. Lid was not necessarily against methods of Stanislavski – but was making an argument on treating Stanislavski less as ideology and more as a potential material.

The panel was divided in their views on whether or not to work with actors as representations for something else, or as subjects and materials in themselves. As Goebbels stated: «Everyone *can* be a good actor. I try to discover each person’s capacity, the possibility in them, more than imposing ideas on them. Ideological training can destroy this capacity.»

Part 2: actors

The second part consisted of a panel discussion between choreographer/director Helena Waldmann,

actor/director Anders T Andersen and actors Torbjørn Davidsen and Lars Eidinger. The discussion was moderated by critic/scholar Thomas Irmer.

The panel discussed how the actor is partly disappearing from theatre today: there are still people on stage, but we no longer perceive them as actors. Vegard Vinge and Ida Müller's Ibsen performances proves as a good example regarding this. The panel discussed the different approaches to acting and training of actors – and they seemed to agree on Lid's proposition regarding the non-ideologic use of Stanislavski. Andersen regarded acting, directing and writing to be aspects of the same: finding the best way to tell the 'story'.

The panel represented different approaches to acting – and used different metaphors to explain their views. In the case of Davidsen, he regarded the stage as a place where he as an actor just *is* – without acting. Unlike Goebbels he does not believe that anyone can *be* an actor – but that everyone already is an actor in one's daily life. Eidinger, on the other hand, compared acting (on stage) to the act of making love, and by that: giving and receiving pleasure. Put differently: this is also a way of pointing to how both actors and the audience meet in some form of communication or conversation, and how both sides want to see and be seen. Waldmann was among the first 21 students to study applied theatre in Giessen, in 1982. After her first initial years, she 'got rid of the actor', and concentrated on the elements in stead: the body and the voice. She was more along the same lines as Goebbels, but at the same time she went further in reducing the actor to an element just as light, scenography etc. Andersen represented the director and actor at the same time, and was the one most outspoken in favour of still keeping some of the classical actor training.

As Eidinger pointed out, once someone enters the stage they become performers – in one way or the other. It might be a question about ways of giving information – style or aesthetics, as Waldmann commented. The different ways of acting or using actors/performers on stage relates to the sort of aesthetics one is searching for. When asking someone to 'under-act', what one actually wants might be to eliminate or reduce the pathos?

The last part of the discussion was dedicated partly to language – how ones language becomes vital when choosing styles or ways of dealing with text. Eidinger pointed out that being a German actor after the Second World War, language becomes

a way of arriving at B after A. For instance will the use of pathos have different connotations in German than in English, due to Hitlers fascistic propaganda during the Second World War. Towards the end, the conversation revolved around responsibility and which part actors generally take in the responsibility for a performance. This is also a question of how the actors relate to the material or the text of the performance, and how they deal with the audience. These topics are strongly related to the topic of the second The Other Eye seminar, namely that on education. How are the actors supposed to work, with what forms and in what sort of collaborations?

Closing note

When Eidinger during the second part of the seminar compared the work of the actor with the act of love-making, my thoughts went to Susan Sontag. In her famous essay *Against interpretation*, she wonders whether an increased focus on the erotics of art would be preferable – and this might in this case be more a question to direct to the actors than towards the critics?

What kind of criticism, of commentary on the arts, is desirable today? (...) What is needed, first, is more attention to form in art. If excessive stress on content provokes the arrogance of interpretation, more extended and more thorough descriptions of form would silence. What is needed is a vocabulary – a descriptive, rather than prescriptive, vocabulary – for forms. (...) What is important now is to recover our senses. We must learn to see more, to hear more, to feel more. (...) In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art.¹

And if we by that return to Erdinger's quote – and the question of 'pleasing' – what is theatre about? The participants of the seminar represented different views on this, and although the question was never put directly – I have a feeling part of the participants was hoping to please their audience – whereas the other part was hoping to disturb their respective audience. Perhaps both might be possible at the same time, and maybe its like Waldmann said: a question of aesthetics.

NOTES

- 1 Sontag, Susan: «Against interpretation», fra *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, Penguin Books, London, 1961/2009, s.12-14

When I want an actor to cry, I give him an onion



BY HEINER GOEBBELS

There is a moment in the musical theatre production «Eraritjaritjaka», when we hear the French actor André Wilms recite a line from the notebooks of Canetti, which greatly moves us, because the actor, to the waning music of a string quartet, wipes a tear out of his eyes: «*To speak in such a manner, as if it were the last sentence that were allowed us*»¹. We are moved, even though he does not recite the sentence with much inwardness, for he is simultaneously busy preparing a scrambled egg: he seasons the already foamy eggs with pepper and salt, uses a scissor to cut chives into the glass bowl, lets butter melt in the pan and finally peels an onion. Is it the onion that brings tears to his eyes? Is it the stirring that stirs us?

But the onion is not all that is required: it is the rhythm of the string quartet, as the actor cuts the onion into small pieces; and all movements and actions and texts in this ca. 35 minute long sequence are defined by music (as are all the camera settings that capture these images live and project them onto the back wall of the stage). The way he pulls up the arms of his cardigan, how he posits the letter opener to the music, parts the eggs, reads the paper, arranges his socks – all this follows, bar by bar, the exact score of the string quartet by Maurice Ravel, which is performed simultaneously on the stage.

I surround the actor with purely *outward* tasks, but which in the context of the performance, as an interaction between the texts and the music, the room, the light and the acting, do not remain *outward*, but reach the senses of the audience (one also smells the scrambled egg...), and trigger reflections and very well can move the audience. The much-acclaimed 'inwardness' is very much present, only where it belongs – in the audience.

I would like to describe how in my work the drama is shifted from the representation of a dramatic conflict that is played on the stage (usually as the psychologically discharged confrontation between the protagonists), to a drama of perception, that happens to the spectator: out of that which is seen and heard, what is triggered and experienced in the act of viewing, and what one makes of these experiences.

The first question of the actor who works with me is therefore not «What is my background?» or «Who am I?», but «What must happen on stage so that the questions that one has about a text, a piece or a work, also arrive where they are received with interest and perhaps answered – namely, in the audience?».

This is not a degradation of the actor, quite the opposite. It entails making him an accomplice, a co-director, from whom one can expect the same overview of the totality of applied means on the

stage (of which he himself is one) as from the director.

I place the highest demands on my actors and can, not without pride, say that I have had and still have the luck to have worked and still work with some of the most outstanding members of that guild. And I generally assume that an actor commands a great amount of virtuosity and knows how to act with it, but not necessarily has to pretend to 'be as if', i.e. to change into a dramatic character. And that this is not necessary in the context of my arrangements – simply put, we do not even speak about it. We do not talk about characters, we talk about tasks.

Scepticism and distrust in representation accompany me principally. Scepticism not only against the actors, but against the theatre in principle: against a set, that does nothing more than illustrate, against a merely functional light, against commenting costumes, and against texts that primarily aim at bringing across a message and demand no artistic reality of their own.

My distrust against the representational capacity of the actor is thus neither personal nor aimed against that vocation: on the contrary, I merely think that the actor is capable of more. But since he seems so like us spectators and thereby 'real life' – he stands as the first suspected culprit of an «as if», because for him it is especially difficult to provide the act with a «separate artistic reality», which is not only a copy of another reality. The wall of a house on the stage can be immensely large or minutely small, and may thereby evoke the abstract. An actor is first and foremost always one of us, a person.

Scenic *forms*, choric rhythmical texts as in the work of Einar Schlee or decelerated, stylized bodies and their separation from language as seen in the work of Robert Wilson, help him (and the audience) to completely side step the Stanislavskian «as if». Or, precisely, tasks. This may be described as «task performance» or «score» in the tradition of choreographic and performative experiments of the 1960s till today (from Yvonne Rainer to Mathilde Monnier): when I want the actor to despair, I give him a lot to do. When I want him to show his exhaustion, I give him, – like in the music theatre work «Max Black» – a chair after a breathtaking marathon².

But doesn't every director formulate tasks? During rehearsal he describes the emotions of a character and calls this 'subtext'. The idea is charming,

but presupposes that the subtext is known. And that there either only is one, or that one assumes the subtext defined by the director is the only true one. The only problem is: *the* subtext does not exist. Any good literary text has several layers of meaning, levels of understanding and approaches to reading it. And these approaches are easily concealed, filled up and constricted when virtually one single interpretation, when a 'private' emotion is made the dominant level of understanding – instead of opening them up to the many eyes and ears and minds of the audience.

The superstition of a director, that an 'understanding' of the text can be secured in this manner and that this understanding can be conveyed and transferred 1:1 on the stage and could plausibly be comprehended as such by the audience, is negligent. On the contrary, the exhibition of 'plausibility' and 'to have understood' through a brilliant actor who has mastered the text (who is behind, rather than below the text, offering it to us) may even limit our experience of the text. The consequences are performances in which the first scene makes clear how the play will end three hours later... 'Understanding' is commonly misunderstood with a reduction to that which is already known. Clichéd pictures and gestures illustrate the thought and at the end the audience says that they have 'understood' the play (or the interpretation). But is this not the opposite of artistic experience, which always also relates to the experience of the strange and unknown? In 'understanding' I would rather allude to the multifarious openness of language, which does not pin down a text.

Understanding must always be realized individually, it can only occur in the body and mind of a spectator. And it cannot be 'demonstrated'. But one can surround it and supply techniques, which make it possible.

Therefore I personally rarely use the terms 'task' or 'score', but rather the terms 'resistance' and 'form'. This does not exclude the possibility that the actor can enjoy the work with resistances and formal confrontations as a productive challenge.

During a rehearsal at the *Gießen* Institute I once heard a teaching assistant say to the students: «One should never tell an actor: louder or quieter, faster or slower...but one must always explain this through the character, account for it through his or her psychology». Upon hearing this I closed the door to the rehearsal stage immediately, because this is exactly how I work: by using purely musi-

cal, acoustic, formal criteria. I also always refused to apply Ruth Berghaus's remarkable technique, which on the one hand consisted in thinking formally and aesthetically, and then, within seconds, to translate this convincingly into psychology for the actor. For example, when we cooperated on *Dantons Tod*, and I out of musical reasons suggested that a passage should be spoken more slowly, she interpreted this suggestion simultaneously for the actors and explained it in terms of character: «God, just think what Robespierre has been going through just now», not without blinking at me with her other eye in a conspiratorial manner.

Rhythm is an example of such a possible resistance: i.e. the composition of a form for texts or movement, which sets the actor and his language – more or less as an instrumentalist – into the state that helps the hearer to decode the texts. Because our perception also operates in rhythms, in rhythms of sight as well as corporal rhythmic experiences of the hearing of language, music, tone and sound. In this sense, the decoding of texts can be meant literally: as an acoustically hearable instrumentation of the punctuation, for example. Hearing the syntax, for example hearing where the comma is set or how the end of a line breaks the semantics, can be a decisive impulse to interpret a sentence beyond one's established and familiar levels of understanding.

The blocking of an open 'understanding' takes place exactly when the director's terms of 'subtext' and of 'emotion' vicariously replace the innermost for the audience and thereby, with the actors, occupy the play's real emotional centre. This means that the most important place to discern the reason for the acting is not to be found in inwardness, but in the reality of what the actor is actually doing on the stage. Thus, it is not about placing the actor's self-referentiality, the 'being comfortable with the part', the 'being at one with the part', the textual assurance and the brilliance of the acting at centre stage. We need these forms of resistance, if theatre is not to become one of the media that «let all relations between people appear spontaneous, improvisatory and immediately human»³ – as Adorno / Eisler once said about bad film scores.

I try to put an instance, at the side of or in the way of the actors, performers and musicians, which they can confront, against which they can spar off, and which does not even let the impression of improvisational spontaneity arise – simply put: tasks.

What role does work with outer forms play in

contemporary actor's training? Is an awareness of the ideological components of the craft conveyed – as the institutionalising aesthetic of a theatrical tradition, that is about one hundred years old? The suspicion arises that the almost exclusive talk of 'matter' and 'contents' and the avoidance of *formal* studies only suggests to us that the representational conventions must be understood as 'natural' and cannot be questioned: to absolutise a virtually *organic* form of acting, which strands us unreflectedly with the effect of this quasi-natural form.

The Norwegian director and theatre studies researcher Tore Vagn Lid describes how work on form can lead to intense conflicts drawing on his own experience from music theatre productions with actors: «Stanislawski's programme of psychological realism places the actor at the centre of theatre, not as an outer realism but just in the actor's inner vision of the unified, realistic and believable situation. In the work of the actor, which in Stanislawski's work is equated with the internalisation of the dramatic text, the core concept of motivation is tied to the definition and clarification of an organic situation...[...] If the «building blocks» of theatre work are clearly defined (analysed) situations, divided into an organic chain of actions and reactions, and these in turn rest on individual and relational understanding and on the actor's conception of rhythm and structure, then by necessity certain premises for the other dramaturgical or music-dramaturgical parameters of the theatre space are set.

Thus, by blocking what the actor perceives to be an organically built up situation, in order to make space for a musical commentary, a conflict may be spurred. A conflict of identification, of the unity between actor and part. All this strengthens the gravity of identification («The work of the actor with himself / the work of the actor on the role»), strengthens a subjective and expressive relation to the scenic and to the musical material.»⁴

So this is about the avoidance of a presumed organic plausibility, i.e. to create a tension and fragmentation between the performer and the material. Especially in the work on stage with musicians, one can observe how constructive their instrumental relationship to their own body can be. For example, in spite of limited rehearsal time and highly complex tasks on stage, it was possible for me, along with the musicians of the Ensemble Modern, to stage an opera (*Landschaft mit entfernten Verwandten* – Landscape with Distant

Relatives) within the course of a few weeks. In this opera the musicians did not just play their instruments masterfully, but sang, danced, spoke and changed ca. 300 costumes as well. Is the assumption correct that in contrast to the musician, the actor must learn everything through the body and muscle memory? Is such an instrumental trait being blocked in actor training?

Working with *form* and the conflict with equally agential aspects of theatre (music, light, space etc.) does not imply a reduction in the skills of the actor. Just the opposite, as an actor one must still, or even more so, 'be very good'. And the conflict of solving tasks and other elements enters a playful potential, which is not motivated by the depths of the psyche, but gains its energy from the resistance to the tasks. It is about a double drama of the elements: for the actor (with, beside and against the other elements of theatre), as well as for the spectator (as a drama of his senses, his perception). This brings us to the thesis penned by André Eiermann⁵, that aesthetic experience in the performance – as a critical self-reflexive experience – does not necessitate the direct encounter by which the viewer sees himself mirrored in the protagonist and identifies with him. Rather, one can conceive of an immediate, indirect and triangular relation with a mediated 'third'. For the actor as well as for the audience, this implies: to have no identification, but to trigger a readiness, an interest for the Unknown, to acknowledge and engage with that which may remain unfamiliar to us.

*Translated by Jan Jacob Hoffmann,
Bergen, January 2014.*

NOTES

- 1 Canetti, Elias: *Die Provinz des Menschen, Aufzeichnungen 1942-1972*, München 1973, Carl Hanser Verlag.
- 2 Cp. Siegmund, Gerald: *Die Aufgabe des Schauspielers – Task Performance als Choreographie*, in: Sander, Wolfgang (ed.) «Komposition als Inszenierung», Berlin 2002
- 3 Adorno, Theodor W. / Eisler, Hanns: *Kompositionen für den Film*, Hamburg 1996 (München 1969), p. 41.
- 4 Lid, Tore Vagn: «'Gegenseitige Verfremdungen' – Theater als kritischer Erfahrungsraum im Stoffwechsel zwischen Bühne und Musik, Frankfurt am Main, 2011, cp. Part II Chapt. 2 «Stanislawskis 'System': Die Arbeit des Theaters 'an sich selbst'», p. 210
- 5 Eiermann, André: *Postspektakuläres Theater – Die Alterität der Aufführung und die Entgrenzung der Künste*, Bielefeld, 2009.

Playing a Game of Sorrow: Acting within new dramaturgical structures



BY TORE VAGN LID¹

I. DISCUSSING THE METHOD

First of all I'd like to make a small proposal to at least compensate for a rather obvious methodological problem. To discuss my own experiences, aspects and problems connected to acting and playing within the narrowed frameworks of this text is far from suboptimal. The dialogue between (you as) reader and (me as a) writer is off course a dialogue, and my writing/speaking situation and your reading situation likewise both constitute a scenography, but still we lack the same references, some *shared experiences* to take as a common point of departure. Until some years ago this problem would have to be either overseen or compensated with the «staged» dialogue as a form of writing essays. Gordon Craig (1872-1966), Konstantin Stanislavski (1863-1938) and Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956), to mention only the most famous, all went for this «representational strategy» while trying to discuss «living art» in the form of an essay or an article. But when we now have the technological means to digitally represent some of the works and topics at stake in the text, I think this opportunity should be used as intensively as possible.

So where you by now ideally should have been

able to visit rehearsals or a complete live version of *Fatzer* (2012), *Ressentiment* (2010) or of *The Game of sorrow* trilogy (2012-13), you will have to settle for a short video cavalcade roughly put together, unfortunately of quite variable video and sound quality, but still with the purpose of giving you at least a certain impression of what frames and challenges the actors meet in my productions within and without Transiteatret-Bergen.²

Introduction <http://vimeo.com/80742597>

Post-dramatic = post-acting?

To quote freely the German philosopher Theodor W. Adorno (1903-69): What has become certain in the post-dramatic theatre is that when it comes to the art of acting, nothing is certain any more. Some people now juxtapose the so-called «post-dramatic turn» to a more or less fundamental attack on the actor, on the actor's place in theatre, on the actor's education, trade, status and future.³

As a director and author I think that such an attack is both premature and mistaken. The answer is – I believe – quite the contrary. The post-dramatic theatre needs the actor in the same way as a vital art of acting also needs the post-dramatic theatre.

What is decaying, however, is the idea of acting with a capital «A». That is the (once so) hegemonic conception of a psychological realistic acting style as the one and only truthful and unquestionable approach to the art of acting; a timeless, and all-embracing discipline, invented by Konstantin Stanislavski, with one system, one scientific method and one transcendent vocabulary that historically has settled down with itself and can therefore only be standardized and cultivated. However this doesn't mean that it's no longer possible to speak in a meaningful way about what a good actor is. We must only remember to ask: Good at what?

II. STANISLAVSKI & me

The German philosopher and writer Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) once said – to Brecht – that he always read the books that no longer were in fashion. That's a method that I have a great taste for! Therefore I have spent a lot of time reading (and rereading) Konstantin Stanislavski's great opus. I've been searching everywhere, also by his self-proclaimed American students, like Stanford Meisner (1905-97) and Stella Adler (1901-92), picking up tricks and following up leads, not least as a productive way of confronting (you might call it «verfremden») my own thoughts and working methods. And in many ways (and along many parameters) I found – especially in the Russian theatre scientist – a vitality and a willingness to experiment far beyond what I had expected.

But still I'm left with a problem: not of the value of this tradition in its self – like other great traditions, no – but by *the danger of some totalizing tendencies deeply connected to its fundament and to its vocabulary, cultivated and traded in institutions and schools with their courses more or less written in stone*. May it be intended – or not! It's off course possible – like many people do – to claim the usability of the Stanislavski «method» on every form of theatre as long as you «use it right». But for me there are still some dimensions – some power fields linked to this system of thoughts and methods – which are too problematic only to be overseen and left in silence.

1. VIEW ON HUMAN NATURE- outdated?

There is no «system.» What exists is nature. My entire life I have tried to get as close as possible to what we can call «a system.» This is synonymous with the creative work's being. The laws of art are nothing more than laws of nature. A child that is

born, a tree that grows and the creation of a stage character are manifestations of equal caliber.⁴

One critical dimension from my point of view is how inextricably and intimately linked the Stanislavski School's acting ideal seems to the prevailing view on human nature of his time. Individualism, the thought of the organic core of the personality and of the «real» and «authentic» subject, is translated more or less directly into the intentions of the actor's I, meaning introspection, self-control and overview.⁵ The way I see it, a decisive founding principal in the entirety of Stanislavski's authorship rests upon the concept of the «living,» «organic» individual as a self-realizing process. When «the method» isn't freed subconsciously from its ideological pre-requisites, an equally subconscious surrender of these pre-requisites occurs. In short: a more or less non-social view of human life from the decades around 1900 is added to the mix. Because so what if the ambitions of the theater are precisely the desire to problematize such a view of humanity? What if the actual concept of the «living» and «developing» subjects becomes the subject of the theater? How is it to be reunited with a direction (and an audience's preference) that has to watch «living people» on the stage so that the performance and the actor can receive the mark of «approval?» There are no human methods that arise from nature. Not one system that in itself is grounded in objective criteria. And that is not a problem. The problem comes when one forgets these pre-requisites; when a method hides its ideological roots so that the relationship between acting technique and view of humanity is made natural (a priori). Adorno's *Minima Moralia* opens with the motto: «das Leben lebt nicht» – life doesn't live. This paradox touches the root of our problem: The individual who believes he takes action, who feels alive – is not alive. Instrumentalism, capital and cultural industry have – at least according to this pessimistic philosopher – soaked into every pore of our modern way of life. Spontaneity is not spontaneous and the demand for «authenticity» and «true felt feeling» has in itself become an instrumental and false jargon in a market in continual expansion. One can of course agree or disagree with Adorno's dystopia, and this is not the main theme here. But if one as a director would at least make an attempt to place Adorno's view of humanity on stage, then Stanislavski's demand for the «organic», «living» and «authentic» actor would at best emerge as paradoxical – at worst as something coarsely ironic.

Maybe it's too nice? – Rooms without intentional action

To give you a counterpoint to this organic-essentialistic approach: In his last speech on German soil in the summer of 2000 the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) was talking – quite contrary both to the naturalists and the idealists of the early 1900 – about rooms without intentional actors: In a global economy, with its boardrooms, institutions et cetera, the rooms and structures create their own personalities rather than vice versa. In the 2004 performance *Maybe it's too Nice?* – a visual audio play I tried to work with a performance where a particular economical language itself played the leading part – not the actors who it made use of. The key word for the play was the struggle with and against the language, and the desperate attempts to get out of it. The idea was to let the characters develop from a battle-zone of a language rather than from a psychological «point of departure», a story line (Aristotelian or Brechtian) or from well defined dramaturgical situations. Although *Maybe it's too nice?* in fact had a narrative structure⁶, the actors did not know the story until the day before the premiere. Rather, the dramaturgy of the performance was split up in sequences of language-battles (numbered 1-12) – where the actors could decide which battle to fight. This focus on strategic rhetoric rather than on organic development, coherent (story)lines or dialogues motivated by retrospectian (individual) psychology, led to a focus on language and rhetorical virtuosity, revealing also the hidden musical dimensions of this language. Here are two short taped parts of this *Transiteatret-Bergen* project.

From *Maybe it's too nice? – a visual listening play* (*Transiteatret-Bergen* in *Bit/BlackBox*, 2004/5)

<http://vimeo.com/78342463>

<http://vimeo.com/78350383>

2. DRAMA-overrated

My second main concern is how the basis for Stanislavski's approach to acting takes for granted the dramatic text as the «first-» and the «last mover». Accordingly everything from the actor's work with himself to his work with the role seems conditioned by a dramatic universe «handed over» from the author – the genius of the theatre – and translated by the actor as a loyal craftsman. Due to the time and discursive context of Stanislavski's acting and writing, it's not surprising that he takes this «point of departure» as somet-

hing obvious – or in philosophical terms, a priori:

*It is the theater's job to gestalt a piece's inner life and its roles so that the core and basic concept that the poet's and composer's work arise from can be expressed on the stage.*⁷

For me this is an obvious problem first and foremost because I normally work with projects that don't have the drama as their «first mover», but the piece of music, the academic thesis, or – and I'll come back to that – the board game. What if the theatre and the actor just don't work with oneself and the role, but with a Passacaglia from J.S. Bach⁸, a DUB figure from Lee Scratch Perry⁹ or a dissertation on evolutionary theory from the orthodox naturalist Steven Pinker?¹ In *Tt-Bs Polyfonia Variations* the actors' point of artistic departure requires an almost chamber-musical way of acting and synchronizing voices and gestures. Here in a rehearsal from *Bergen Kunsthall Landmark*:

From *Polyfonia-Variasjoner*, *Transiteatret-Bergen 2010*:

<http://youtu.be/7ZbaHaYcpuI>

In this «double-monologue» the aim was both to challenge the subjectivity of apparently highly private and lonely «messages» as well as the traditional concept of the choir expressing the «mass» or the «collective». The methodical solution became an almost schizophrenic montage, first in terms of a naturalistic approach to the text, and then in terms of a musicalization of the «non-musical», meaning the stylization and choristic doubling of the fumbling expression of one young girl. Hence for the actors two almost contradictory approaches had to be combined, so that the very artistic tension of this «double monologue» found its expression due to this polyphonic approach.

One other «try» in this direction was to combine Gerhart Hauptmann's naturalistic «classic» drama *Before Sunrise*¹¹ with Franz Schubert's only String quintet, here in an arrangement I made for four voices and cello. The manuscript – structuring the tragic end of the play – looks like this, with Helene (the young main female character of the play) repeating «Alfred!» before her predetermined suicide:



The experiment was – by means of music dramaturgy – to convert the new naturalism of today with its merciless genetic determinism in a score that at this specific point (the end of the play) also freezes all spontaneity, all psychology, all «free choices», also «forcing» the actor to (re-en)act inside the fixed (or predetermined) structures of the musical score. Here from the concrete scenic realisation:

From *Before Sunrise*, The National Stage in Bergen (2011):

<https://vimeo.com/78129824>

3. SITUATION-reduced

My last (and to me probably the most important) objection to the essentialistic stanislavskian concept of an acting-style or «system», drawn from nature itself is what I see as an understanding of the concept of situation that is too narrow. My experience is that Stanislavski's key concepts – situation and situation understanding – lock themselves out of the real social room (situation) in which theatrical and musical expressions actually take place. The reason why – I think – is that the definition of situation and dialogue is taken from the inside – that is once again from the organic drama – and consequently these concepts are unable to escape from the gravities of this introspective dramatic universe. What I here typically call the problem of the situation, is rooted directly in Stanislavski's «an actor must work with himself.» Following the key chapter «Attention on stage,» the fourth wall in what the dramatic situation defines as a situation on stage is closed: «the actor requires an object for his attention, not in the hall but on the stage. And the more

interesting this object is, the greater the control it has on the actor's attention.»¹²

Unlike Stanislavski, to me the theatre room is not first and foremost a room determined by the inner organic drama, but a socio-rhetoric room: A polyphonic space of equal participants who share contemporary experiences and adventures. Such an understanding was the basis for Transiteatret-Bergen's reconstruction of Brecht's *Fatzer* (2012) as well as Brecht/Eislers *Die Massnahme* (2007). No fourth wall. No stage. Only one shared room.

From *Die Massnahme*¹³

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1faRq5oBTn0&sns=em>

From *Fatzer*¹⁴

<http://vimeo.com/43725955> <http://vimeo.com/78271205>

But when the dialogue – like here – does not take place in a central perspective but decentralized, one very important Stanislavskian premise will disintegrate together with the psychological safety of the fourth wall and – for many excellent actors – leave them with a highly practical and technical vacuum. So for a post-dramatic theatre to expand beyond the safe borders of the dramatic situation means – for the art of acting – a challenge that needs to be taken as seriously as Stanislavsky did with his once so ground-breaking techniques for the naturalistic actor and his drama. Because one thing is that a safe and good gravity is set aside, but quite another thing is what we replace it with – in other words; where shall one as an actor find something firm to «cling to»?

III. GAMES OF SORROW: AN ATTEMPT AT A SOLUTION

Far from everywhere, or everyone, recognizes that which is given by nature as a guide for theatrical activity. Mostly, she (nature) is treated brutally, so that the actor ends up affected. If you on the other hand have exact knowledge about true art's boundaries and its organic natural laws, then you won't go astray, and you will be able to discover your mistakes and correct them. Without these solid principles, the way they emanate from art's natural base of experience, you must become insecure, go astray, loose your standards.¹⁵

For my part one possible answer to this has been to use the way of thinking and the logic of *the board game* in and for the theatre.¹⁶ From 2011 until now I've been working at what I've called *a sociological game of sorrow trilogy*, whose objective has been to look for the individual in the systems and the systems in the individual. My hope has been to break away from the immanent tendency of theatre to privatize all problems and tragedies, also where the tragedies obviously are shared by many people and are caused by crises and structures independent of the choices and spiritual life of individual destinies.

From actor to player

The first sociological game of sorrow was *Punishment* (HOT/Logen) from 2012. The attempt simply aimed at trying to approach the essence of punishment along artistic parameters. A long field-study in a closed Norwegian prison formed the basis of the performance. I experienced the prison and the prison system more or less like a strange, almost dreamlike game, with its silent and killing rules, its slow-flowing time, characteristic architecture and merciless hierarchies. To capture this in the form of documentary theatre would not have been possible; likewise all forms of «psychological» portrayals of the prison's individual destinies. The solution was to turn the actors and the musicians into «players» who take their «pieces» – more or less authentic convicts (their voices, stories, reflections and deaths) – through a labyrinth of written and unwritten rules, where you – for each decision, each step – are in danger of having to move back to the start or leave the game. This became the starting point of the self-imposed rules of the whole game of sorrow trilogy. To the players – musicians, actors and technicians – the rules of the game mean a situation where one *does not represent characters, but inste-*

*ad works for one's game-pieces, sacrifices a piece (for example in *Punishment* the pedophile who no one wants to play with) or exchange pieces with another.*

Since the dramaturgy of the game of sorrow is structured after *rounds and moves* – not scenes and acts – strategy and acting style can radically be changed and adapted to each new round. Consequently all imaginable game strategies are in principle at the disposal of the players of the game of sorrow: In one move the song is chosen as a game strategy, in a second one, a more or less realistic chamber play, and in a third one, a visual radio play.

In the last round of *Punishment*, the piece «Africa» – one of seven game pieces – has the choice either to injure a co-prisoner or to sacrifice itself to avoid extradition from Norway. My choice for this expressive last round was what I have called *a radical artistic and dramaturgical work share*.¹⁷ The actors model «the fire» after voice-instructions from an old jailer who personally had experienced that an African prisoner burned himself to death in a Norwegian prison-cell in the winter of 1992. The whole round is structured after J.S. Bach's gigantic Chaconne.

From *Punishment – Game of sorrow #I* (Logen, 2012)

<http://youtu.be/jlJk-UQr2-w>

<http://youtu.be/bLC0aE60kWQ>

<http://youtu.be/rpbfkavPhqA>

In the second part of the trilogy, *Kill them all!* (at The National Theatre in Oslo 2013), it's the European financial crisis that is being played for in the game of sorrow. The game board this time covers the whole stage and a team of actors, DJs and instrumentalists move their game-pieces around in a murderous system of economic power and powerlessness. In the seventh round of the game the lines of the piece of «The old Actor» – on the train from Norway to Greece to buy the dream flat on sale – crosses with the line of «The Eternal Student» – a piece who's native to Italy, but now adrift in the North-West on the map.

The work share is clear: The players stage the dialogue between the two pieces. In this round the remaining players – actors and musicians – concentrate on playing our brand new version of Steve Reich's minimalistic percussion piece *Pieces of Wood* and in this way – supported by a model train and a video – take care of the geographic transfer.

From *Kill them all! – Game of sorrow #II* (At

the National Theatre, Oslo) (NB: Password to the vimeo-link = *kill*) <https://vimeo.com/79866031>
(and the final round of the second game of sorrow:) <https://vimeo.com/79866030>

What's decisive here – as in the other games of sorrow – is the actors' ability to adjust techniques and strategies according to the different challenges the pieces meet in the actual game. This approach makes it possible – and necessary – to unite radically different approaches to acting skills, forms of working and thinking *also within the dramaturgical framework of one and the same performance*, one and the same game of sorrow. This does not mean – however – that for an actor to play within the dramaturgical framework of the game of sorrow would offer some sort of vague «all round skills». Not unlike the lawyer preparing her defense, it's rather the task for both the actors and the director to search for – and decide which strategies and hence which techniques – each player will use for the task of defending his or her game piece.

So what does the game of sorrow demand of its players?

The player in the game of sorrows has a key role, but is not in himself enough. As an intrinsic part of the game's (musical) dramaturgical mechanism, a challenge is made to players who simultaneously are aware of what light and light-technicians work with, who are interested in – and allow space for – the orchestra's efforts, and who recognize that a video screen can have just as great an impact upon it's audience as an actor can. The game of sorrows demands, in other words, players who recognize the theater space as a polyphonic space of participants and media who *in principle* have equal status (which is not the same as to say that that all dramaturgical parameters should necessarily be equal present at the same time!) Simultaneously these sociological players of sorrow challenge a theater space in which precisely the actor is also valued as a specialist. That is to say, an approach to the game that doesn't dismiss the actor's work «with himself» (as little as a musician's), that doesn't dismiss the concentrated and multi-dimensional theatrical work simply as a naïve romantic remnant, and that doesn't forget the simple logical point that in a principally equitable dramaturgy, the actor is also included.

NOTES

- 1 The article is based on a lecture given at the Hebbel-Theatre, 30.11.2013 and is written as part of my artistic research-concept; *Kunnskaper og ferdigheter for et postdramatisk teater* Kunsthøgskolen i Oslo/Teaterhøgskolen 2014-2016.
- 2 This text is inspired by the work of many great actors, both within and without the organizational framework of Transiteatret-Bergen. For the names of each of these great actors, follow the video-links embedded in the script.
- 3 Bernd Stegmann – dramaturge and professor – argues for example i his newest book *Kritik des Theatres* (Theatre der Zeit Verlag, 2013) against a «post-dramatic turn» in which he believes that the art of acting, understood as representative of a role gestalt, is lost.
- 4 Konstantin Stanislavskij: *Skuespillerens arbeid med seg selv, del II*, german edition by Bernd Stegmann (*Stanislawski Reader – Die Arbeit des Schauspielers an sich selbst und an der Rolle*, Henschel Verlag, 2007) p.204.
- 5 This is also the case with Stanislavskis epigone's, Meyerhold and Eisenstein. Where Stanislavski ideologically modulates between classical idealism and biological naturalism, Meyerhold and Eisenstein are founding their «methods» on Marxian sociology and Pavlovian reflexology.
- 6 *Maybe it's to nice?* was based on Richard Dressers play *Below the belt* (1995)
- 7 Konstantin Stanislavskij: «*Skuespillerens arbeid med seg selv, del II*», German edition by Bernd Stegmann (*Stanislawski Reader – Die Arbeit des Schauspielers an sich selbst und an der Rolle*, Henschel Verlag, 2007) p.194
- 8 *Elephant Stories*, Transiteatret-Bergen (2009)
- 9 *DUB Leviathan #1*, Transiteatret-Bergen (2012)
- 10 *Sound of Science*, Transiteatret-Bergen (2012)
- 11 Den Nationale Scene, 2011. Director: Tore Vagn Lid.
- 12 Konstantin Stanislavskij: «*Skuespillerens arbeid med seg selv, del II*», German edition by Bernd Stegmann (*Stanislawski Reader – Die Arbeit des Schauspielers an sich selbst und an der Rolle*, Henschel Verlag, 2007) p.51
- 13 Transiteatret-Bergen: Festspillene I Bergen/Salzbürger Festspiele 2007/8)
- 14 Transiteatret-Bergen: Festspillene I Bergen/Nationaltheatret, Oslo 2012
- 15 Konstantin Stanislavskij: *Skuespillerens arbeid med seg selv, del II*, German edition by Bernd Stegmann (*Stanislawski Reader – Die Arbeit des Schauspielers an sich selbst und an der Rolle*, Henschel Verlag, 2007) p.26
- 16 This must not be confused with the German term «Trauerspiel».
- 17 To read more about this approach I recommend my book, *Gegenseitige Verfremdungen: Theater als kritischer Erfahrungsraum im Stoffwechsel zwischen Bühne und Musik*. Teil III. (Peter Lang Verlag, Frankfurt a. Mein, 2011)

Encounters with becoming



BY FREDRIK HANNESTAD

We were three actors that founded The Theatre-company Verk in Oslo in 1999. We started from scratch focusing on a collective working process and proximity/lucidity on stage, and now we are seven artists working together. During the course of our work, we discovered that the size of our performances needed an external perspective and I have thus taken the role as a director. In doing so, I try to unite the different disciplines and artists, while still focusing on the collective working process and the proximity on stage.

I will in this article describe our method, with the focus on the actor's work.

Background

Originally the group was based upon Grotowski's research, Odin Theatre and Ingemar Lindh. They all had slightly different approaches to theatre, but the actor's work was their main interest.

Grotowski and the Odin Theatre believed that inside everyone there was an essential core, a source, a water well that was not contaminated by stereotype expressions and clichés.

The problem was how to find this source? The method was in a way pretty simple: instead of teaching the actor different techniques it was a question of breaking down the actor's resistance through hard physical exercises inspired by Meyerhold and Yoga. The exercises were precise with a beginning, a middle and an end and the idea was to

discipline the actor, heighten his physical awareness and make it possible for him to pinpoint and observe his or her inner impulse. When the actor was exhausted by fatigue she would get into contact with this energy source and express herself in a raptus of impulses coming deep down from the well inspired by Artaud: *The actor is not aimed at solving social or psychological conflicts, but to express objectively secret truths, to bring out in active gestures those elements of truth hidden under forms in their encounters with becoming* (*The theatre and its double*, Alma Classics LTD Januar 2013, Great Britain, s. 50)

But I must emphasize that there was a little branch that came out from the same environment that had a (slightly) different approach, and that was Ingemar Lindh. He was preoccupied with collective improvisation. When I was asked to write this article I went back to the papers from that time (1989), and I was really surprised about how much of our work corresponds to some of his ideas and especially his theories around the social situation which I will explain below.

There are two aspects or terms in our work I would like to focus on:

1. The social situation
2. «Listening»

The social situation

Our strategy in the work is to open up for as many possibilities as possible in the beginning of

the process, overloading it with different types of theatrical aesthetics and references in search of interesting juxtapositions and unexpected moments. Everything is allowed, and failure is a main part of this work, to accept failure, to enchant it. This generosity towards the space and the social situation generates a lot of material with varying degrees of signification (meaning). Very little of this material is used in the performance, but it is more a question of gathering common experiences and references. In a way one could call these experiences a way to build up a sub-consciousness in the performance. What you see as an audience is just the tip of the iceberg.

Lindh identified the «social situation» as a crucial element in improvisation and the making of a performance. The term implies considering «the whole context as material for work;» colleagues, encounters, discussions that ensue, time and space, actions, costumes, props, text, music etc. In short: everything outside of the actor.

The dynamics of the social situation provides tools that allow human beings to do something, «means-whereby», that is, things to do. The actors start to respond to the material, associating, making actions and equivalences, responding to each other, exploring improvisation as a method of organization. This way of organizing a performance is very different from directorial montage or choreography.

In our work we try to widen the field of signification understood as «meaning in process» for the participants. We want to extend the limits of what provides material for the actors to generate and organize their work. In this way the mechanics of «social situation» announce an event that makes it possible for a rapid increase of meanings.

In the process of making *Stalker* we were working with several different types of elements at the same time: the original film *Stalker*, the film manuscript, Geoff Dyers novel *Zona*, Tarkowkis diaries, interviews with family members and friends about the film, *Roadside Picnic* by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky (The original novel the film was based upon), film music from *Stalker* and other films + other references that corresponded to the film. We were searching for meaning, trying to find a way in, a relation, a common place. In the process we always come to a point where we get tired of discussing, where we say ok, show me, how would you do the performance? We did countless improvisations based on endless discussions, and suddenly we

found a spark, a relation towards the material that we liked, that had all the elements that we were seeking: poetic, funny, strange and meaningful. We had found our way in and we started to make a concept around that spark, limiting the material.

Listening

The term «listen» plays a key role in our work of improvisation. For us «listening» is when you start to make your act re-actions, instead of conscious acts.

To cultivate the ability of «listening» within a performance situation as the means whereby the spontaneity of everyday life can be made present. Of course, actions and words are, to varying degrees, already prepared, but in the moment they happen they are consequences of your listening, and not of your wanting to act. These spontaneous reactions are not random, but they cannot be repeated and that's a sad thing actually, but also fantastic and unique. They can only be discovered again or re-discovered through your listening.

Though «listening» is used in a metaphoric sense to signal a state of bodymind awareness, there is a non-metaphoric shade to it that applies to the whole body:

This listening does not involve the ear but the whole being of the actor. Perhaps it is not so much a question of «understanding» but of «perceiving.» What is important is that the actor perceives that something has happened. It is not necessary to know «what» has happened. Once it is perceived that something «has happened» one can find out «what it is» that has happened.

Lindh, Stenar att gå på 1998

Behind most of the scenes in our performances there are at least ten or fifteen variations of the same scene, and these variations and improvisations lie there as possibilities for the actor to choose in the «here and now» in the encounter with the audience. I believe that this keeps the actors alert and alive and opens up for the possibility of creating new meaning with the audience/spectator. But also a general feeling in the room that «anything could happen».

The question is how to make the performance experienced and alive. The improvisations are experiences in the search for meaning, but one could also say experiences in failure, and to fail as an actor is more than ok because we are not interested in the flawless. So when the actor stands in front of

the audience she has the freedom to invent through experience and failure new meaning by the means of listening, and we encourage failure as an option. When the actor is on thin ice the audience will feel it immediately giving the performance situation a vulnerable and live feeling reminding the audience that this is «here and now», it's alive, forcing the public to consider the real up against fiction. We are always striving to find the right balance between fiction and the real. When one manages to ride those two horses at the same time, a certain kind of ambiguity starts to develop and hopefully the performance will start to transcend, which is our main goal in our performances.

The act of retelling

We are also influenced by Brecht. Especially the anecdote of the person who retells an accident that has happened in front of his eyes. The act of retelling is an essential part of storytelling, which lies as the base for our culture. Re-telling is an example of someone trying to organize events from the past giving them a coherent meaning. We like the presence of someone re-telling something, because they are not playing a character, but rather representing elements of a character that is effective to tell the story.

But it differs from what kind of text you have. In *Stalker* the text is pretty shallow or very close to how we speak. Therefore it was necessary to find a way to heighten the speech, or emphasize untypical places in the text. All to transform a shallow text into something unique. Our strategy is often to find the right obstacles to work on, so that the focus of the actor shifts from acting to solving a task.

In our work with *Stalker* we were looking for a subtext that was more conceptual, based on the idea that there's a general memory loss going on in our society. We called it «empty head», a kind of erasing all pre-learned ways of speaking, or «typical» ways of building up a speech. We tried to empty ourselves after each line, exploring the text giving emphasis on unimportant places. We immediately got interested in what the actor was saying. The text opened up and became meaningful, and we started to listen.



THE OTHER EYE #3

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