

THEATRE AND PARTICIPATION

Ècoles Des Écoles Teacher Seminar 15th – 17th June

This documentation is the result of the seminar ‘Theatre and Participation’ held at The Danish National School of Performing Arts in Copenhagen, from the 15th – 17th of June. The seminar was held in cooperation with the European Theatre School Network École des Écoles.

The seminar invited practitioners and teachers from across Europe to engage in a three-day seminar exploring theatre and participation. The seminar focused on new forms of interactivity in the performing arts, the themes and methods explored in creating interactive and participatory performance and especially the types of questions that arise and lead to discussion: what kinds of aesthetic and ethical considerations follow different type of interactive theatre, how do we navigate and explore interactivity’s increasingly blurring boundaries between the theatre and audience, and audience and performer? What methods can be employed to investigate the practical structures and possible effect of an interactive performance? And how do you rehearse performance that may be entirely dependent on the individuality of an audience member?

The following is a step-by-step documentation of the event, highlighting the issues raised, the performances presented and the experiments conducted.

Monday June 15th

The seminar session was kicked off with the performance “Tanz aller – ein bewegungschor/Dance of all – movement choir” by the German performance group LIGNA. The group specializes in the concept ‘Radio Ballet’, in which participants listening to a radio-play through headphones are given various and different instructions whilst together creating movements and dance, designed to subvert fixed regulations of space. Vor Frue Plads, Copenhagen.

Tanz aller – ein bewegungschor/Dance of all – movement choir

In *Tanz aller – ein bewegungschor* the radio ballet concept is introduced once again, yet this particular performance focuses on the exploration of choreographer Rudolf Von Laban’s movement choirs - which were theorized as spatial intervention. Laban’s movement choirs were part laboratory experiment part political statement – a mass of bodies rejecting regulations of space (....). The participants are introduced to Laban’s theories of movement and spatial awareness and the historical impact of the movement choir. We are invited to participate in dance and movement classes and encouraged to rehearse. As the dance continues it becomes clear that participants are divided into four groups, each group at some point antagonizing the other, joining the collective, breaking apart and repeating.

More info on LIGNA: <http://ligna.blogspot.dk/>

Tanz Aller video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fGma2iagOkg>

Opening the seminar with this particular performance was suitable as the *Tanz-aller/Dance of all* raised a recurring theme and question relevant for discussing interactive theatre and audience participation, framing the entirety of the seminar: How do you lead an interactive performance, and what is the choice effect?

Tuesday June 16th: *Day two of the seminar presented yet another example of interactive/audience participatory performance and a series of lectures discussing the theme, with Ralf Strøbech, Head of scenography at the Danish National School of Performing Arts as moderator. Held at the Danish National School of Performing Arts, Philip de Langes Allé 3*

09:00 Conducting the Audience with Tobias Trier (DK)

Singer, composer, actor, musician and writer Tobias Trier, performed an excerpt from his upcoming solo-theatre-show ‘Dirigenten’ – ‘The Conductor’. The performance was followed by an open debate reflecting on the show and the interactive methods used.

A conductor enters and addresses his choir, leading them in song and rehearsal. The audience is immediately involved and asked to participate in a (for audience –spontaneous, for the conductor – planned) choir rehearsal. The audience, now transformed, is asked to actively listen and attempt to harmonize and work collectively in order to please their conductor, but also to ensure a collective experience of cooperation. Active participation is necessitated on behalf of the spectator for the ‘experiment’ to succeed.

The following debate explored the ways in which an audience can be captured and enticed to participate, especially through a focus on different ways of manipulation: what personality traits make people listen? – How can the conductor persuade his audience to follow him? The piece also engages in the power-politics which are inevitably linked to the conductor-choir/leader-follower situation: who actually makes the decisions? And finally – which structures are necessary to employ in order to create the best possible framework for interaction? The piece opened the second day of lectures and debates firmly portraying the need for establishing and discussing strategies for audience participation.

09: 40 - LIGNA Artist-talk

Following the “Tanz-Aller/Dance of all” Performance which involved all seminar participants, the artist group LIGNA was present and engaged in an artist-talk, discussing the specificity of LIGNA’s work and the role of the audience in an interactive performance piece such as Tanz Aller.

Interactive Theatre: Concepts, Strategies, Ethics by Kim Skjoldager-Nielsen (DK), PhD candidate Stockholm University

Kim Skjoldagers lecture focused on terminology relevant for discussing interactive theatre. Relevant for the lecture is the, for Skjoldager, often miscommunication around the subject due to shifting and

interchangeable terminology, creating confusion regarding the actual genre of participatory theatre studied – do we refer to this genre of theatre as immersive, participatory or interactive?

This lecture categorized all theatre as participatory, some types of it immersive and others interactive. Skjoldager identified elements of interactive theatre as perhaps the most challenging and one that especially raises questions of concerning as to how such forms of theatre are carried out. Is it possible to combine dramaturgy with improvisational structures? What types of challenges does such a combination entail, ethical and structural? He draws on the work by the Danish/Austrian Performance Group SIGNA, whose art practice delves into the world of performance installation – typically involving a complete transformation of buildings into a new universe, in which actors and audience members interact in various scenarios. The works of this particular group often calls on a discussion on how best to deal with the ethical implications of highly immersive works (see SIGNA Vila Salo, *The waiting Place*).

Re-imagining dramaturgy into new structures and framing (as perhaps necessary in order to envision interactive performances that play with the boundaries of audience and actor relations) Skjoldager identifies other forms of theatre which makes use of similar types of frame-shifting and concept-changing methods such as the Forum Theatre (Boal), in which the audience is regarded as co-actors and co-creators of the piece, albeit intended for a different type of effect.

11. 10 Group discussions with question coordinated and facilitated by Kim Skjoldager

In groups, participants discussed the contents of Skjoldager's lecture and drawing on their own practical experience reflected upon the following: The positive and negative interactive theatre; The possible artistic qualities of interactive acting; Whether transgressing the borders of audience members is legitimized for the sake of artistic freedom and finally: How and when do you draw the boundaries?

The following plenary discussion saw contributions from all groups. The main point established was the *clarity* and *framing* that is related to the ethics of participatory theatre. A common source for agreement was idea that responsibility needs to be present – ideally in the structural framing of the piece, in whatever form that may be. Regarding transgressing and crossing borders, it was likewise established that this particular aspect is fluid and incredibly challenging – borders being personal and mobile, and thus a specific sensitivity needs to be linked with the piece in question in order to fit into a structure that allows for transformation.

Including the spectator by Jens Christian Lauenstein Led (DK), dramaturg at Aalborg Theatre

Jens Christian Lauenstein Led's lecture focused on his work with *Borgerscenen* – the citizen's stage at Aalborg Teater. The citizens stage takes its' inspiration from the highly successful *Burger Buhne* in Dresden and following a trend of theatre that puts everyday experts – normal citizens center stage, as opposed to traditional actors. Lauenstein Led focused in particular on the challenges in this type of citizens-theatre. Most importantly is the production of such a performance – the professional theatre working with citizens, producing a level of theatre that, despite its difference in approach, remains on par with any other production. At the center of this talk was the challenge of aesthetics and an ever-returning question: How do you remain true to the art form and the aesthetic vision whilst simultaneously working with non-professionals who, at the virtue of being non professional, are able to create a new type of aesthetic? Is it too easy to remain within a certain type of frame, and

how do you maintain a balance being true to the actual real-life stories and the personal attachment connected to them, whilst expanding them into an artistic product? Also in focus is the role of the teacher/director – are you a guider or a collaborator? When working with an interdisciplinary focus, it is important to find a common language that opens up for a new dialogue between parties involved in the production. The lecture ended with an introduction of the sentiment: Who does the stage belong to?

For examples of Aalborg Theatres' "Borgerscenen" see: "Romeo and Julie are alive" (2003); Alborg 9220 (2014)

14.10: Showcase of work from students and teachers of the Danish National School of Performing Arts

Participants were invited to view a showcase of three works made by students at the Danish National School of performing arts. The showcase was introduced by the students and participants were given a brief introduction before visiting the exhibition venues. An important reflection on behalf of the students was the following: How do you create participatory theatre without alienating the audience or making them afraid? The students employed an inverse-logic: Making the uncomfortable comfortable.

The students presented three pieces of work, each with a different participatory aspect:

Joey Chestnut, Morten Hee Andersen and Henrik Grimbäck

The performance 'Joey Chestnut' made use of participatory techniques by inviting the audience up to be an actor, completely instructed by the main performer on stage – following the lines of 'making the uncomfortable comfortable' the audience member is approached as a helper and aid to the story, and completes the scene – but is never made to stand alone, and always guided in every way – given lines, directions on where to sit and stand.

Familjen - The Family, Henrik Grimbäck

The short film 'Familjen - The Family' introduced participatory methods in terms of the extras that were part of the film. The extras were described as being part of the set – instructed by the director to interact and become familiar with the crowd. The presentation of this project highlighted a specific focus on redefining the frame of an ensemble of extras could interact and work with the set. The focus on group dynamics and crossing of boundaries is in focus: How do you make the group a comfortable place to be?

Holes, Henrik Grimbäck

The interactive aspect of this particular performance lies especially in its' technical structure. Audience members view the performance inside a small box with the actors, similarly to the example above, becoming part of the set. The audience could not interact with the performance as such, due to the way in which they were situated around the stage, but were given headphones, allowing the audience to hear the same instructions and directions as the actors were given from the

technician. In this way a participatory element is created as the audience become witness to the actual framing and technical structure of the play.

17:00 Blind Hamlet by Actors Touring Company (UK) Teater Grob, Copenhagen

Nassim Suleymanpours' play 'Blind Hamlet' introduces a stage with no actors, save for a lone stage manager, and invites the audience to become the actors instead, guided by a single Dictaphone in which the voice of the writer instructs the audience, to come on stage, what to play, what to say. It has been praised as a unique and new form of audience-participatory theatre. The piece seems to question the very essence of classical theatre: Why do we need actors, when we have an audience? Why do we need rehearsal? And what is the value of the *mistakes/uncertainty* of a live performance. The framing of the piece becomes essential. The absence of an actor immediately involves the audience. The surrounding basic as well as commercial structure of a classical play remains – black box theatre, stage and audience, PR, tickets, and narrative etc, but the actual interaction is created by the audience, with the one helping hand provided by a recorded voice. The audience is not entirely safe – they cannot necessarily preempt the next step, as a drastic plot twist reveals. Interesting to note in terms of the framing of interactive theatre, *Blind Hamlet* meddles not just with the concept of an actor, but with the concept of the director. How is the audience lead through the piece?

18. 15: Artist talk with Nassim Soleimanpur (Iran) from Actors Touring Company

Following the showing of *Blind Hamlet* the audience engaged in an artist talk with writer Nassim Soleimanpur. The talk centered on audience reactions – the issue of audience expectation and the concept of choice – did the audience choose to be the actor? The power-play and concepts of manipulation vs. choice in audience participatory theatre was a repeated comment. The technical aspects on how to actually create, visualize and perform such a highly interactive play as *Blind Hamlet* was introduced. It was discussed whether we can find a pattern of interaction – and if so, how such a pattern can be studied, taken apart and re-defined in order to create new experimental experiences and modes of interaction between audience and performer.

Read more about *Blind Hamlet* on <http://www.atctheatre.com/productions/blind-hamlet>.

Wednesday June 17th: *Day three of the seminar was entirely dedicated to a prolonged workshop, lead by director Erik Pold. The workshop was intended to dive into the concepts discussed, the performances experienced and the theory presented. It was a chance for all participants to draw from their own practical experience and put words, thoughts and ideas into action. Held at the Danish National School of Performing Arts, Philip de Langes Allé 3*

The final workshop day, facilitated by Erik Pold introduced a working structure, with which participants in groups were introduced to relational methods and strategies for audience participation (short summary below) and guided to discuss and reflect on the seminar, using these ideas to create a piece of participatory theatre, for the rest of the participants to try out. A participatory theatre-lab, of sorts. Participants were directed to begin their workshops following a

particular frame – linking the actual working structure of the workshop day to a recurring topic: Framing of participatory theatre. These specific tasks given each involved an incorporation of the audience through various ways and angles. Participants worked with the following structure:

- Mission
 - o Thinking about a theme, establishing a related mission, keeping in mind that missions can fail – the possibility for interaction within conflict.
- Framing/Context
 - o How do you frame reality? Establishing a context which is relatable and engages natural interaction i.e. – the conductor (See Tobias Trier, p. 2)
- Role of the performer
 - o How does the performer practice/rehearse an interactive piece? Establishing every possible scenario for interaction, and making a plan a,b,c,d..?
- Role of the audience
 - o Giving the audience responsibility and an alibi for interaction: are they a witness, addressed, physically participating or do they choose the course of the performance? And how does that open up for possible ways of working with an audience, and could it change within the same framing?

The following is a short summary of each group experiment:

- 1) ‘Mirrors’ – this experiment put the audience in focus, by literally placing a mirror in front of them. Time played a central role and was the leading object in allowing an interaction. The concept of inter-passivity was introduced: What happens when the audience remains passive, but acutely aware of each other? The discussion led into the notion of the human condition – the audience becoming witnesses to themselves and each other. The role of the facilitators somewhat left behind as they became the spectators.
- 2) ‘Fear’ – the experiment dealt with tackling the challenge of boundaries. An ‘in or out’ opening sentence played with the idea of choice – allowing the audience the choice of participation. This particular experiment also highlighted the problematic in expectation in regards to framing: In what ways do the framing of a piece create expectations? And what are the possibilities for meeting/raising/failing those expectations?
- 3) ‘Story’ – The personal narrative was the centre of this experiment. Audience members were involved as themselves, and invited to share personal memories, with pointers defined by a facilitator. These stories were then shared as one large narrative, woven together by facilitators. The experiment established a form of ‘common’ language (see lecture by Lauenstein) which was manifest through the final, composed narrative. The challenge of this piece was to find the participatory potential and establishing the aspect of relation and power-play between audience member and facilitator and between audience and audience.
- 4) ‘Debate’ this experiment was in the following discussion labeled as a ‘choice circus’ the mission was clear: creating a participatory dynamic. The aim of the mission recalled a recurring discussion: how do you contextualize and discuss strategies for participation, when it seems limitless? The decisions chosen by the audience, together, in this piece were not of

importance, rather the awareness of facilitator and audience as to the *process* of decision making and thus uncovering the mission and aim – a substructure of *participation*.

- 5) The fifth and final experiment dealt with the idea of literally moving the audience from a particular, physical role and taking them out of the space, into new scenarios outside of the existing frame. The facilitators were co-dependent on the audience, giving them a certain responsibility, but were at the same time also casting the audience as witnesses to a performance group in upheaval and a dissolving structure. The experiment played on the concept of form meeting context: The audience were invited to one type of participatory theatre, in which clues were given to their involvement thus introduced to a particular frame – but ended up in within a frame entirely different. Clear from this experiment was the concept of attempting to define/plan audience participation and reaction, considering every scenario, yet allowing a sense of the unknown to take its part, and allowing the audience to step into (or leave) their given responsibility.