

Jette Lund
Engsvinget 27
2400 København NV
0045 38 602315

8. december 2001

FrankoB: My Body Is A Canvas

What are we experiencing ?

Is that, what FrankoB shows us to be seen as "theatre" or is it "something else", which we might call "performance" or whatever we might like ?

The simplest definition of "theater" comes from Eric Bentley:

"The theatrical situation, reduced to a minimum is that A impersonates B while C looks on".

The Danish translation of "impersonates" is "plays", which mean as well "impersonating" as "playing".

FrankoB "plays" or "impersonates" no one else as him self.

Yet I will call his scenic show "theatre", not only referring to the origin of theatre in ritual and cult, and the obvious character of "sacrificing" in FrankoB's shows, but also referring to the existence of "another kind of theatre":

It is often overlooked, often misunderstood, but known by people as long as they have made magic pictures, as long as man has "animated" the nature and the things, from which he was surrounded or with which he surrounded himself.

You might call it "puppet theatre" - and if this term makes you feel quite wrong, then "Theatre of Things".

One might ask oneself, if it really is important to "call" FrankoB's performances anything at all ?

Why try to put in boxes, to make order of something, which is so fundamentally chaotic as art ? One might think, that art will have to explain itself ?

I agree: Art should not need long explanations. But for me is the knowledge about the context important for the understanding of works of art. Not only for the understanding of the time, in which they enter, and the situation, from which they derive. But also for the process of producing art. Whether or not it is a single artist or - as usual in theatre - it is a producing collective, it is important, how they understand (in which context they see) themselves.

Practically seen it is important to be able to seek the knowledge of the "craft" (to seek and find the people, who knows how to do, what you want to do, practically), and not to be forced to invent the soup plate once more.

One has never been able to create art through analysis, but problems by producing art have sometimes been understood and solved through analysis.

This cleared: If what we see in FrankoB's performance is theatre - and if we find it useful to put such a label on - we might find, that the theatre of FrankoB is "another kind of theatre".

This theatre form has been hidden too under terms like "figure theatre", "animation theatre", "object theatre" or even "visual theatre" - as if not any kind of theatre is "visual" - even a radio play is based on "inner pictures".

For me all these terms are referring to the same topic: The puppet theatre or the Theatre of Things.

This other kind of theatre is characterized by the "B", which is "played" by "A", being a "thing", and not a person.

This "thing" might in some cases be a puppet, representing a person, so in the classical or traditional puppet theatre.

But the "thing" might in other cases just represent itself, and thereby open the spectator for the associations, which might derive from the "thing" itself and the connections, in which it appears. This is the case by FrankoB.

As mentioned above the translation of the different terms complicates the dialogue, but it might help us to understand, what the topic really is, in all its dimensions.

In Danish an "actor" is a "player" or a "showplayer" For "acting" Danish will use "playing". A "play" for the stage is a "showplay". For childrens play Danish has a special term.

Eric Bentley goes on:

"Such impersonation is universal among small children, and such playing of a part is not wholly distinct from the other playing that children do. All play creates a world within a world - a territory with the laws of its own - and the theatre might be regarded as the most durable of the many magic palaces which infantile humanity has built. The distinction between art and life begins there"

When "impersonates" is translated til Danish "plays", the term becomes this extra dimension, which I use, when I extend the definition of Bentley to the "Theatre of Things".

If the same co-meaning ("undertext") should be expressed in English, I would probably in the conventional actor's theatre

situation have to write "is playing (that he is)", and in the puppet theatre situation write "is playing (with)".

This "thing" with which the player "is playing" is - regardless of the "thing" in the actual case representing a role figure or not - characterized by being nothing else than it actually is. Its material and its funktion as "thing" is clear: A porcelain cup, an aspirin tablet.

In the traditional puppet theatre the Princess of the play might be a bag af fabric hiding the hand of the puppeteer and a wooden head on his finger. Regardless of her efforts, she will never be something else. Her materiality will unveil itself and be a part of the show, first time she in her frustration is banging her head to the edge of the puppet stage. She is "material for playing" - she is a "thing".

So the player too is simply "player".

But definitely not - like the playing child - "private".

The player/puppeteer can in modern, sophisticated puppet theater play a rolefigur himself, which - visible to the public - is playing a puppet - e.g. as the Ventriloquist does.

But the player remain in his visibleness (visiblity ?) being what he actually is: The Puppet player - and so arise new associative possibilities in the shape of a "picture of infinity":

I am playing, that I'm playing, that I'm playing - who is playing who ?

What then is interesting is not only the player, and what he does, and not only the thing, what it "is" and what is done to it, - or to the rolefigur, it is representing - but the (outer) connection and the (inner) relation between the player and the thing, on the outer (manifest) level as well as on the inner (transformatoric) level.

If we transfer this model to the shows of FrankoB, we might experirience following:

As FrankB as player, attired in a scenic identity of white made up nudity, pricks himself and lets his blood run out and become visible for his spectators, he makes his blood "a thing" - a "fluid", a "color", some "paint". The blood becomes his "playing material".

This playing material lives its own life by virtue of the associations, bound to it, and by the virtue of the patterns or traces, it leaves on his body and on the fabric under him.

FrankoB "plays" - as children do, and yet not as children do, and yet as children do, with this material, this "thing".

And the interest of the spectator ("the narrative value") lies not only in the player and his "play" with the material, or only in the effect of the material as fluid, paint or color, but far

more in the relation between the player and the material, as well on the outer as on the inner level.

The reactions of the spectator is then apparently very much like wellknown reactions of the audience to the more traditional puppet theatre: One thinks, it is an "effect", or one wishes to realize, if it is "real". How is it done ? In this case: Isn't it dangerous ?

As the bloodstained fabric is sewn into clothes, furniture covering or teddybears, new "puppets" arise - new "animated things". The direct (by first glance..) aesthetic is not different from the common aesthetic by using figured fabrics: The "figures" are carefully chosen by the designers to fit in properly on the objects, everything made with taste and accuracy. Again it is the relation which is different: The spectators knowledge of the fact, that the fabric is stained with FrankoB's blood, makes the things into "relics" - as images of a saint or an expensive doll in an exhibition case. One might say, that the spectator in this case is made into a "player".

Starting out from the definition of Bentley, the spectator - C - is just as important as A and B. This is the case here too. The shows of FrankoB does'nt make sense without an audience - with no one looking.

If you by "theatre" means artistic measures, aiming to spin (catch - like a spider) the audience in an illusion of "experiencing" something, which in fact is not happening, or to "be" in another place or in another world, then the performances of FrankoB is not theatre.

There might be a tendency towards creating such an illusion in the sequence in the waiting room: The Audience is waiting for their two minutes visit by the white-painted creature, whos head is half hidden by a big collar, which - apart from preventing him for licking his wound - might prevent the visitor from the danger of being bit.

But the illusion is directly (very soon - in the same moment) broken, in this case you may just look an the little "waiting number", which have been put into your hand.

Here the definition of Eric Bentley with the term "impersonate" might again be teasing us. But "impersonate" is not a term meaning, that C has to believe in A being B.

It would invite to fraud. This accusation has through the history been linked to the actors trade and made the actor an ("unsaved" - or rather unsavable ?) individual, which could not be buried on consecrated ground.

Nevertheless it is mans own psychological constitution, and not only traditions or oldishness (?), which create the uncertainty about who "the actor" is, and about what "acting" is. The word for a "play for the stage" translated direct from Danish or German would be "showplay" or "a play to look on" - this is certainly, what FrancoB's performances is.

The title "My Body as A Canvas" will tell, that FrankoB places himself to the spectator's disposal, so the spectator may project the pictures, produced in his mind by virtue of the blood, dripping from the live body, on the body of FrankoB.

Taking the topic "theatre" as something to be "consumed", "enjoyed", or something "educational" - or at least "fascinating", what we experience by FrankoB may hardly be called "theatre".

It "fascinates" allright, but it is neither to be comsumed nor enjoyed, and is in it self not educating.

In this point the word "impersonate" might help us, while this term connotates (means too..) the ritual, transcendent "metamorphosis" - the sacrifice (offering ?) made for a purpose (intention ? sake ?) for something or someone, which is more important than the sacrifice itself.

Such analysis as this made here might be useful, increasing our conciousness of the fact, that new artistic measures too are rooted in the human psychology, in the human way of experiencing the surrounding world.

One might put it this way: It might be unimportant, what we are calling the new artistic expression, we are trying to create: Theatre or performance or something else. But it is not unimportant, what we think we are doing to the audience.

By trying to explain FrankoB in a historic frame - and not just pushing him into the impersonal and post-modern category of "performance", the meaning of his work for me at least is becoming more clear and the understanding deeper.

May it be so for others too. The world is full of slaughterhouses. If you just wish to see blood, you might seek one of these.

© Jette Lund