

Practice-Based Research in Performing Arts

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Practical experiences with education for the modern, genre-crossing performance art/ installation art

This symposium started out, asking three questions:

1. Why develop discourses on Practice-Based Research in the performing arts ?
2. What do we want to achieve with PBR and with the study circle?
3. How is "Performing Arts" defined in this context?

Thinking of the questions raised up til now one could start out asking - what is "a discourse", what is understood by "practice-based" and "research" - what is meant by "performing" and what is "art" ? That - I think - is exactly what a discourse is all about. I will try to deal with the first question first, and throw it back -

Why not ? Performing arts is a practice-based activity. It is carried out in "real life/real time/real people" - when A is presenting artwork B for audience C - with an adaptation from Bentleys well known formula for "theatre".

How to study a human activity as performing arts outside its practice ?

So it is for me necessary to "develop a discourse", in order to deal with the various problems which makes it necessary to put the question in the first place:

In the natural sciences practice based research is the norm and not the exception. The social sciences was mentioned yesterday. But the Humanities have their origin in the studies of the religious scriptures and so a tradition of researching in other people's research - in this case that is the artist's research, which results in a poem, a novel, a painting or an act of performing. Or even further away - in another scientist's research in or description of a phenomenon.

Theatre Science evolved as a branch of Literary Science, referring to the notion of *text* as the dramatist's written monologues, dialogues, comments and remarks. But the (post?)modern theatre forms see the *text* as all the signs formed by the scenic images and actions, these signs being audio-visual, olfactory, tactile etc. according to the chosen media. Together they constitute the *text*.

It might still be necessary to repeat, that space, objects and performers, as well as lighting, sound, music and spoken or written words, the static and moving images, the motion of bodies

and stage elements, are all seen as equal means of expression and as objects for the attention of the audience.

In some cases this not only breaks the conventional borders between fiction and reality, but also that between stage and audience space and between audience and performer. These borderlines may actually be dissolved, introducing notions such as *live art*, *interaction* and *audience participation*.

As an audience member you can no longer expect to be seated on a chair, but must actively be part of the formation of expressions. It can no longer be taken for granted or even intended that every member of the audience is experiencing the same *text*.

The new play of Kirsten Dehlholm: *Sandchild* - contain all these elements. (Politiken, February 24th, 2007)

This tendency is also mirrored in the production of the play, where formal hierarchy are broken down and all participants are seen as members of a team, working together on equal terms. (This is not Kirsten Dehlholm) The dramatic linguistic texts are often created through improvisation and discussions in the production team, known as *devising theatre*.

The use on stage of "New Media Objects" (Manowich) with their shifting, changing and fragile character, accessible by anyone, accentuates the shifting, changing and fragile character of the modern performing arts.

The important thing is that this - in my opinion - is not just another example of artistic and avant-garde ensemble theatre, as we have known it throughout the twentieth century, but a qualitatively different way of creating performing arts.

This kind of performing art is however not new to mankind. On the contrary you might say that it is the rigid construction of formal genres and the Aristotelian drama theatre, which dominate our conception of the theatre, which is only 2.500 years old.

Answering the third question: My definition of Performing Arts in this context so has a borderline to the phenomenon "ritual", but do not exclude the traditional theatre or any theatre form, and focus on the possibility of "another kind of theatre", which do not match the traditional specifics (or conventions) of "theatre", which needs other frames for production, and which obviously appeal to artists of today.

By following this evolving practice and the reviews published, one will realize, that the traditional concepts of theatre can't grasp the essence of these theatre forms, where classical notions as protagonist and antagonist and classical dramaturgical models gives no sense.

Seen from the University that might be old news, obvious and not worth mentioning, but seen from the artist's side it is still a fight with reviewers and funding committee members, asking for

main characters and a proper storyline, and at their Best just might declare the project as "interesting, but not really theatre". There are exceptions - Anne Middelboe Christensen in the paper "Information", February 20th, 2007: "Fucking alone".

Such a situation is not new to theatre history either - the formal so called Aristotelian "unity of time, place and action", which presented an academic dogma for some 200 years until the late 1800, was never accepted by the commedia dell'arte or by popular theatre as such, and was most vehemently fought by Brecht.

It took 25 years, a modern director and a Hans Christian Andersen Year for the establishment to realize the phenomenon New Circus. Kirsten Dehlholm is being well granted - with every right - but for the theatre science it might as well be the underwood of young artists, working in various directions, which might call on our attention.

The term "postdramatic" do'nt tell anything about what is is, just what it is not.

Practice based research will be necessary to understand how the different theatre forms are created and how they are perceived, in order to create a new vocabulary for the theatre - which for me is an essential part of a "discourse" and - as it is my topic - to create appropriate educational possibilities.

Today's notion of "the stage arts" and "the stage artist" or "performing arts" and "the performer" is a modest token for this comprehension, that the modern stage arts exceed the frames of the classical arts and genres, as drama, ballet, opera - and visual art.

But how does this comprehension apply to the educations? This issue concerns all art forms, but is here specifically discussed in relation to the education of actors.

The artist-to-be is in no doubt, that there is a difference. She consciously chooses her education either on the traditional actor's schools (as Statens Teaterskoler) or for example School Of Stage Arts (SOSA) - or a school abroad. She consciously seeks different production methods and different means of expression, and rejects - sometimes with contempt - the traditional "psychological theatre".

But what is put instead? What is the real difference of the different offers in education ?

It is to my knowledge - not studied or described.

A big comparative study on a Nordic level is - to my knowledge - not yet published.

Therefore my conclusions are solely grounded on my own practical experiences, and also on three reports, which I have produced.

The first is a description of a four-year experiment with a "Basic Education for Puppet Makers" 1996-2000 in Hanstholm, a project, which for technical reasons couldn't be continued and which is now closed down. The description is made with the background, that this education had no equivalent anywhere in the world, and that a documentation of curriculum, didactics and experiences would present valuable knowledge.

The 1 1/2 year course was meant as an introduction to the different film- and theatre educations. As a part of a polytechnic school its topic was the puppet making. But to build an instrument you will have to know how to play it, so the course included acting, puppetry, voice and body training, besides modelling, drawing and construction of puppets in different materials. This approach attracted clearly a certain predisposition by the students, a certain talent, taking its point of departure in the object on the stage, the puppet, and the shifting subject/object relations between the actor/puppeteer and this object (Konstanza Kavrakova Lorenz).

Hanstholm produced 30 students from which (to my knowledge) 10 now are educated further as actors/puppeteers, stage designers/ puppet makers and film animation designers.

The second is a description of the education at the private "School of Stage Arts" (SOSA) 1997-99, made on behalf of the school for an application for official approval, an approval, which the school unfortunately didn't get. This education is established and led by Nullo Facchini, is closely related to the theatre "Cantabile II", and relies on international artists as well as former students as teachers.

The school has existed since the middle 80-ties. The education is focussed - as I see it - on three central aspects:

1) the physical element of theatre: The presence of the performer, her ability to change, and her ability to create, exploit and redefine spaces and objects. In this aspect the performer uses the same means as the puppeteer: The ability to work with shifting subject/object relations.

2) a deliberate request to the students (primarily) to use what is popularly notioned as "the right half of the brain": The non-verbal, synthetic, associative functions, and not "the left half": The deductive, analytical, verbal functions.

3) the ability to be an independent and creative co-producer in a team, and so to be able to create own material. An important and to a certain extent problematic part of the didactics is the use

of personal material called "Life Stories", which stresses an aspect which we may call "the personal engagement". In these aspects the whole didactic differs very much from that of the traditional schools (Statens Teaterskoler) and it is - in my opinion - not possible to integrate methods from one school on the other, even if the meetings of the schools are useful to the students on both sides.

The third is a not yet fully closed report of an experimental "Laboratory" at "Odsherred Teaterskole's" "Institute of new Stage Art" 2005-2006, where 8 performers got the opportunity over 6 weekends to develop their own scenic project, under guidance of the director Catherine Poher and my self as dramaturge. From this experiment there is a DVD with sequences from the different works. (Catherine Poher/Katrine Karlsen)

The participants were chosen on an audition, where two aspects of their projects were asked for: The physical, material expression of the stage (the performers "playing material"), and the conscious wish for and need for support in a search for new expressions - a "personal engagement". The role of the "coaches" should not be that of a director or a traditional dramaturge, but support the performer in the search for the real core of the project, a search for that certain "language" which would release the performer's perhaps not yet outspoken desires. The function has been called a "reflector" - that is to reflect on the work of the performer, to give her the possibility of her own choice, to make it possible for the performer to act as an "auteur" on her own project. If something like "a life story" turns up, it is material for the performer's personal project, it cannot be expropriated for someone else's.

The three reports are very different in their topics and their purpose and span over a period of time of 10 years.

All three contexts relates to theatre forms, which often not only are far from the mainstream theatre, but which also require quite other talents and skills from their performers than those, on which the traditional theatre schools are grounded and which they teach.

As I have a personal great interest in and specialize in this "kind of theatre" the similarities is of course no coincidence. That is the problem by Practice Based Research, that the researcher becomes a parttaker, and might tend to see what she wants to see. By developing a discourse one cannot leave that question undisputed.

But given the many students and performers I have worked with in the past 20 years, given their practical use of the tools, I have been able to present, thank to my thesis, the experiences of the last experiment, combined with the experiments from the two first, might - as I see it - at least present a rich material for further

studies on the thesis: "Another Kind of Theatre", characterized by shifting subject/object relations, whereas what we commonly call "theatre" is characterized by the changing subject.

Looking of the theatre from "outside" to find a "meta language" there are interesting psychological and anthropological theories which give evidence to the assumption, that the two theatre "species" are mirroring two aspects of human thinking.

One (ontogenetic) grounded at the play with the (transistorial) object (Winnicott), building an "Ego" ("I"), and one grounded at the ability to change the "I" - the role-play.

And seen anthropological (phylogenetic) the human thinking stems from the acknowledgement and acceptance of "something being what it is not" - (Engelsted):

A is not B, but is playing B, while C looks on.

If our practice and our theory give us reason to recognize these two theatre forms, it will have a strong influence on the way we should organize educations for the performing arts.

Education in arts was always contested. But if we want to create modern educations in the artistic fields at all - and not leave the field to "master led apprentice teaching" and the sheer notion of "talent" - not to forget the talent of using the elbows - if we insist on discussing art from a point of "quality" too - then education for me is research, as research is education.

Any actual educational programme for an actual person is a research project, for the person as for the teacher. This might be seen as banal, but it is a necessary precondition for an acknowledgement of the educational situation.

Both the practitioner and the teacher need to legitimize and question their praxis, for new inspiration, and for gathering and generalizing the knowledge about the process of education, which they have gained, and to compare it to the knowledge of others. It demands continuous, concrete research, and it cannot be anything other than "practice-based". It goes for the traditional schools working with the "changing subject" as for the different offers of an education for "another kind of theatre".

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