Dramaturgy and Modern Stage Art
Considerations to an artistic form-experiment
v/Jette Lund

Dramaturgy means the knowledge about how to create "drama".
As the modern stage arts leaves the classical Aristotelian notion
of "drama", the notion of dramaturgy has to develop accordingly,
or we will have to invent a new notion to describe the craft of
organizing all the artistic means presented for an audience,
whatever kind they might be.

The modern stage arts very often are penduling between what we
might call "installation" and what we might call stage art as e.g.
"dance". The dramatist has often very little to say; when words
are used, they might be "devised" through the rehearsal process,
or texts are used as a material, which can be formed, fragmented
and expressed through different medias, along with the spoken
words from an actor.
But as an "auteur" or as a group working on the limit between
installation and modern stage art, you will have to be aware of
the fundamental difference between the situation "exhibition" and
the situation "stage art", seen from an audience point of view.
That's where the dramaturgy goes in.

the exhibition

> The "exhibition" can be described as a situation, where
> the audience is invited in, is free to leave one piece of
> art and go to the next, and undisturbed can leave the
> building or the ground of the exhibition again, whenever
> one might want to.
> Every single piece of art (sculpture, painting, installa-
> tion or something else) of an exhibition will have to
> work for itself, to attract, sustain and relate[1] to the
> interest of every single member of the audience.
> But if the artist wants to restrict the movements of the
> audience in any way, to structure the audiences
> experiences in any succession, the demand made on every
> single piece of the exhibition to be of interest for the
> audience will be higher, and the same claim will be made

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[1] REFLECTIONS ON PRACTICE
On creative engagement
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on the succession in itself. This "route" through an exhibition can be seen as a "stage", and organizing it as the first step of "staging".

the stage art

Presenting "stage art" can be seen as a situation, where the audience is invited in, and placed after a plan, made by the artists/producers, for a certain amount of time. The audience accept the invitation and these conditions (to sit, walk, lay down or something else) and accept to stay for the said time, accordingly to this plan.
Not to follow such "given instructions" or implicit conditions is disturbing for the rest of the audience and might be considered "not allowed" or at least embarrassing. As the audience is giving itself in the hands of the producers, it expects to be entertained and engaged, accordingly to the given conditions and promises, made by the producers, and will tend to be disappointed, offended or direct angry, when these expectations are not met.
The exception confirming the rule could be the famous performance "Lips of Thomas" by Maria Abramowić, where – after two hours – the audience took over to prevent intolerable consequences for the performer [2].
Hence the necessity for the producers of considerations about a structure, a dramaturgy, and – not least – how to communicate their intentions, in order to adjust the expectations of the audience in relation to traditional and therefore well defined conventions for the stage art situation.

Between these two basic situations there is an infinite number of possible variations, but in the relation to an audience, an artist/producer is bound to make decisions to the level of "freedom" versus "control" and so to the structure, in which the audience is invited (or provoked) to participate.
This obligation can not be repealed by a claim of every single member of an audience being free to interpret the piece of art as he or she might want or be able to. This precondition was always there and will always be there – hopefully.
The obligation is to define the conditions and to guide the expectations of the audience, which basically means for the artist to express due respect for the audience.
On this basis it is possible to construct what we might call "the fictional contract" – a situation where an audience willingly and free and for a given amount of time is presented with the possibility of leaving reality and stepping into a "fiction", without any

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[2] Erika Fischer-Lichte, Âsthetik des Performativen, p.9-10

un-wanted and not self-chosen consequences for their personal
reality later on.

The performance "Floating Characters" might be seen as an "instal-
lation", due to the lack of theatrical "drama", and due to the
strong visual elements, not only in the huge panorama screen, but
also in the choreographic elements and not least the very strong
sculptural elements, including the puppets.
But as the performance in its construction presupposes an
audience, sitting in chairs for a certain amount of time, the
concept will be "theatre", and the very strong traditional theatre
conventions will have to be met with an outspoken intention to
guide the expectations of the audience.

When I suggested the performance to be described as a "visual
concert", it was so an attempt to - through this synaesthetic
notion - to guide the audience <u>not</u> to expect the structure of an
epic or dramatic "story" – but like in a symphony or a sonata to
expect a succession of elements of rhythms, forms and colours
associating sentiments or moods, not to be intermediated through
the ear (primary) as in a traditional concert, but (primary)
through the eye.

Nevertheless the creation of the performance took its point of
departure in a text by the Russian poet Vvedenskij[3], which is no
dramatic text, but rather prose poems.
They should partly be directly visually "seen" as writings on the
screen, and partly heard as text, expressed live on stage or from
tape as auditive elements, along with and as a part of the other
auditive elements - the music.

The visual expressions of the performance were created by four
elements: The scenography (room, screen, carpet, boxes, light),
the panoramic pictures and the written texts on the screen, the
choreographic movements of the actors with the puppets, and not
least the sculptural effect of the three puppets - a coal black, a
wax coloured and a translucent "ice" - each played by two actors.

Each of these four elements has the possibility of creating an
independent expression from its own different means and forms.
But as the screen for the panoramic pictures, the sober red
carpet, the black boxes and the naked black no-nonsense room are
rather stable and strong elements, resting in themselves, the
visual expression of the actors in their cooperation and
connection with the puppets - were giving a rather fragile and
flickering impression, claiming much attention from the audience
to be creative interpreters of the pictures presented.

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[3] Aleksandr Vladimirovic Vvedenskij 1904-1941, "Eine gewisse Anzahl Gespräche"

An audience might find fascination from different elements or "values" [4], such as perception of sensuous impressions and situations recognized [5], or as admiration of the skills of the actors, the composer, or the artist behind the pictures and the puppets. But this fascination is more likely to be aroused by elements where you are to engage in some sort of interpretation, rather than by element already clearly defined.

If it is possible for the audience to be fascinated by the very central activity between the puppets and the actors, and the fragility of the pictures evolving from the actors interaction with the puppets, they might invest this attention and so a synergy might spring out of the cooperation of all the chosen means.

Following this line of investigation of the chosen means it is easy to see the dramaturgy of the performance structured through opposition between very clearly structured means and less structured, more open, fragmented and fragile elements, challenging the audience to interpret.
On one side the screen, the written texts, the boxes and the carpet are in opposition to the shifting, overlapping and transforming pictures on the screen, and on the other side we find the stable and clearly recognisable human bodies, speaking recognisable texts with a recognisable (yet absurd) meaning, together with the concrete "humanlike" puppets with their non-human material character, which in and through the actions of the actors, and through the taped and live-spoken text, transform into fragile existences, mirroring the fragile existence of Vvedenskijs absurd characters.

This structure can be seen as an introduction of themes, repeated, elaborated and played by different instruments, in different tempi and keys. The theme of dissolution and flickering is introduced not only in the different material character of the puppets, and in the "unity of three" between the two actors and the puppet, but in the language as well: The "Ice"-puppet speaking Norwegian, the "Coal"-puppet speaking English, and the "Wax"-puppet speaking Russian.
When in a certain scene the no-nonsense room is dissolved by shadows on the walls, doubling actors and puppets and so repeating a theme in another "key", the "visual concert" metaphor is confirmed.

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[4] Jette Lund:"Die fiktive Wirklichkeit und die wirkliche Fiktion", master thesis, University of Copenhagen 1995

[5] Pil Hansen:"Dramaturgi og perception", PhD, University of Copenhagen 2007

The notion "floating characters" so refers not to a clearly
defined "character" as one body + one soul = one person, but
rather to a personality penduling between different possibilities,
the picture of the two actors, playing or not playing a certain
puppet, mirroring this "between" - the un-decided, fluent
existence of a person in crisis - or the modern human to come, by
a Danish philosopher Lene Andersen[6] named "homo liquens" - a human,
who's personality is defined from outside society, not from the
inside, from any human "self". Not only Vvedenskij, but also a
writer and philosopher as Walter Benjamin saw this "trend".
The two actors playing each puppet is so not just a practical
necessity in managing the rather heavy figures with limited rather
inert movement possibilities. The actors playing the puppet,
trying to find expressions through positions, and sometimes
"struggling" to get it right, can be seen as mirroring the
difficulties of creating the so much wanted "picture" of a modern
"self".

With reference to the well known metaphors of Sigmund Freud, one
can say that Anima and Animus, Es, Über-ich and Ich are fighting
for the "supremacy" of the character. But these metaphors don't
describe the personality of "homo liquens", who is able to fit
into many different forms, according to demands or inclination.
It seems to me as the metaphor of different driving forces,
connected through a stable outer form - here the puppet - such as
here presented, is much more relevant. The personality - or the
homunculus, if one prefer - may evolve in the mind of the
spectator, in an actual "between" these three elements: The two
actors and the puppet.

This constellation is not "new". We know it from Japanese theatre
as "bunraku" or *ningyō jōruri* - an art of puppetry, where the
puppet is moved by three puppeteers, the most important player
manipulating the puppet's head and right arm, the second player
manipulating the puppet's left arm , and the third manipulating
the feet and legs of the puppet. The second and third player are
wearing black and cover their head with hoods, connotating
"invisibility", whereas the main player don't hide his head and
often wears a lavish costume. The voice of the puppet is sung by
an singer in the orchestra, placed at the side.
This technique has been adapted in several ways in modern Western
puppetry, as in Berlin 1994: "Die wunderbare Welt der Simulanten",
by Jochen Menzel, where the voice of the puppet was spoken live at
stage by an actor, and the puppet manipulated by two players.
But in the performance "Floating Characters" this form is becoming
the theme in itself.

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[6] "Baade-Og/mandag", Jesper Knallhatt/Lene Andersen, København 2005

With reference to the "visual concert" metaphor one might say, that the number of instruments played here indicate a symphony orchestra rather than a chamber ensemble.
As in any orchestra all instruments will have to be mastered and played perfect to give a clear impression of the composers intention. In an experiment with forms, this ideal might perhaps very seldom be reached, but one can avoid false tones and false play.
The performance - to my opinion - succeeded in presenting the audience such a harmonious picture, and - more important for an experiment - an interesting and well arranged view into a lot of new possibilities.

The dramaturgical problem for the performance - as I see it - lies in the fact, that this lot of possibilities, these many new ideas and concepts, including the fascinating "unity of three", had to be presented to the audience in the very short time of the performance. Due to the practical possibilities of the construction and rehearsal period at hand, the team had to limit itself to the four presented sequences. From a dramaturgical point of view more time and more variations were needed for the audience to get acquainted with and realize the possibilities, and so - out of a number of offered variations to the themes - to make its own interpretations.
Should it be possible to show the performance again, one or two more - short intermediating - sequences would - in my opinion - be a good idea.

Another topic, related to the "New Media Objects"[7] on stage in general, should be mentioned: The "new media" are really new and immature, in comparison with other electric driven media producing light and sound for the stage. The computer programmes are often fragile, new versions coming on in an endless stream, making work done in older versions more or less useless, or leaving the programmer with endless reorganisations of material which has to be adapted in the new versions or the new programmes, not to mention the fact, that every new version to some extent makes the programmer's own dearly gained experiences useless too - at least for some time. Programmers obviously tend to neglect this fact, and rather claim, that any problem can be solved in another ten minutes.
As a piece of performative art has quite another "time-line" and rhythm as e.g. a piece of commercial advertisement, an artistic "pilot project", made in advance to grant money, collect material and make the artist/ producer familiar with the possibilities, at

[7] Lev Manowich: "The Language of the new Media". 2001

the time of the production of the project itself will tend to be of very little practical value.

I have personally participated in several performances, using new media objects in different ways, and they all - including the "Floating Characters" project - suffered under this gap between promised possibilities and real possibilities, taking producer and artists hostage to some (damned) programme, leaving the programmer to work day and night, and yet not be able to present a material for the stage in time, a material for the artists to work with. In this aspect "Floating Characters" might be seen as a torso, where wonderful possibilities had to fall out, because good rehearsal time was spent in waiting for material to rehearse with.

Acting is pretending, but there is a limit for pretending. No actor can react on material, which is not there, anymore than a musician can practice his part without his instrument. The short straw then was taken by the music, as the composer was taken hostage by his computer programme as well, and so were not able to concentrate on the musical, auditive elements, he was meant to and wanted to produce.

The fluent, protoplasmic character of the new media seduces us to false thinking. To insist on calling the new media produced playing material for "objects" - like "New Media Object" - should guide us to realize, that the seemingly non-physical material will have to be presented physically - sensuous - on stage, to reveal its object potential in interaction with the subject actors, and that time to rehearse this interaction is an absolute necessity for an artistic use. This is due to visual as to auditive material as for any other sensuous means.

In "Floating Characters" the overwhelming amount of material, the number of different means of expression, the solid work of the actors with themselves and with the puppets, and the constructive and clever dispositions of the director, made it possible, that no one actually - at least to my knowledge - experienced the performance as "lacking material".

The overall impression of this experiment with forms, seen from a dramaturgical point of view, is a goldmine of possibilities for future projects, impressive in its multiplicity, with a bit of frustration because of the - for many good reasons - many unused or only initiated possibilities. And in it self a fascinating experience of traditional and very modern means of expression connected in a totally new way.

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