



Ellen 2010 (Adelsteinn Stefansson)

Ellen and creative relations

By Erik Exe Christoffersen

The visiting performers of *Ellen* arrive with knowledge about the town as well as new texts written and inspired by the name Ellen. They bring along sound, light and movement. Like modern seismographs they arrive with measuring devices, attention, and intuition. What they bring is transformed into a meeting with the town and its residents. The meeting turns into a performance, a work that is an action, an investigation, and an exchange. The performance incorporates the architecture and the scenic prospects of the surroundings (Programme the Ellen). *Ellen* (2010) comprises two different kinds of theater. It was played in five different towns and changed from town to town by involving local guests and what was being talked about locally. One part was a careful staging of a new text by the poet *Morten Søndergaard*, whose poetry paraphrases the name Ellen. Through binaural headphones the audience listens to the recitation of text as well as the precisely choreographed rhythms and directed gazes of the three actors. In the second part 3-4 guests participate from each town. From Silkeborg an interior designer, from Svendborg a hotel director, etc. The guest sequences were set to last some 6 minutes for each guest. To some extent this was prepared, but not rehearsed. In the part without headphones actors interviewed the guests and talked about what the actors had discovered about the town. In this chapter we will shed light on a theater production as a collective production containing a variety of creative individuals and creative strategies.

Ellen. What's your name?

The production manager welcomes the audience and we are asked to put on headphones. A performer (Özlem Saglanmak) in a dark skirt enters on stage to what looks like a birdhouse on a tripod. She is not tall enough and fetches a black box. This appears not to be high enough, and she goes back and retrieves a higher box to step up on. Now the height fits her and you hear her voice in the headphones. Clearly there is a microphone in the box. Two other performers come in: one (Ellen Hillingsø) dark-haired and in a gray suit and the other (Ellen Friis) in a light linen-colored costume similar to her blond short hair. They all speak into the birdhouse and are all equipped with wireless microphones. Each girl is wearing sneakers in distinctive colors: green, yellow, or red. The sound and the voices are softly echoed in the headphones. Seeing the actors at a distance and feeling their voices creates a division between the auditory and the visual, which is the fundamental aesthetic of the performance. The voices whisper, lisp, speak in a chorus, speak directly to the audience, and repeat each other. This coincides with their name and the text of *Ellen*. The performers are both very formal and very personal in their behavior. There is a deliberate concealment of improvisations and pre-determined actions. At the beginning of the first scene, for instance, you are uncertain whether someone has forgotten to put the boxes on stage? In another situation a cell phone is apparently ringing and the actors, sitting with

their backs towards the audience working at their “table of existence”, turn and stare silently at “the disturbing spectator”. This creates a staged moment of authenticity. The implementation becomes kind of personal. In a traditional theater the personal is hidden behind the actions, the lines, and the costumes as if it were fictional characters who are speaking, but here the personalized performer recites the text. This is part of the concept: that the actors are cast by their name, similar to finding a person named Hamlet to play Hamlet.

Already the title *Ellen*, has a duality. Does the title refer to a general name or to the performers? The actors are called Ellen, they say while walking, standing, and sitting. Since the name of the actors is Ellen, there is a doubling, when the text is recited to an audience. “We walk and are called Ellen, what is your name?” “Names of human beings are like drops of acid that are burned into them,” Ellen says and hence suggests that fate is involved. The text is concretely anchored to the body as if it was a personal enunciation of the actors, and is further enhanced by the text being whispered into the ear of the spectator. The actor, Ellen Hillingsø is wellknown to the audience and of course this helps to emphasize the autobiographical effect.

The performance begins with a form of birth and naming. The subject takes the name of herself: “Ellen, I will stay in your name, Ellen.” Although there are three performers, who are obviously different, there is no differentiation of Ellen as such. They get an Ellen-identity and go out into the natural world. Like nomads Ellen follows “our animals.” She goes in all directions, but “Ellen does not tolerate shadow“. By contrast, she enjoys the warm countries in the south. She moves in the world and is part of it. Ellen has children. She creates a home in the name, which means light: “Light is our permanent residence. We will be light. We seek shelter ... We are natives of light, but born out of darkness.“ The variability and mobility are what characterizes Ellen. The poetic text describes a return to darkness, a return to the time before Ellen. They walk out of Ellen and therefore out of the light and space, going on to the next town, so to speak. This movement from darkness to light, and again to darkness is a de-individualization or anonymization of the performers, who become statuesque figures and voices in the room. At the same time each of their voices has its own characteristic sound, which is clear and creates a sense of personal nearness. Although the sound is predominant, the expression in their eyes is also central and the performers look at the audience in different ways. In several situations we see Ellen Hillingsø with her dark, intense almost staring eyes directed towards the audience. The relationship with the audience is created through the performers’ bodies, their voices, eyes, and actions along with the auditory mediation. It is not an organic contact, but rather separated or fragmented, and yet it is at the same time personalized: such as when Özlem is slowly moving forward staring towards the audience. She looks straight at the audience with her eyes while she moves her mouth, but the voice you hear is recognizable as Hillingsø’s, and yet you almost believe it is Özlem speaking.

Ellen’s room and guests

In *Silkeborg*, the performance turned into an almost surreal landscape in a vast salesroom for new automobiles. Seeing the theater in this car-universe created a crash effect, a mental

collision. The three performers came driving onto the defined stage. As a backdrop for their individual activities each of them had an office with huge windows. In Aarhus Ellen was performed at *Entré Scenen*, which is a typical black box venue, where the floor and walls are painted black, which creates an optimal opportunity for focusing the light. The room is reasonably wide, and this created a broad, but not so deep stage, delineated by white walls with openings in the side. This made a “cleaner” theatrical universe, where the text becomes more prominent. The performance simply became more form. The recitation of the text acquired a more choral character with repetitions and echoes through the separation of sound and image. The two different construction sites featured all different sides of the performance. In Silkeborg it was very much a reality effect that emerged, while in Aarhus it was the theatrical.

At Hotel Pro Forma’s home base in Copenhagen we saw: a homeless woman, an Ellen-woman who had settled in the desert, a researcher in anthropology, who studied homes as territories, a rescuer, as a specialist in home accidents, a light designer, a Master of Forestry, fathers of Ellen and a cousin. All were guests without the audience knowing who specifically was related to whom. In this way the thematic of home was created: to be domiciled, to inhabit one’s name, one’s town and one’s home. In Aarhus, an IT consultant, Ellen Andersen, who works internationally with employees worldwide, was invited. She talked about virtual conferences at which one talks together sitting in separate identical offices around the world. She stressed the importance of meeting staff in the real world. It provides respect and presence that you understand the concrete reality of the employees, to see and get to know the cultural codes. In cyberspace there are no local codes, and even the names are changed. They call themselves Sam, Ben, Jo, etc., whether in China, Japan, or Brazil.