



Artist's reflections

Hostages of Me

Hostages of Me

By Tue Biering

Hi. I don't know who you are. Nevertheless, it interests me who you are.

I assume that if you are reading this text, you are interested in theatre, and that you probably work with theatre. However, from this point I do not know any more.

Let me make it clear that I consider you as my hostage. Of course, not in a dangerous sense, but I get a hold on you, and we are going to spend some time together. Right now, I have no power over you. You can stop reading and never return to this text. In the theatre you have a harder time to escape. Of course, you can still close your eyes and, but you can't go anywhere. I also want to make sure I get your attention, and so I entertain you, I make sure you curiously keep your eyes and ears open and focused on what is happening.

Prologue About an Ending

I'm sitting with my colleague Jeppe at Hotel Opera in Copenhagen. Our refuge when we need to get away from our work at the Royal Theatre. We sit huddled together in some big leather chairs and look blankly into the air. We're saying goodbye to theatre. The year is 2007.

At least that's how I remember it. We have lost the courage to believe that theatre can make a difference. That with our many good intentions and theatrical gestures we can move some of the many things that we think are blatantly wrong when we look around us.

Right now, we are concerned that people are still being traded as bodies for others to buy and be sexually exploited. We both live in Vesterbro, a former workers' district of Copenhagen. Daily we pass prostitutes and trafficked women standing on the street that leads down to the Central Station. We would like to do something about it, but we are not social workers, we are not politicians, we are just awfully naive theatre-makers.

The most natural thing for someone like us would be to do another show where we would use researched material about trafficking, let some actors represent prostitutes and tell their story. That might make a nice show, but it would be another show that could confirm to all of us that something is wrong, and someone must do something, and then it will be forgotten again.

We're saying goodbye to theatre in despair about the fact that all the things we have done in the past didn't really make a difference, didn't really leave a mark, didn't leave any kind of turmoil. We want to be activists, but we don't know how. I remember it as a very long pause when nothing really happens in the small reception with thick carpets at the Hotel Opera.

This is not entirely true. One show stands out a bit from the back catalogue of feel-good-no-harm shows. We did a show the year before *COME ON BANGLADESH JUST DO IT!* (2006). On a trip to Berlin, we talked about how we were both taken by Naomi Klein's *No Logo*. A book about out-sourcing, about how Western world companies exploit cheap labour in Third World countries and save up to 90% of production costs. Money, which instead is used for massive marketing and creating megabrands. Inspired by the motto of one of these megabrands, "just do it!", we got the idea that we would like to outsource ourselves. We wanted to outsource the most well-known and used product from our own shop, which was the Royal Danish Theatre. The drama *Elverhøj* (The Elves' Hill) from 1828 by Johan Ludvig Heiberg is in my opinion not a very great piece of art, but it can rightly be called a crown jewel of Danish theatre. It is the most performed Danish play and

Hostages of Me

known by most Danes. With *Elverhøj* under our arm, we travelled to Bangladesh, and together with a consultant we found a team of Bangladeshi actors.

We signed contracts with them for a salary that was 10% of a Danish actor, gave them a Danish language course to teach them how to say all the lines in Danish and then went home again. Six months later, four weeks before the premiere, the Bangladeshi team arrived in Denmark. They were dyed white in the face and given costumes from the Royal Danish Theatre's stock. As we had saved a lot of money, we could now treat the audience to free drinks during the performance, give them cash, and order pizza for those who wanted it. At one point in the show, it was announced that the audience had the opportunity to oppose the show and demonstrate in the street. Some nights most audience members ended up out in the street demonstrating while the show inside continued to play; on other nights, few people wanted to do without the drinks, pizza and cool cash.

The show generated a lot of publicity, stirring a debate whether it was morally responsible to let Bangladeshi actors go on stage for a tenth of the salary of the other employees? The highlight for me was when a newspaper expressed its sincere concern that all Danish culture in future would be outsourced and produced in the Third World.

A year later, at the Hotel Opera, it is perhaps the performance *COME ON BANGLADESH JUST DO IT!* that gave us back some courage and faith in theatre again. That performance had given us some new concepts and tools. "Just do it" was a principle of allowing theatre to enter some of the structures that it would point towards. Another discovery was to let the audience become part of the problem. That they were unable to point at others without pointing at themselves.

With those two principles, a new idea began to grow. We would let the audience buy a prostitute to play theatre for them. At the same time, we would let a prostitute represent herself, instead of letting an actor be a stand-in.

The idea was simple, but from here, as usual, everything got much more complicated. We had a pretty strong concept but were struggling to figure out what the material should be. What should the audience look at, what role should the prostitute whom the audience helps to buy, play? We looked in the literature and in theatre texts for scripts in which the purchase of sex is part of the story. There are many, but the problem was that the material is not very well known, and we needed something recognizable, something that our concept could lean on to. The film *Pretty Woman* (1990) should have been obvious, but it was more of a coincidence at the bottom of our list. For us, it was the first time we used a film as a direct model for a performance. Nevertheless, it made sense right away. *Pretty Woman* is one of the films, most people have a relationship with, and most of us can play scenes of it in our inner cinema. A laughing, mostly carefree Julia Roberts who may be a prostitute, but is mostly a romantic, fun-loving girl who can loosen up a grumpy and disillusioned rich man in the form of Richard Gere.

We built our own little theatre out of shipping containers in the middle of the prostitution area in Copenhagen. Inside, we furnished the hotel room that is the main location in *Pretty Woman*.

From the first day of rehearsals, it was incredibly effective to let Vivian Ward, Roberts' character from Hollywood blockbuster fiction, meet the reality version: prostituted women, usually with severe abuse problems and a hefty background of sexual abuse. With great help from a former prostitute, we assembled a large cast of diverse women, who were all given a single rehearsal in which they learned to use an "in-ear" system in which an actor told them everything to do and say. Ironically, most of the women involved loved the film *Pretty Woman*. Some of them even had started out as prostitutes because they had seen that film.

Every night, one of the women, together with a small team of actors, re-recorded the scenes from *Pretty Woman*. Moreover, every night after an hour, she left our theatre to continue her life on the streets.

We had a strategy of running the story about our show exclusively in one big newspaper, but it was revealed, so a tabloid paper suddenly ran a full-page article about dubious theatre artists buying prostitutes for state money. After twenty-four hours, journalists from all Danish media called, and soon CNN, BBC, German press etc. followed. We found ourselves well in the role of the villains and chose not to comment, and the story continued. Politicians also began to take a stand on it. Some stated that it was irresponsible and that it was exploiting and exposing weak people who were not able to choose for themselves.

When we told the women involved about this description, they were furious, they didn't want to be seen as weak or as unable to choose. They chose several times a day in some much more transgressive situations. They were tired of well-meaning protectors talking down to them.

One of the women involved told me that what hurts most is someone like me, passing by someone like her on the street and pretending she doesn't exist.

What she said was quite crucial, and ever since, has been the background for much of what we later came to do. In many following performances, we turned our gaze on people we don't normally look at and forced ourselves to look them straight in the eye.

With *PRETTY WOMAN INC.*, we felt that we had created something much bigger than theatre. We didn't have much space for many audiences in our small interim container theatre. However, an incredible number of people knew about the production, since it was discussed in all the media for weeks, and most of them had to decide whether it was ok to buy another human being – in this case to play Vivian Ward, in a theatre performance. It was an absurd and interesting discussion, which exposed the issue of prostitution in a distinguished way.

We hadn't changed the world, but we had regained the desire and belief that we could create some encounters between the audience and some of the people we rarely notice in real life on a stage.

Interlude – The Fix

So, we weren't saying goodbye to theatre after all, as a little spark of ambition for something new had been lit. The baby needed a name too. We dreamed of being a company that stood out, was something different and yet a cool cat. The list of ideas for names has been lost, but I remember that for a while we seriously considered calling the company "Taxpayers Pay" or "Deadly Nunchaku". Luckily, we became more concerned with finding something to describe how we worked. The German theatre director Frank Castorf said in an interview that in his opinion theatre should be "politisch aber sexy". That sounded a bit like the task we were on. We wanted to help change things, fix things but preferably, in a way that was cool that was easily accessible. Therefore, FIX&FOXY became both a name and the description of some tools we wanted to use. A bit like the name of a Do It Yourself store for people who also want to have fun. We saw it as theatre you can build at home, out of the things you just have on hand in a child's room.

With FIX&FOXY, we could do what we couldn't do anywhere else. Where we could think theatre, activism, art. With great willingness to take risks and without fear of failure.

We wanted to be a company that brought together a new group of artists each time, challenging and exploring new formats.

The year was 2008, and now FIX&FOXY had come into being.

PART I

Popular Culture as a Shortcut

Another experience from *PRETTY WOMAN INC.* that was to have a big impact on us was the realisation how effective it was to work with a movie-plot that everyone knew. To be able to speak into a fiction that was so much a part of our collective memory. We had been used to working with theatre texts but had to realise that film has far greater recognition with people.

The TV series *Friends* is familiar to most. It is perhaps the world's most watched sitcom. In addition, many generations have an almost friendly relationship with the six people who, over ten seasons, sat in some pastel-coloured apartments in New York and tried to make their lives work. In turn, we have a hard time connecting with the people sitting in asylums all around us. People who, like Rachel, Chandler, Phoebe, etc., are also waiting for their lives to make sense. The only thing I knew about asylum seekers were documentaries and press articles, where they were mostly depicted in black and white photos, deeply traumatized and blank in their gaze. Was it possible to create the same close connection with asylum seekers than with the characters in an American sit-com – and maybe even create the feeling of being friends with them?

With a large cast of asylum seekers, we every night for a period created a new episode of *FRIENDS - THE ONE WITH THE ASYLUM SEEKERS AND SOME REJECTED ONES* (2010). We created a studio with cameras and sets from the familiar locations from the series. The audience was instructed by a host to be the live studio audience for the live recording of the day. The cast, who came from the Middle East, parts of Africa, Eastern Europe, and Asia, had four hours of rehearsals that day for the evening's episode, while each night new famous Danish guest stars arrived to play smaller roles. It was recognizable and safe for the audience to be in the *FRIENDS* family, and we could sit and laugh at their silly harmless problems with friendships, work, boyfriend troubles, and cable TV. All played by a cast of people with backgrounds in war, persecution, extreme poverty, etc.

It was fun to make, and it was great to see the performers freed from their daily meaninglessness. To laugh with them and get to know them was one thing, but the fact that they took a detour into our consciousness through a silly popular cultural classic, which had made the distance between us smaller, was outright fantastic.

The Uncomfortable Encounter

We had now turned to pop culture classics from Hollywood, and we'll continue the work of making the distance to some people we don't know shorter. We've also become obsessed with seeking out the things we don't understand that we wonder about. At the same time, we also want to start challenging some of our own prejudices.

It's easy enough to despise the sex tourists who go to the other side of the world to find something they cannot find here. Nevertheless, the question remains: what are they looking for, and is this maybe even something that I need in my life?

"I will do anything to make you happy"

Ping Pong, LOVE THEATRE

We wanted to give the audience an airplane ticket to Thailand and let them follow in footsteps of a sex tourist. We sat and calculated the numbers and were convinced that the arts foundation probably did not see the same good idea in it as we did. The alternative was to buy and move a small part of Thailand to Denmark. After some research and Skype conversations, we went to Thailand and did

some casting with Thai sex workers. Among those castings was Ping Pong who had served many thousands of different clients and remembered them all. She could tell stories in detail about the sad ones, the love-seekers. The ones who just wanted to be allowed to draw her or the backpacker who only wanted to play guitar and sing for her. She told me that her work was largely to help people, to make them happy.

After some difficult fighting with the Danish immigration authorities, Ping Pong arrived in Denmark a few months later and, using things we had bought in Thailand and acquired from hotels on the trip, we painstakingly reconstructed a hotel room from the research photos we had taken at the sex workers' workplaces. We even recreated the temperature, humidity and smell of Thailand in the room. Like a little closed capsule of Thailand.

For the performance *LOVE THEATRE* (2015), there was room for ten audience members who sat against one wall of this hotel room. Ping Pong took the stage and told a story each about ten different Western European clients she had had. Each audience member was individually invited on stage and staged as one of these customers. They were given the lines that the customers had said to her in a re-enactment of situations that were awkward, touching, violent and loving. All situations were born of Ping Pong's deep understanding of finding what would make that person happy.

A phenomenon one might think repulsive was given a different perspective, and perhaps one could even identify oneself, as a spectator, with some of those Ping Pong had met.

Audiences have always, somewhat naturally had a role in our performances. We were now gradually specialising in creating encounters between audiences and people they only thought about in clichés and stereotypes. An encounter that would seem uncomfortable at first, but that we made easy to step into, and fun to participate and empathise with.

It became clearer to us that creating encounters have been the essence of our work. Something that is very special to theatre, and something we came to take further.

The Triumph of The Will

It is called the World's Greatest Movie. The most beautiful film in the world. And the world's most dangerous film.

Today there is no doubt that Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph des Willens* from 1934 is Nazi propaganda. It is harder to admit that it is also insanely beautiful. It was a great inspiration for Hollywood. Both Walt Disney and the Cannes Festival celebrated it at the time. We wanted to find out if one can love a film and its beauty when it also carries a political message that had disastrous consequences.

We wanted to recreate *The Triumph of The Will* scene by scene. To rediscover the fascination and enthusiasm that once existed for the film that since has been hated and banned. At the time, we had a cast of four actors, but shortly before the start of rehearsals, three of them dropped out because they had received better offers. Now we had one actor, one live producer, two camera operators and a film that originally had one million people in it. It was clear that this one actor needed help. He wasn't going to be able to do it on his own. He would need help from the audience.

Now we had to be particularly creative, and this turned out to be a lucky turn, because our first idea probably had not been not so good after all.

At the beginning of the show, the actor explained to the audience that he wanted to recreate *The Triumph of The Will*. Using miniature models, the first scene, a flight through the clouds to the city of Nuremberg was filmed live. The audience saw what was being filmed on a screen. However, already in the next scene there was a problem. Many people had to face the political delegates. The

Hostages of Me

actor asked if the audience would help him. It was very simple, because they just had to get up and move away the benches they were sitting on. They just had to look at the actor and greet him as he walked by. One actor's helplessness in the face of such an overwhelming project naturally made everyone want to help. With the right camera angles, we saw the scene being created, and we saw ourselves standing and waving, interspersed with the arrival of Hitler, Göring and the others in turn, all personified by the actor standing in front of a green screen. It was funny and very harmless. Now a scene with even more people arrived, and everyone again willingly helped. Over 3 ours the audience joined in as Hitler Youth did gymnastics, storm troopers marched in formation, there were night scenes of cosying up around a bonfire, where there was beer drinking and campfire singing. All to create the right images for the film, admire the aesthetics of the images, and recognise the joy and camaraderie they must have felt at the time. Towards the end, the actor brought in a big wagon full of boots and all the audience members put on started marching in different formations. We now experienced how great it is to march in step, to do something together, to find that common ground. We completely lost touch with the real context. Finally, we sat down again, and now we were partly an audience for the last part of the performance, and partly delegates sitting in the final part of the Nazi Party Congress in Nuremberg, watching the historic speeches of Hitler, Göring, Speer, and others. At this point, we clapped and cheered when told to do so. For we were carried away and wanted to do good.

With *THE TRIUMPH OF THE WILL*, we recreated not only the images of the film but also some of its manipulation and the infectious joy and enthusiasm of doing something together.

You are getting an idea of the audience being repeatedly taken as hostage and lovingly challenged in various encounters with others or themselves and led to new places. Right?

At this point, we still called it “experiences”, but later we realised that it is “empathy”. The audience should not sit at a distance and experience. They need to get close, get in and empathise.

The Outskirt

You are now in a car. You're driving around in the dark in a landscape you've never been in before. Your driver and your three other passengers don't say much. After a long pause, the person driving you deeper into the darkness begins to talk about his relationship with a character in *Twin Peaks*.

We wanted to do a show about how we view people who are on the periphery of our mental landscape. If you go and ask a random person where you can find some slightly crazy types, the “different” ones, they will always have an idea of where that is. It might be the neighbour, it might be the next town down the road, or the crazies on the far side of the country. Moreover, if you went to those “crazies” and asked them the same question, they would most likely have a pretty good idea where the “crazies” lived, too. In a few cases, they might even point to themselves, but I haven't seen that yet.

We wanted to take the audience to an area where there was a general assumption that slightly crazy people lived there. Using David Lynch's cult horror series as a recognisable reference, we wanted to find *Twin Peaks* in an area of Denmark.

If I asked you, which character you are in *Twin Peaks*, you would be able to find one. If you couldn't, then in a short time I could do it for you. Because like so many other good shows, there is a great diversity and a great representation of different types and personalities. Therefore, it wasn't hard to find a large cast where everyone could identify with one of the characters from the series and with some of the themes.

There was the criminal investigator, who had worked in the police for thirty years solving murder cases. There was a young guy, who, like Laura Palmer, lived in a transgressive and searching youth culture of sex and drugs that her parents knew nothing about. There was the psychiatrist, who had worked with psychopathic killers and had a case with someone who ate his own girlfriend. There was the mother, who constantly worried about her daughter when she wasn't home, and there was the couple who lived in a haunted house. Moreover, there were many, many more.

As the audience, you were gathered in an old assembly hall. You were there with thirty-one other people, as eight drivers arrived. One of them would choose you, and together with three other audience members, you were then driven somewhere. Maybe you had a young driver who told you during the drive that he had been in twenty-three car crashes because he often drives drunk. He told you that two of his other friends had died in traffic accidents in the area. After twenty minutes you were dropped off somewhere in the dark and told to go and ring the doorbell of the house in front of which you were standing. You were invited into a unfamiliar person's house. Here you might meet someone, who told you about what it's like to be the "nutcase" in town. To be bullied in the community. You'd be served damn good coffee and watch the collection of birds being gathered here. After twenty minutes, you were let out into the darkness again, and picked up by a different driver. Another person, another story from this person's life. For three hours, you were alternately picked up, driven around and dropped off in a new place. You met a whole lot of people with stories you could never have imagined. Over the course of a long evening, you slowly began to feel part of the area and its people.

Even if you didn't know the series *Twin Peaks*, you would feel like you knew it after experiencing the show *WELCOME TO TWIN PEAKS – EIGHT CARS IN A REMOTE AREA OF CIVILIZATION* (2016). In addition, maybe your mental frontier had been moved a little bit.

PART 2

Turning Point

Bored? Does it make sense to get into all these performances? I have not given you the more complex concept of the performances, but I hope a pattern begins to emerge. We don't have a method. Every time we do a new show, it's like building a new machine. There's a big difference between inventing logistics for eight cars to fit together in seconds and casting a Thai prostitute and convincing the authorities she's not taking work from Danish actors. However, it's always a lot of practical work, a dynamic process, and every time we try to fix it in a foxy way. And even though we do not have a method, something is recurring. Uncomfortable meetings, audience participation, and then something unexpected always happens at some point.

Moreover, right now at this point in the performance of the shows, a turning point is needed. In the performances, it's usually a new person who arrives, or a confession that turns everything upside down.

I Have Lied to You All

We've done many shows that are inclusive, that put on stage the people we normally never want to see or who we hide away from. I've seen myself as a very inclusive person who wants to hug everyone. Nevertheless, I've been lying all along.

There are people whom I can't accommodate, whom I don't want in my theatre and, whom I have deftly avoided looking in the eye, preferring to caricature and parody from a distance. I am

not at all the inclusive person I claim to be, and I now find myself standing in my own blind spot. The artist who feigns the role of the inclusive one.

We had been keen to do performances with all the other people. Put them on stage and let them tell their story. Now it was our turn.

ROCKY (2017) was a show about the artist and the self-professed humanist who loves to cheer on the losers. An actor stood on stage and explained about his love for the movie *Rocky*, because he loved the stories about the losers being able to stand up and against all odds win our respect and love. However, what happens when the losers don't want our love? When they are tired of being props in a story that is always being written by us who have appropriated the right to write.

ROCKY is the performance of the artist's self-staged inclusiveness, which is challenged when a loser like Rocky becomes right-wing and ends up a politician. It's the left-wing's nightmare that the cuddly doll ends up striking out and ends up in power. It is the artist's nightmare to lose all privilege and speaking time, and to watch powerlessly as the world turns to the right and these Rockies take the stage.

In *ROCKY*, the actor ended up hanging himself from a chain. Like a dead pig, upside down, he hung there, as a final self-staging as the victim. At least he was able to assume the privileges of playing the role of the loser.

Until that moment, it was a performance where the audience could shudder to empathise with the story of *ROCKY*, but the performance ended with another scene, as a member of the Danish People's Party entered the stage and described how she experienced the performance and how she perceived the world. Here, Rocky became reality, and here the theatre was visited by those we in FIX&FOXY and most of the audience have never embraced.

The Statistical Machinery of Destiny

Destiny has always preoccupied humans. Whether a thread of life has already been spun, a higher power has laid the cards before us. Today, there are other words for it: inherited privilege and environment-promoting capital. Statistics have shown us unequivocally that our societies are arranged so that we can predict our children's future with a high degree of probability, based on their socio-economic background and the geography in which they grow up.

Most of us know these statistics, and we can intellectually relate to it. However, how can we translate it so that we can feel the inequality in the numbers?

AGAINST ALL ODDS (2019) was a performance where twenty-two children aged eleven or twelve, with the statistically representative breadth from upper class to lower class, took to the stage and acted out their personal statistical future lives. At first, we had to know all of them. They acted as individuals and moved in and out of the statistics of children aged twelve. Who has learning difficulties, who sleeps badly at night, who has parents with economically difficult backgrounds, who spends a lot of time with his family, who is mentally challenged? All of these and more are factors used to predict their future destinies.

The second part of the show followed the brutal scenarios of the statistics, and it followed them as different social groups and as individuals. Those who run straight through the education system and are guaranteed a place in the job market, those who end up in drug addiction and crime, those who end up in unskilled work, and those who never find a step or anything to hold on to and end up at the bottom of society. With cynical calm, the statistics push them through their lives to

their last day when, one by one, they lay down on the stage, some early, and some late. In the end, twenty-two statistical fates were left behind, each with their own possible future.

It was hard not to be moved, outraged and powerless. In this case, the audience was relegated to the role of spectator with no opportunity to jump up and make a difference. There were no extenuating theatrical circumstances.

The Scar

You've probably long since discovered that there's not been much feel-good no-harm drama so far. A journalist once told me that every time you go to see our shows, it feels like you're being beaten up. That it can be quite hard and take a long time to recover from it.

It's certainly not our intention for you to be afraid of us. However, we do want to scar you. Not a real scar, of course. Nevertheless, we like to think of creating something that remains. Like when you look at a scar and it brings back strong memories and a clear recollection of how and when it happened. It must hurt to go in and see our performances. It must leave a strong impression.

The Representation of Us

On stage are seven South African actors. They will tell a story about migration. About how hunger and poverty force millions of people to flee their homes and countries to seek their fortune in a foreign land, where wealth and opportunity exist. They are on stage looking at us; they might look like someone representing the many migrants fleeing into Europe from northern Africa, away from hopeless poverty in the pursuit of a better future.

The show began with all seven of them painting their faces white, because *DARK NOON* (2019) was not about them, it was about us. *DARK NOON* invited the audience into the story of how millions of Europeans from the 1850s fled to the promised land of gold and honey. About how desperation and a prospectless future drove them into a mad rush towards an unknown destiny.

It's the story of the West, told like a Western. On a vast stage of red, dry sand, we followed people who, through imagination, built a city and created a dream of something better, a dream that may grow bigger than the man who dreamt it.

A year before, we had gone to Johannesburg to find a cast for the show. We had gone with the idea of doing a show about the Africa that we knew little about, but which had nevertheless been very much on our minds all our lives. We wanted to assemble a team of actors who could tell us the story of Africa, in their own way, but with a simple conceptual framework. They would tell it in a Western narrative, based on the idea that the dramaturgy and characters of the Western cinematic genre are easily recognisable and readable, and a way of creating a relationship with something so far away.

After assembling a team of amazing players with our co-director-choreographer Nhlanhla, we did several workshops exploring the relationship between South African society and the universe of the Western. There were many things that made sense, but I had a sneaking feeling that I was reproducing a character I didn't like. Here we came and asked them to tell us about themselves. Like it has happened many, many times before. "Tell me a story from Africa."

After a few days with that feeling, I started a trial by hesitantly introducing the idea that instead of telling their own story, they should tell my story. I was quite unsure if this was the wrong thing to suggest, but it immediately seemed that everyone was relieved. The team of actors agreed that it was the first time they had been invited to play "the others". A new energy and work that became much more interesting began.

Hostages of Me

It was very satisfying to reverse the power relationship, and it was interesting to see how the reverse representation opened a whole range of possibilities. That through the representation of “us” by others we might become wiser about ourselves.



Dark Noon. Photo: Søren Meisner

Unknowingly, it became apparent during the process that Western films had had a great personal impact on all seven of the South African performers. The performance ended with each of them telling about their relationship with Westerns. Most of them grew up with American Western films as a very dominant genre, and which introduced guns into the poor townships. Real guns were handled as you had seen the cowboys do on TV.

There was suddenly a deeper reason why these seven people with a bitter acquaintance with the genre created a Western about us, for us.

Catharsis

“I’ve been told by my psychologist to hide the keys to my gun cabinet when I feel like this...”
(War veteran in My Deer Hunter)

It was supposed to be a time machine. We wanted to film a group of soldiers before they were sent to war. Film them going to war, and then a few years later put them on stage and let them talk to their past selves. The idea of creating a conversation across time between a self that doesn’t yet know what was going to happen, and a self that was in the future after having participated in a life-changing situation, was fascinating. When the concept was conceived, Denmark was participating

in the war in Afghanistan, but when we were about to cast, Denmark was coming out of the war. In a fit of artistic narcissism, you could almost wish we had continued being at war. Although we could wish for more influence on political decisions, it wasn't exactly the battle it made sense to win.

We had to change our concept but wanted to keep the idea of the time machine, so we chose to reverse time. Instead of talking into the future, it might be possible to talk into the past.

The idea was to let war veterans who were injured to look back in time and try to recreate the person they were before their lives were shattered. We contacted quite a few veterans, but most of them we spoke to revealed that they were deeply damaged and living with PTSD, which often made them live in isolation from other people and highly incapable of standing in front of an audience. For a long time, we didn't have any cast and it seemed impossible to accomplish.

After several times losing heart in the project, someone finally wanted to take part and set out to revisit the past and meet the person they once were.

Using the film *Deer Hunter* as a dramaturgical template, they talked about their lives before the many shows, about the thoughts and ambitions they had. The mission and the things that made them later break down and be broken. Moreover, about the long walk they had gone through to recover to be able to move on. It was not possible for any of them to recover completely again, a realisation that had been the biggest and most painful one.

The performance was very different from what we had imagined. We had feared it would be another show about war, but it became much more. It was with *MY DEER HUNTER* (2020) that I first understood and experienced, what catharsis in the Greek tragedies is capable of. That by watching and empathizing with the violent pain and existential collapse of others, we are cleansed.

Becoming The Other

The pandemic has obviously affected us, and has had profound consequences for our work at FIX&FOXY. In the time before, we had talked a lot about starting to use the digital possibilities that were available to be in touch with other people around the world. We had grown tired of travelling and didn't think it suited our climate footprint either. Was there a way we could work internationally without having to move around the world?

At the time, there weren't that many platforms. Skype, Google and Microsoft had developed some options, but they didn't seem that useful, and I must admit I sat and waited for something to happen to make technology more readily available.

Then the pandemic came, and we all had to adapt and become digital super users.

We created *AVATAR ME* (2021), which is, in all its simplicity, a 1:1 digital performance where you become, for a moment, another person in the world. You got a link and now you sat in front of your computer, and on your screen, you control another human being, who was live at this moment somewhere else in the world.

You were a woman in Johannesburg, South Africa, and could not go outside your door, but you had to go shopping. Alternatively, you were born a man in Brazil but took female hormones and found yourself being chased through the streets by people shouting derogatory and threatening language.

Several audience members said they experienced something more intimate and present than they had ever before experienced in the theatre.

Similarly, I feel I have a close connection with everyone in the cast after weeks of rehearsals, not knowing if I will ever meet them in real life.

The Ultimate Encounter

Over the years, we have worked on all our blind spots. We have invited everyone on stage.

We have worked with the vulnerable, those who rarely get a voice, those who are overlooked, and also those with whom we disagree.

However, there are some who someone like me always sees as the bad guys, the ones who are to blame for the way things are. Those who have created imbalances in the systems. We have created many representations of them, but never met one of them ourselves or given them a place on stage. They are very exotic and keep to themselves or with others who look like them. They are the very richest in society.

We wanted to do a show about how exposed a position it is to be rich. We would invite the rich in and announce our many images about them. Every night a very rich person would come on stage. Some own thirty million kroners, others more than a billion. What they all have in common is that they don't want to appear in public in the media, but they want to step onto a stage and meet an audience at eye level and talk about their experience of being particularly privileged and distanced from the rest of society.

In *WE THE 1%* (2021), an actor engaged in a choreographed dialogue with the rich, trying to make them live up to our notions of rich people. An installation of the world of the rich was built around them, with designer furniture, lobster, champagne and symbols of the upper class. In the end, the rich were caught up in our imagination of them. However, it turned out that the rich are also people for whom one can feel sympathy, and so the situation was exacerbated when a homeless person entered the stage. A meeting between society's poorest and richest is a very rare encounter, and we can see how uncomfortable the situation became for the rich. Later, more homeless people, drug addicts, criminals, indebted people arrived. They intruded the stage and eventually took over the rich men's territory, removing everything before our eyes and before the eyes of the rich. Meanwhile the actor speaks the line, "people like us love to see people like you being dragged through the ringer and brought down to the level of the rest of us."

We've got what we wanted, and we've happily watched. Until a live video from Moldova flashed up on the back wall. Here, a family sat in a kitchen and now started asking the audience how we feel about being much more privileged than them, about being among the 1% richest in the world and about, how we would feel about losing our privileges.

The performance was once again not about those on stage, but about the audience, who were now put in the uncomfortable position of being the privileged ones.

The Last Act

Now the show about the performances with people you may have never met before is ending. In addition, like all these performances, there is no real ending. There is no moral. The hallmark of all the performances is that you, the audience, are left with more questions that you must answer for yourself.

We may have given you a problem. Something you're struggling with. We call what you find yourself in, right now "the last act". The one that plays out from the moment you leave the show and continues for the next few days or years.

Epilogue of a Beginning

Having created performances with people in Bangladesh, Thailand, South Africa, Moldova, Brazil, Malaysia, India and elsewhere, it is clear to us how essential it is to create encounters with the world.

Tue Biering

Right now, we are facing a new beginning where in future productions we will collaborate much more with other international artists and people whom we have never met. We believe that an outlook to the world will give us an insight into ourselves, and that with this insight we shall understand many of the great challenges of the future.

We hope to continue to challenge ourselves and our audiences. Then we will challenge the way we see each other and our own place in the world.

We believe that theatre has no boundaries.

Introduction

FIX&FOXY is an international company based in Copenhagen, Denmark. We would like to see ourselves as a place where different artists meet and create new, different ideas about the world and the people in it. With *HOSTAGES OF ME*, we want to invite you into our history and to give you a front row seat to some of our performances, because everything we think is closely connected to our history and our practice.

Tue Biering, director and co-foiunder of Fix&Foxy

Translation: **Annelis Kuhlmann** and **Peter M. Boenisch**



The Big Feast. Photo: Søren Meisner