



## Artist's Reflections

What Have We Really been Up To?

# What Have We Really been Up To? Ethical, Social and Artistic Enquiries

By Jeppe Kristensen

FIX&FOXY is a name for the collaboration that Tue Biering, myself and a large number of other artists have had over the past nine years. Initially, the collaboration was not intended as a unit of any kind. We have created a number of theatre projects, each of which we have had a strong desire to realise. It is only gradually that we have begun to bring them together under the collective name FIX&FOXY, and we are still reluctant to talk about an overall project. We are interested in making performances where in each individual case we have the opportunity to rethink all the elements of theatre, including the institutional framework and ourselves. However, as we approach ten years of work, it should still be possible to come up with a fairly coherent idea of 'who we are'. To outline an artistic field of enquiry in which we at FIX&FOXY have worked and try to assess it.

## An Ethical Experiment

It will necessarily also be an ethical assessment. At the moment we are manipulating our audience to be Nazis in the performance *Viljens Triumf* (Triumph of the Will). We have shown prostitutes to a paying audience in *Pretty Woman A/S* (Pretty Woman Ltd.). We have performed a xenophobic opera in one of Copenhagen's most troubled social housing estates, in *Parsifal*, we have made Faroese participants act out all the prejudices about themselves in a soap opera with a completely unlikely star status as the only payment, and we have let actors with disabilities spaz through and exhibit their dreams in *Verdens bedste forestilling* (The Best Show in the World). Can this ethical experiment with other human beings be justified?

In our own answer to the question lies – I think now, long after the fact – a somewhat baffled attitude that everything is already a great ethical experiment anyway. Surely, we cannot be supposed to treat each other the way we do? When we made *Pretty Woman Ltd.* in 2008, it was accused of being unethical. The quite simple basic idea of the performance will be familiar to many. It took place in a small provisional theatre hall that we had set up on Halmtorvet in Copenhagen. Every evening we used the entrance fees to pay one of the neighbourhood's street prostitutes to play the role of Julia Roberts as a street prostitute. The woman was given an in-ear speaker, which gave her instructions and lines to perform a more or less accurate reconstruction of the original film, with Anders Mossling as Richard Gere. The performance was accused of exploiting the participating women and exposing them. We did not agree, we thought we made a very balanced and friendly production. But probably the most important thing is that these women were already being exploited and exposed in their daily lives. How can being in a theatre performance be worse than working as a drug prostitute? The ethical question of whether we can justify what we do therefore makes more sense to me if it is rephrased as: what comes out of letting ourselves give theatrical form to the ethical experiments that reality perform on us, like little guinea pigs; and what kind of theatre work do we then engage in? In other words, what kind of aesthetic enquiry, dramaturgy and acting should we try to create?

### **Cardboard, Tape and Video Cameras**

Our performances have come to appear quite similar, even though they have each been the expression of very different ambitions, and have been experienced very differently. In *Pretty Woman Ltd.*, the film is recreated using simple means. There are ping pong balls in the bathtub. The snails in the French restaurant are made of wine gum. We do a bluescreen recording with a blue sheet as a background. Something similar occurs in a lot of our performances. In the Faroese version of *Dynasty*, the actors are equipped with cheap wigs and costumes consisting simply of lapels and cuffs glued to their own clothes. Their own homes are transformed into oil mansions with self-adhesive Greek columns and two-dimensional cardboard flowers and fireplace. In *Triumph of the Will*, the audience stands with tinfoil shovels and marches around in rubber boots from the store Metro that have to pass as Nazi leather boots. In retrospect, a picture emerges that we have explored the minimum limits of what is required for a reproduction. Or perhaps rather, what the nature of a reproduction can actually be. Another aspect of the aesthetics we have explored in relation to the reproductions is that of practice. It is always apparent in our performances that a production is taking place and also, in most cases, how it is carried out. The scenographies therefore often consist of a 'set', which, as described above, can be quite cheap and minimal, surrounded by a production area that is pragmatic. Here there are camera operators, cables, computers, backs of set pieces, editors and, in some performances, an entire Foley workshop to create the soundtrack for the recordings. While the layers corresponding to the fiction of the original works have been playful, bordering on the silly, these technical layers have been no-nonsense professional spheres.

### **Reflection without Statements**

In this way we have tried to create performances where the illusion and the creation of the illusion have been present at the same time, and equally visible. In the theatre (or wherever our performances take place) there is a clear fictional game going on which, in order to give meaning to the performance, we must involve the audience in. In *Triumph of the Will*, for instance, we ask the audience to re-enact and relive the 1934 Nazi Congress in Nuremberg, without having prepared them for it. Most people come to the performance expecting to be an ordinary audience, and in the first part of the performance, that is what they experience. They sit on benches set up like in a cinema, facing a screen. In front of the screen is a small model city and all sorts of elements that can be filmed. Our lone actor, Anders Mossling, introduces his desire to recreate Leni Riefenstahl's film because it is so aesthetically beautiful that it makes him happy. His camera crew then sets about recreating the film shot by shot. Shortly into the film, however, the problem arises that the film involves an incredible number of people. Mossling wants to recreate the film, but he cannot do it alone. He therefore asks the audience to help him by acting as a background for the film as a crowd receiving Hitler. From then on, the audience becomes participants in the creation of the film, until finally they play the absolute leading role as the masses in Nuremberg. Throughout the whole performance you know that what you are doing is politically and intellectually wrong, but the experience and the feeling is that it is fun. There is no point in the performance where this dilemma of reflection and experience is resolved. The performance ends without a moral or a message. I have a very private perception of what the performance is about. To me, it is about how difficult it is to know what is good and evil when you are part of a context larger than yourself and with manipulative forces. I do not think it exonerates Nazis, but it asks me questions as to what larger historical movement I am part of without knowing what it entails – a comfort fascism, for example, that makes our generations tacitly accept all the unpleasantness and imbalances in the world if

resistance requires lower living standards and growth? But that is my completely personal experience of the performance. The political and debating element of the performance lies in avoiding any kind of message in the uncommented interaction between the technical level and the fiction.

### **Double Plots in Metafictional Performances**

In performances such as *Triumph of the Will* and *Pretty Woman Ltd.* where a high degree of control and an element of unpredictability in the interaction between actors, non-actors and the audience create the performance, the actors have a major task. Our performances often have a double plot. One is, for example, to tell the story of the sweet prostitute or Parsifal's experiences in the vicious Arab world, while the other is about 'making it happen'. In *Pretty Woman Ltd.* we borrow a story from the original film. It is the story of a street prostitute who does not really belong in the environment, who is sweet and charming, who meets a reserved rich man, and then through a series of funny scenes she gets him to put his reservations about her and the world in particular, behind him, and then we can start to see her and feel something for her. In the performance, we try to make more or less the same thing happen: through a series of funny scenes (also on the theatrical level) to make the audience see the woman performing in front of them and start to feel something for her. We do not stage it in such a way that we control what the audience should feel, but we very deliberately stage it in such a way that the audience is compelled to put their reservations behind them. Something similar in *Triumph of the Will*. Here we borrow a situation where the ordinary people visiting Nuremberg enjoy taking part in a community (which is politically suspect, but it is part of Riefenstahl's work that, for naive or propagandistic reasons, it does not show in the film). In the performance, we turn the making of the film into the common project that the audience is manipulated to take part in and have fun being part of. An essential part of Anders Mosslings work in *Triumph of the Will* is to make this group feeling materialised.

### **Process**

In these performances, our actors must feel equally comfortable playing a role, communicating with the audience in such a way as to create an equal relationship, taking care of one or more non-actors who are not trained in performance situations, and at the same time managing the development of the performance in such a way that this secondary plot unfolds. In our work, we have wanted to make this happen by creating performances that suit the actor. We assign a lot of responsibility to the actor in terms of creating situations, lines, and technical solutions. We also expect our actors to contribute to solving conceptual challenges. At the same time, we see it as part of our job to organise the performances in such a way – conceptually, technically and procedurally – that they could not be played by any other actor. Occasionally, some of our actors feel that they are given so much room to fulfil their task that it seems as if we do not care at all. Of course, we do. But in rehearsals we observe a lot. We have no wish to dictate the performance to our cast, and believe it is best created by the actors and other cast members as much as by us. We are by no means clever, just stubborn, curious and always in the process of discussing what kind of performance we are making. In most rehearsal processes, therefore, the free feeling the actor has had in developing the performance changes to a strict regime towards the end, when the created material has to be structured into an actual dramaturgy. Certain lines – usually opening, transitional and closing lines – are rewritten countless times in order to place the absolutely right code words in the absolutely right places. This is the only method we have to guide the audience through the two parallel plots and make them give each other meaning.

### **Real Fictions**

We have not always made reproductions. This is not the case, for example, in performances like *Parsifal* or *The Best Show in the World*, which are important for my understanding of what we do. Fictional games, on the other hand, have always been part of our work, as far as I can see. I think this is partly a matter of taste, perhaps a certain shyness towards the theatre's traditional fiction contracts. But it certainly also has to do with the fact that this is where we have found a situational opportunity to explore meaning. Not only through the story being told, or the aesthetic devices used to tell it, but also through the situation in which the audience, the actor and others are placed as the story is told. In retrospect, it is quite clear that in these performances we have both employed metafictional strategies and insisted on either stepping into a real context (in our site-specific performances) or drawing this context into the theatre (in our person-specific performances). It is as if the fiction and the play with the production of fiction has only been interesting to us when the real aspect of the issue has been represented in the fictional play. One could say that we have explored the possible effects of giving an ethical issue a metafictional form where one of the fictions is that the real is also present in the performance. We are not making a philosophical point that the real does not exist or anything like that. We are just aware that what we put on stage is theatre, and that everyone who performs is an actor in their own way, whether they have training or not. There is a very big difference between what they can do and what they cannot do, and, first of all, there is a very big difference in the story they carry. We have started to look at the reproductions, as well as the metafictional staging of classics and original works we have made, as shared games that take place between all participants – actors, audience, technical team and Tue and me as senders.

### **... and Fiction-Based Reality.**

I think that one of the things we have achieved by giving theatrical form to everyday ethical problems is to create some very special encounters between all of us who are involved. Even if you arrive at the performance as a member of the audience, you somehow always become – depending on how we have organised the situation in which you enter the performance – a participant on an equal footing with the actors and performers. This is also why pop culture narratives have played such an important part in our performances. They are a kind of modern classics – not old, but collective stories that contribute to forming our shared view of the world. A story like *Pretty Woman Ltd.*, in our experience, contributes to shaping our image of prostitution, no matter how silly it is, and, incredibly, this is also true for the prostitutes themselves. In a complex society where it is difficult to know everyone, we fill in the gaps with stories, be it in a straightforward relationship to the harmless and idyllic as in *Pretty Woman* or to the demonic as in *Triumph of the Will*. I think it is fair to say that one of the premises of FIX&FOXY's theatre is that we see fiction and reality as two intertwined phenomena. And the exhilarating thing about this mix, and about working with theatre as a meeting place, is that these narratives actually feel changeable.

### **Conclusion**

Our investigations of the cardboard-and-tape aesthetics and the visible production apparatus, of the metafictional strategies – including the fiction called reality, and of the particular form of acting that creates a dialogue between audience and actors, are thus concerned with how to give theatre meaning from some basic elements: taking advantage of the fact that we are in the same space, taking advantage of the fact that we tell stories, and taking advantage of the fact that theatre is perceived as meaningful play. We have tried to situate our performances in the world and to make

their context an essential part of the meaning-making process in order to place the audience in a situation where – without any statements from Tue's and my side, I hope – the dilemmas of our world can be experienced and reflected upon in a social space. We have rarely experienced that spectators have withdrawn from participating in these ethical challenges. We have tried to make them accessible to everyone and to make them rewarding to participate in by focusing on humour and communication. And our experience is rather that we all more or less need to be part of these ethical experiments. Otherwise, the great ethical experiment we call reality will seem out of our hands. It is a stimulating and rewarding game to participate in. But it also requires that we as creative artists commit to creating entirely new performances each time, rethinking the basic framework of the theatre to create situations where – in order for the audience to experience performances with the same attitude – we remain curious and unprejudiced (This article was previously published in *Peripeti*, 2012).

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