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Interview

Pretty Woman Walking Down the Street

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By Solveig Gade

In the autumn of 2008, a theatre performance took place in a container on Halmtorvet in Copenhagen. The performance sparked a fierce public debate, and long before the official opening date, it had expanded its stage area to the media. The performance was called *Pretty Woman A/S* (Pretty Woman Ltd.), the directors and conceptualisers were Tue Biering and Jeppe Kristensen, the set designer Christian Friedländer and the actors Egill Pálsson, Anders Mossling and Nanna Bøttcher. Moreover, a handful of female prostitutes participated in turn – and, one might add, various politicians, social workers, former prostitutes, theatre critics and journalists, the audience and then all the rest of us who, in one way or another, have helped generate texts, statements and rumours about the performance. The concept behind *Pretty Woman Ltd.* was, in all its simplicity, that the two directors chose to stage selected scenes from the popular 1990 romantic comedy *Pretty Woman* in the container at Halmtorvet. Instead of Richard Gere and Julia Roberts, however, the Swedish actor Anders Mossling and a number of different female prostitutes from the area around Halmtorvet could be seen in the roles of the wealthy business-man Edward and the engaging prostitute Vivian, who ends up with the famous Prince Charming.

Biering and Kristensen – with the help of a former insider from the milieu – had established contact with the prostitutes in the year leading up to the performance period. In the weeks before the premiere, the team had rehearsed the scenes so that the prostitutes could enter into the performance unprepared and play the leading role by having their lines delivered by earpiece. The container was modelled on the interior of the film's main location, a smaller version of a penthouse hotel suite, and separated by a glass pane the audience could experience a 'real' prostitute playing the role of both the fictional character Vivian and the 'happy hooker' described by the social cliché. During the performance period, each night three or four of the participating women would appear in a caravan adjacent to the container and, in consultation with Nanna Bøttcher, decide which of them would be on stage that night. For their part, the audience was told that the money they had paid for the evening's ticket went to cover the amount that the evening's selected prostitute would have earned if she had been working the streets instead of performing in the theatre. Hence the name of the performance, *Pretty Woman Ltd.* – in the same way as in a limited company, the audience had to "invest" in the prostitute and thus take an active part in a study of how much money can really buy.

Tue Biering and Jeppe Kristensen have previously been known for their ability to create both challenging and thought-provoking concepts together. In the performance *Come on, Bangladesh, just do it!* they hired five actors from Bangladesh, guided by Danish actors, to perform the Danish national treasure *Elverhøj* (Elves' Hill) at the Royal Danish Theatre. However, with a declared ambition to test the possibility of transferring the mechanisms of the globalised labour market to the art world, the Bengali actors were paid only about one tenth of the salary received by their Danish colleagues. Thus, within the framework of the Danish national stage, Danish cultural heritage was deftly paired with some of the issues raised by globalisation in relation to the question of not only the relationship between the 1st and 3rd worlds, but also art and business.

In *Pretty Woman Ltd.*, Biering and Kristensen similarly approached a precisely defined problem by taking as their point of departure a specific locality – the newly renovated area around Halmtorvet – and some of the discourses that contribute to structuring the public image of the "woman's oldest profession", including the romanticisation of the profession that the film *Pretty Woman* can be said

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to represent. By pairing a site-specific strategy with a discourse-specific one, so to speak, Biering and Kristensen with a focus on the issue of prostitution effectively shed light on the boundaries that determine who counts and who does not, who is visible and who is invisible, in the so-called Danish public sphere. This question seems grotesquely urgent precisely in relation to the area around Halmtorvet, where trendy café and gallery visitors with sunglasses on their foreheads literally have to edge their way past illegally immigrated prostitutes from all over the world, who, like ghosts from the once infamous Halmtorv, stubbornly insist on maintaining their territory, even though it has been invaded in recent years by entrepreneurial artists and traders.

As mentioned, *Pretty Woman Ltd.* sparked a heated public debate, with not only theatre insiders, but also politicians and social workers passionately voicing their unassailable opinions on the project. And the media willingly joined in the spectacle, which one almost has to look to the German action artist and director Christoph Schlingensiefel to find similar examples of. For, as with Schlingensiefel, it was not possible to sit back in a comfortable consensus of being “on the side of good” in relation to the project. On the contrary, not only as audience, but also as an ordinary newspaper reader, you were thrown back on yourself and forced to critically reflect on not only the project and the questions it raised, but also your own automatic pilot attitudes about aesthetics and ethics.

Conversation with Tue Biering and Jeppe Kristensen

About six months after the containers and caravan have finally been packed up, and the media storm has subsided, I seek out Biering and Kristensen for a talk about how the ethical and aesthetic questions raised by the project look from a distance. We start by talking about why it was important to the two authors that the project took place within an artistic framework, and what they see this setting as adding to the issue that, for example, an opinion piece in a paper would not be able to do in the same way.

Jeppe Kristensen: To start with, we have a professionalism that makes it natural for us to make theatre about this issue instead of writing a letter to the editor about it. Nevertheless, you could say that the thoughts we had at the very beginning about the kind of slave trade that takes place today, that is trafficking, perhaps seemed a bit like a letter to the editor. But the process and the movement away from the letter to the editor, which began when we started working with the theatrical framework and the actual encounter in the theatre hall rather than with lectures or teaching, was determined by much more than ourselves. All the input we got along the way helped to move the project to where it ended up. And here the important thing was not a particular political conviction, but what happened when we were present together in the room.

Tue Biering: When Jeppe and I started talking about how important we thought it was to address this issue, I was completely discouraged by the idea that we should get a playwright to write a story about prostitution, which we then had to get some actors to play. It wouldn't be satisfactory for us to approach it in that way, and I might be moved by such “theme performances”, but they actually very rarely tell me anything new, because we all read the same newspapers and the same books, and we all watch the same documentaries. So the idea was to see if we could find a format that could create some ripples and provoke some discussions in a different way than what you can, roughly speaking, do with these “themed performances”.

Jeppe Kristensen: When you work in a “problem-orientated” way, as we did with for instance *Pretty Woman Ltd.*, there is a danger that you end up like another parasite sucking blood out of one problem after another, and that the only thing that really happens is that afterwards you can feel like a good and artistically responsible person who has “done something about a problem”. In relation to this project, there was the additional danger that – if we made it as a “theme performance” – we would just end up preaching to the already converted. At some point the idea came up that if we made a performance that included the abusive nature of prostitution – we buy a woman to do something – then suddenly there would be something at stake. We couldn’t quite figure out exactly what, but we could sense that in that way the performance would not only mean something to those who came to see it, but also to those who didn’t, and in that way, it would have a life outside the theatre.

What considerations did you have about the physical setting of the project – a container on Halmtorvet?

TB: When we did *Come on, Bangladesh* a few years ago in the Turbinehallerne at the Royal Danish Theatre, we found that people had a lot of pre-programmed ideas about what they were going to see, and this meant that their reception apparatus was kind of disturbed by a certain idea of what theatre is. An idea that made them not very keen to go along with the rule we set for how the story of *Elves’ Hill* could be told. So by moving *Pretty Woman* out of the theatre and into a container on Halmtorvet, we were in a way free of these very pre-programmed expectations, because we knew that the audience couldn’t possibly say, “Ok, now I’m going to go and see some ordinary theatre”. The idea of the containers had been in our heads from the beginning, but at first we preferred to do the project in Skelbækgade in a disused car repair shop and then in one of the many hotel rooms in Istedgade. But when the car repair shop was demolished, and the hotels didn’t want anything to do with us – which is perfectly reasonable because we wanted to question a problem that they themselves are part of, but don’t want to be associated with in public – we ended up with our starting point: these three containers, which quickly turned out to be just right. The containers were easily accessible, and when we found used condoms and needles around them the day after they were set up, we knew we had made the right choice. Instead of being a conspicuous parasite, we had become part of the organism around Halmtorvet.

JK: Impractical as we are, at one point we also considered building a huge glass box so that people could look in from outside and see what was going on inside the box. This was to bring out the conceptual dimension of the project, which was that *Pretty Woman Ltd.* was not only played out for those inside the box, but also for those who were outside it. In a way, we are in a perpetual conflict with our relationship to theatre. We often talk about how we’re about to do something that takes place in a gallery, and how it’s important that it’s seen as art and not as theatre, because in that way it will be a different framework of understanding that will define the way the project is received. But on the other hand, we are super happy that we are not in a visual arts context, because it is somehow much more liberated than what we need. We need to have some boards to play against.

What do you mean when you say that there is a greater degree of liberation in the visual arts?

TB: Well, in the visual arts, there are virtually no limits to what can be art – you’ve kind of tried everything and anything is possible. And because we perceive the world of visual art as free from

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a lot of dogmas, in a way we really want to go there. On the other hand, we knew that if we were to create any kind of reflection about *Pretty Woman Ltd.* – if the project was to have any kind of effect – then we had to stand by the fact that it was theatre. Because in the theatre world, the first reaction would be “but you can’t do that”, while in the visual arts world, people would probably say “well, yes, it’s just art, because everything can be art”. And in that way, the liberation could become a pretext for doing nothing.

You must have had a number of ethical considerations in connection with the fact that you sought out and then staged a number of prostitutes as if they were some kind of ready-mades. Can you say something about the considerations and precautions you took before, during and not least after the performance had been realised?

TB: At first a concept had been born that we didn’t really know how to realise. So we started by talking to a lot of people who were familiar with the milieu in various ways, including some staff from Reden, a former police officer who used to be in charge of contact to the prostitutes on the street and the 3F network. Later we got in touch with Tiller Lorentzen, a former drug prostitute, who thought the project sounded fantastic and like something she would have liked to have been involved in when she was working on the streets herself. Somehow that became our guarantee to go ahead with the project. Through Tiller, we gradually made contact with several of the women, who themselves compared their profession to acting in the theatre: “Normally, you have to stand and smile at a customer and say he’s the most beautiful person you’ve met today, what lies and deceit! Acting is part of my life, so to be on a theatre stage in front of an audience with an earplug is just great!” For us, however, it was very important to ensure the safety of the women who were performing and to talk to them about how they felt about being in this situation where people were looking at them. During the rehearsal process, we started letting people into the room quite quickly so that the women could get used to the situation, and if it made them feel more comfortable to wear a wig or say their lines in English, we did that. In that way, it was a gradual development, where the concept was constantly dynamic.

JK: Yes, we were always ready to shift the concept. Of course, the decisive ethical bar was the women themselves – whether they wanted to participate. It was an all or nothing requirement, and for us it was crucial to make a performance that the women wanted to participate in. The performance we ended up making was one that the women were comfortable with, and apart from being as super cool and good as they were, they were obviously aware of what they were doing when they were in the room.

The glass pane that separated them from the audience also acted as a kind of protection for the women, didn’t it?

JK: Actually, it was almost mainly the audience that was protected by the pane, because what they were experiencing was clearly very intense for them. But the pane also had a conceptual dimension; it signalled an exhibition box, and in that sense, there was a duality at work throughout the project. On the one hand, it was an extremely tough project that had an element of abuse and violence in it, but at the same time, we tried to carry out this very tough project as gently and caringly and accommodatingly as we possibly could. Incidentally, several of the women involved said that

they loved having a place where they could, if not speak from, then at least show themselves from different sides than the social fiction they are normally seen through.

Did you ever have to interrupt any of the performances out of consideration for the women?

JK: There were some rehearsals where we had to do that, and there were also some playthroughs where we thought, no, that simply won't work, she's in too bad a state to continue. But by talking to Tiller, we reached the conclusion that sometimes there are ethical boundaries that you have to disregard. I mean, you shouldn't see the fact that the women are under the influence or have withdrawal symptoms as a problem, because that's how it is; they are almost always under the influence, and they have psychological problems and have been standing out in the rain for four hours. So yes, sometimes you became extremely anxious from looking at the conditions and daily lives of these women. But that doesn't mean that you have to censor yourself out of it, because those conditions and that daily life are part of the real world – we just don't normally have to deal with it. As for the part of your question that concerns what happened afterwards, that's probably the question we've been asked most often. In the beginning we thought a lot about it – whether we weren't just giving the women a sweet, and that it was all much worse afterwards – but gradually we got disgusted with that way of seeing things. You would never say that to you or to me: "You're not allowed to have a good experience, because you'll miss it afterwards." What strikes me as the real problem in relation to these women is that they are not allowed to do anything! They can't get to feel too good, because then they'll just feel bad afterwards. I still get angry when I have to talk about this, because it is simply such a degrading way of talking about other people! As Tiller said: "They also know that it's only Christmas Eve once a year". But having said that, we are still in contact with them, and that is because the part of the project that was about stopping to see them as part of the social fiction called prostitutes and starting to see them as ordinary people has been successful. So that's why we still have contact and go out for a meal once in a while, with the reservations there are because these women have to earn a hell of a lot of money all the time! In terms of a more specific follow-up part of the project, we did some extra performances at the end that people paid a lot of money to see, which we put into a fund that could help Tiller move on with her ideas of setting up a women-only rehab centre. The problem is that many of the drug prostitutes have a traumatic relationship with men, for good reasons, but since the rehab centres are only able to see them as drug addicts, there are only treatment centres for both genders. And you probably don't go to them if you are afraid of or traumatised in relation to men.

As for the critics, many of them described Pretty Woman Ltd. as "reality theatre" and several of them went on to assess that the project as a piece of theatre was "boring", "helpless amateur theatre". In your view, does the term "theatre of reality" make sense in relation to the project? And what happens to the assessment parameters when you distinguish between, for example, reality theatre and theatre?

TB: I actually find it extremely difficult to take these reviews seriously, because a large part of the Danish critics work with a very narrow definition of what theatre is. For many of them, theatre is something that has been written by a playwright and is recited by some actors after they have rehearsed it with a director for 6-8 weeks. And anything that doesn't meet that definition is then called performance or reality theatre. All of a sudden there are a lot of concepts in play, and I think that's hugely problematic. I've been called up by a lot of students who say they're writing a

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paper about “reality theatre” and wonder if I can explain to them what it is. I feel a bit like: Well, I have no idea what reality theatre is! And by the way, I don’t do reality theatre – I do theatre, that’s it. But as I said, that’s the definition most of the reviewers use, and sometimes it really becomes unintentionally comical. For example, one of them wrote in a review that there were “authentic bodies” in the performance. The next day, actor Anders Mossling turned up and proclaimed that he too was an “authentic body” and a “real human being”. Let’s face it: when you put something into a theatrical setting, and when someone sits and watches it, it becomes fiction. The prostitutes who participated were part of the fiction, just like the actors were. As I see it, it’s much more interesting to expand the concept of theatre and explore how much it can really encompass, rather than working with meaningless distinctions between theatre and reality theatre.

JK: Reality theatre is a sad concept in every way. And if you use it as a parameter when you go to see a performance like *Pretty Woman Ltd.*, it will all become about whether something is “real” or not, instead of about being present with other people in a space where a story is being told. When you go to see Nicolas Bro play Hamlet, there is something similar at stake as there was in *Pretty Woman Ltd.*: Bro brings a story about himself and looks a certain way that makes you think “no, he can’t play Hamlet. Hamlet has to be a handsome, blond young man”. In this way, the idea of Hamlet and Nicolas Bro activate each other. It is the same device we use when we pay prostitutes to play a prostitute in a Hollywood film. Because yes, these are “real” prostitutes, but these women are at the same time mediums of a fiction, a social fiction, which is kind of spread throughout society, and I would argue that there is something dynamic in connecting this fiction with the fiction called *Pretty Woman*. Besides, it has been liberating to make a performance that is a mixture of art, social contribution and community work, and therefore could not only be assessed as good or bad theatre in the reviews. It has been a relief that the ongoing reflection on and evaluation of the performance has also taken place in interviews, blogs, letters to the editor, etc. and that there has have often been much broader assessment parameters here than we have met with the reviewers.

You problematise – rightly, I think – this distinction between “reality” and “unreality”, which often creeps into the discourse on art and theatre, working in the border zone between and challenging the unambiguous use of categories such as fiction and reality. But at the same time, it was very important for you to emphasise that the women were “real prostitutes”, when the reviewer in the Børsen thought he could reveal that they were Swedish actors. Why? And didn’t you in this way end up in a strange valorisation of “the real” yourselves?

TB: There were many good reasons for that. The first concerned credibility: At the time when Wredstrøm (*Børsen’s* critic, ed.) made his so-called disclosure, we had spoken to about 50 journalists, and it was important to us that they did not lose confidence in us. Another thing was that this whole “disclosure” was permeated by an incredibly condescending idea that of course these “whores” – as the women were referred to – could not act in the theatre. They couldn’t possibly have the resources to do so! Another reason was that if you could think that “well, it was just a publicity *stunt* that they were prostitutes”, then you could sort of relax again and think of the project as *safe play*, as something that was in no way associated with any kind of risk.

JK: Yes, and the whole layer of reflection in the project is of course about everyone instinctively being extremely provoked by the idea of buying prostitutes for acting in a theatre. But then 10

seconds pass, and then you can think about why you're not outraged that some people are being bought for sex 15 times a day. This question you carry with you, even if you haven't seen the performance, but it would be lost if it turned out that it was just a bunch of actors playing theatre.

It struck me that on one particular point you have seemed a little undecided about your role: on the one hand, you come up with this extremely provocative concept, which you must have known would create a stir, and on the other hand, Tue, in an article in Politiken called "7 døgn med Tue Biering" (7 days with Tue Biering), you seem genuinely morally outraged that the majority of critics and journalists refer to the women as "whores". This indignation surprised me, and actually seemed to me to contradict the premise of the project, which surely is precisely that it should not be possible to adopt a position that claims a monopoly on truth and goodness.

TB: That's true. Up to the premiere, we had a clear strategy that we shouldn't take a moral position on anything, because then *Pretty Woman Ltd.* would be perceived as a moral project, and we weren't interested in that. But the 7-day thing with me in *Politiken* was probably a kind of after-reaction, and at the same time we knew that it was most likely the last chance we had to say something where we ourselves made our personal views known. One of our dreams with the project was from the beginning to gain some dignity for these women, and one of the things that the women we talked to emphasised strongly from the start was not to be called whores, but prostitutes. And we took the opportunity to communicate that. It was not to appear moralising towards the journalists, but I can see that from the outside it can seem a bit like "hey, there's been a shift". In retrospect, I'm actually incredibly glad that this part didn't take up more space, because it's absolutely true – the performance could easily stand on its own.

Finally, do you think you achieved what you wanted with the performance?

TB: Because the concept was so dynamic, the performance actually worked its way in a completely different direction than what we had originally intended. From being a social, political project about putting trafficking of women higher on the agenda, it ended up being about taking seriously the basic narrative of *Pretty Woman* about a meeting between and the mutual transformation of two people. In relation to the audience, it became about taking the people who came by the hand and preparing them for this encounter.

JK: In relation to the prostitutes, the performance also ended up very differently from what we started out with. From being about using the individual prostitute as a tool to change the situation of "the prostitutes", as it might sound in an early project description, it was the meeting between the individual woman and the audience that became the important thing. You could say that the performance ended up containing a fundamental duality: on the one hand, it was driven by the idea that "any prostitute can be bought into any version of *Pretty Woman Ltd.*", but at the same time, the woman's gradual transformation – in front of and together with the audience – from the social cliché of a "prostitute" to a human being was at the centre.

TB: Actually, I think that *Pretty Woman Ltd.* was a huge confirmation to us of what theatre can do. Because in this case, at least as we see it, it really made sense to put some people together in a

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closed space for a certain period of time, because in this way you were actually allowed to take the time it takes to meet each other and change – together.

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Pretty Woman A/S. Photo: Per Morten Abrahamsen

