



Interview

Encounters, Relations, Popular
Culture and Representation

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Conversation with Tue Biering by Solveig Gade

Tue Biering, the last time I interviewed you was in 2009, a few months after you and Jeppe Kristensen had ignited the theatre debate in Denmark with Pretty Woman A/S (Pretty Woman Ltd.). Since then, FIX&FOXY has worked consistently to further develop the format that formed the basis of the performance – a format in which you typically involve a group of reality experts to shed light on a controversial issue, while at the same time directing the spotlight at the audience. Either by involving them physically in the performance or by pointing to them as part of or perhaps even complicit in the problem the performance is about. But first,, tell me, what term are you actually using? Are you talking about “reality experts” – I know you don’t like the term “reality theatre”.

I don’t really have a name for it. I call it casting or the best possible cast for whatever you’re doing. It’s about what you want to do with the project. Sometimes I need people who have experience of being traumatised by war, like in *My Deer Hunter*. In other cases, like in *Vi de 1% (We the 1%)*, I need people who know a lot about being super rich or super poor. And in still other cases, I need people who are good at being actors. That was the case with *Dark Noon*, even though the original idea of the cast was to get someone who knew something about immigration from Africa. But because I sensed that with that kind of cast, I would end up reproducing a narrative about the poor immigrant from Africa, I decided to try and get the very best South African actors instead. I felt like: “Imagine if you made a cast where people sat in Copenhagen and thought: Fuck, they’re so cool! You won’t find anything like them in Denmark.” That would be the best possible way of reversing the balance of power.

Back to the question about the format: For almost 15 years now, you have been working on developing how to spotlight various issues – and create encounters with the audience – by working with casts that have particular experience with a given issue. FIX&FOXY has been criticised several times, perhaps especially with Pretty Woman Ltd., for being unethical because you involve “vulnerable people”. Can you say something about this and also about the most crucial insights you’ve gained over the years?

We have been lucky to have a very steep learning curve from the beginning, and I think the most important insight came already in connection with *Pretty Woman Ltd.*: that we can neither offer a social nor an educational space. There are many others who are better at that than us. However, we can offer an artistic space. And that space can be a fantastic place to be when you’re used to being in social and political spaces where a certain identity – such as “vulnerable” or “exposed” – is imposed on you and you’re treated according to the rules that apply in these political and social spaces.

Because an important part of the ambition with *Pretty Woman Ltd.* was to challenge some of these stereotypes about prostitutes, Jeppe and I had decided that prostitutes should take part in the performance. But at the same time, we were afraid of the ethical issues and weren’t sure how to go about it. So we contacted various organisations, including Reden. They advised us to contact Tiller Lorenzen, a former drug prostitute who has been a consultant on a large number of projects

related to prostitution. She also knows the women around Halmtorvet, where the performance was to take place, very well. For us, the meeting with Tiller was quite crucial – it was what made the project possible. In addition to being able to make contact with the women and tell them about the project, she was able to push Jeppe and me when we were most afraid and reluctant to deal with issues and say: “No one needs you to come in and pose as feeling sorry for someone and afraid to talk about uncomfortable things. Because when you behave like that, you create distance. You are already pushing some people away from you. These women are so tired of being seen as someone to be looked after. These women face some crucial life choices every day, and therefore you shouldn’t think that they are not capable of deciding whether they should be part of this project or not.” I think we talked to you about this already back in 2009. But that’s actually one of the biggest realisations we had already then, and we’ve used it ever since: You can always give an invitation to another person and then let them decide for themselves whether they want to accept it or not. It doesn’t do anyone any good not to invite them because you don’t think they are capable of deciding for themselves whether or not to participate. Having said that it is of course important that you show great attentiveness and sensitivity towards the person you are inviting. So, the most important insight is probably that it is an *artistic* space that we can offer our participants – with all the possibility of ambivalence and uncertainty that it holds.

Another insight is the importance of working with a consultant in the field. Having a Tiller who can nudge you and say “You’re moving within a very small area right now. You might as well go out and explore it all. And if you end up somewhere that’s problematic, I’m there to tell you to go back again.” Having a consultant with us is a way of ensuring we have a working space. Because then I don’t have to go around all the time being scared shitless of doing something wrong and ultimately ending up doing a performance that doesn’t matter because I’ve put a lot of limitations on myself along the way.

A third insight or realisation is that theatre has the character of an encounter and that the very special thing about theatre is: that we are together here and now – whether it takes place in a physical space or in a digital space as in *Avatar me* – and that this means that a real meeting and a real exchange can take place. Because if that meeting doesn’t take place, then a clear risk in the way I work, is that I may end up exposing people. That it can become a bit like: “Well, now we’ve been through these and these problems – what other vulnerable people are out there?”

The Vulnerable

Yes, when we last spoke, you and Jeppe yourself talked about the danger of ending up as a parasite sucking blood out of one issue – and for that matter also population group – after another. How do you try to take precautions against that?

*Well, I am constantly suspicious of myself. In recent years, for example, I have asked myself if I have a tendency to always focus on the people we call “vulnerable”. And maybe I do, but then the next question must be, who are the least vulnerable? Perhaps the rich? There is at least one narrative that says so. But I want to challenge that narrative because in reality there is also something vulnerable, almost shameful, about being one of the most privileged. At least here in Scandinavia, if you have to stand on a stage and talk about how extremely rich you are, which is what happens in the performance *We the 1%*. For a while now, I’ve also been interested in exploring my own vulnerability and my own privileged position. The performance *Rocky* is an attempt to put myself on stage. Because my own conceitedness and self-*

righteousness should clearly have an introspection. Especially because my inclusiveness is not very inclusive when it comes to people I disagree with politically, like some of the right-wing politicians who appear at the end of the performance.

How much do you include input from your cast in your performance concepts? Are the concepts conceived and finalised in advance, or do they change along the way?

Well, it's crucial for me that the people on stage are aware of what they are part of – that it's 100% transparent. That they're not there because it's cool to play theatre, but because they want to participate and become part of a performance and a certain statement. And that they realise that this statement can be complex, and that they don't necessarily have to agree with it. At the same time, they must want to participate in the dialogue that the statement generates. So you could say that the concept is something that is thought out in advance, but at the same time it is important that some people are brought in who, by virtue of their background, professionalism and material, can play into and nuance the issue that the performance revolves around. It makes me smarter to work with people who have experience-based knowledge about what we are working with! But having said that, as a director, I am naturally in a curatorial role where I have to maintain focus, say no to ideas and make choices so that we can create a performance that is communicative and good, and that the audience will listen to and which may even change some perspectives for them. Over time, I have learnt that you have to be very clear about this from the very beginning. You have to signal that I am the leader, and we are in a structure where I am the one who decides, and where some things are just not negotiable. This is a theatre performance and not a plenary event we are doing! But at the same time, it's important that I don't put words in people's mouths that they can't identify with. It's important that they stand on stage as "themselves". But at the same time, they are not only there as "themselves", but also as representatives or incarnations of some of the social fictions that exist about the prostitute, the rich, the poor etc. So there's a duality at work that I want to bring out: at the same time as there's a person on stage talking about her own experiences, I want you to see that there's a person standing there assessing her role.

The Popular Cultural

This leads very well to my next question, which is about your rather consistent device of exposing, but also using various popular cultural genres and formats as a kind of dramaturgy or motor in your performances. The Western genre, Hollywood films, sitcoms and propaganda film are just a few examples, and what they all have in common is that they implant certain archetypes – or social fictions, as you say – in our collective memory: the lonely cowboy, the happy hooker, the friends who never age etc.

*Jeppe and I have talked over the years about the necessity of having a cushion to play against. It's like when you play billiards – if there's no cushion to hit, the ball flies away. A genre can be a cushion to play against. Also because genres provide aesthetics, dramaturgies, characters and cultural narratives that tap into more general matrices and ways in which we humans understand ourselves and each other. The choice of genre is typically based on the fact that this particular genre can do something in relation to the issue we are working with. When we worked with asylum seekers in the performance *Friends: The One with Asylum Seekers and Some Rejected Ones*, for example, we chose the sitcom format and the *Friends*-series based on the idea that it would be the radical opposite of the way the story of asylum seekers is typically*

told, both in the media and in art. Those black-and-white, emotionally appealing documentary images from the reception centre Sandholm, which sometimes actually have an almost dehumanising effect, even though that was not the intention. Instead of reproducing that aesthetic, we chose to recreate the Friends-universe on stage and have the cast re-enact the characters' lines. At the same time as there was a clash of universes, the limbo-like waiting position that both asylum seekers and those Friends-characters who never really grow up can be said to be in was brought to a head. In Pretty Woman A/S, we confronted the romantic comedy and the fiction of the "happy hooker" with the reality of a number of prostitutes around Halmtorvet. And in Dark Noon, we wanted to use the Western genre, which has a pretty clear definition of good and evil, as a lens to explore the image many people have of Africa as a lawless place. But when we started making the performance, I quickly realised that this was all wrong. It became: "Don't you want to tell your story through a genre in a way that I have decided". So instead of migration to Europe from Africa and elsewhere, the performance came to be about the migration of Europeans to America, told through South African actors in white face. In this way, Dark Noon is an example of how genre as a device can also help to challenge us and make us aware of our own blind spots – because the choice of genre helps to push the issue we are working on to its extreme.

Another great thing about working with popular culture and readymade fiction is that many people actually have a relationship with the films and series we use. Today, very few people really have a relationship with Brecht, Moliere and Shakespeare. But there are people who have seen a film like Pretty Woman more than 50 times! This means that as a theatre director, you can speak into the relationship that exists between the audience and the fiction you are staging. In this way, the conflict in the performance will not only be played out between wills on stage, but also between the preconception you as an audience member come with in relation to, for example, a particular film and what takes place on stage. That is very interesting to work with.

Representation

One of the most talked about topics these days is representation. This applies not least in the theatre. Are there limits to who can represent whom, and should we at least reflect on the position (of power) from which we represent others? Where do you stand in relation to this discussion, and are there any of your previous performances that you don't think you could have made today?

There are perhaps some of my previous performances that I wouldn't do today, but that doesn't apply to FIX&FOXY where there has been an awareness of our position as senders and a desire to put ourselves at risk. When we transferred Chaplin's *Gold Rush* to the stage with Amir Becirovic, a spastic, dyslexic, second-generation Muslim immigrant, in the role of the 'wretch' hoping to find gold in the mountains of Klondike, it was not just a comment on Hollywood's ability to ridicule certain characters – such as hopeful but unlucky gold diggers – while encouraging the audience to *feel* for them. The performance was also a comment on the artist – on ourselves – who insists that everything must be "real" and not "as-if". In the performance, for example, Amir experienced a series of "real" acts of abuse – he was set on fire, he was hypothermic, he was forced to eat a shoe – but in the end, he got both the gold and the girl. In this way, *Guldfeber* (Gold Rush) commented on our role as artists, constantly balancing on the edge of ethics. And I think it illustrates very well the playful approach and suspicion we have in fact always had towards our role as artists.

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In relation to the conversation about representation, which is very much in the spotlight these years, it is important, and it brings our professionalism to the centre. Because our field is about representing others who are not necessarily like yourself. At the same time, you have to reflect on the position from which you represent – is it a powerful position or is it rather a powerless position? That makes a difference. But it's not easy, and in many ways I'm confused about what to think. I hope that together we can have a reflected examination of aspects of representation.

Because what is happening right now is that people don't dare to enter the space where these issues are discussed. I meet many colleagues who are afraid to be part of that conversation, but we have to be! We have to be brave. Because there is a lot of potential in being able to represent others and something other than what you are. You learn a lot from seeing yourself and others represented – that's why we read books and watch films and theatre etc. It is important that we continue to explore the potential of representation. While at the same time being aware of our own blind spots and how we may be unconsciously reproducing stereotypes about other people. Over the last five years, I have become more aware of challenging myself. But I will continue to create images that people might find a little offensive. Otherwise, you end up with those indifferent performances that simply fail to create the encounter, which to me is the crucial thing in theatre.

Solveig Gade, Associate Professor, Department of Arts and Cultural Studies, Theatre and Performance Studies. University of Copenhagen.
