



Interview

Excursion to Youth Land with Jeppe Kristensen

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By Ida Krøgholt and Erik Exe Christoffersen

Fix and Foxy's *Ungdom* (Youth, 2015) has the character of a transition from child to adult identity. The stage is a strange mythological space. It takes place at Theater Republique, where an artificial beach with 90 tons of sand, a tent camp with 35 colourful festival tents and a bathing lake with 15,000 litres of water had been created in the large theatre hall. Around 30 young participating non-professional performers meet the spectators in a kind of youth ritual. Some scenes take place in small tents, where a few spectators are invited into a dialogue with a young person, other scenes take place in slightly larger tents or in groups around a campfire, and finally there is an overall party. The performance is an installation, an interactive exchange and a theatricalised meeting between generations.

The performers take on the role of themselves and enter a rather intimate contact with a few spectators, which is in itself a particular challenge. The young performers and the spectators are inscribed in a delicate balance between reality and fiction. What is unusual is the exchange, contact and encounter itself, without playing the usual youth clichés. The young people appear as vulnerable, transparent. Is that what they are? Or is it a projection of our own dream of youth?

On arrival, you change clothes. In the foyer there are shorts and summer dresses for the audience to wear. The theatre has promised that the hall will be summer warm. It creates a special cheerful atmosphere when the spectators meet each other in summer clothes and bare feet, as if we were on our way to a water world. It creates a sense of community among the spectators, and you wonder what role you are going to play.

The spectators are slowly admitted into the space. There is a small lake that you can walk through or cross via a bridge. Some people in shorts just walk through the knee-deep water. The floor of the theatre is filled with sand and there is a large tent camp with trees and observation towers. In the centre of the room there is an open space where the spectators position themselves, slightly disorientated because it is semi-dark and it is difficult to see who is who. I am quite unsure, until suddenly a young girl of about 17 comes up, takes me by the hand and asks me to join her in her tent. It is a bit of a transgression to be invited into a young girl's tent equipped with various blankets, pictures, animals and books.

The First Meeting

She already has a guest, and she asks us what we like and dislike. I say, for example, that I like to smoke before going to bed, and it turns out that she does too. Suddenly there is a loud, ominous sound and a flash of light as if it were thunder. She changes the subject and reads from various diaries by the light of a torch: the first kiss was not much fun, nor was the first fuck, and when she was mad at her mother. Again sound and flashes of light interrupt the scene and she changes the subject.

In the "black" book, it appears that she has had anorexia and her weight was down to 36 kilos (76,3 pounds). She shows us how she counts calories and how much she is allowed to eat. We ask her for details but are interrupted again by the sound and the flash of light. She asks us to brush our teeth and then to make up a story about a little elephant. She shows letters and drawings hanging from the ceiling, talk about depression and hospitalisation. I see that she has wounds on her arms

and legs, and she tells us that she has cut herself. She shows us the picture of her grandmother's cat and of her father, whom she has not seen, but whom she will probably seek out one day. She knows he lives in Svendborg. The picture is torn but pasted back together again.

After about 20 minutes, where we have also been lying down and holding hands, we go to a slightly larger tent where we meet two female friends, each of whom has two spectator guests with them. We talk about being drunk at a party, travelling, intimate shaving and what clothes they should choose for the party. My friend takes off her blouse and, at my suggestion, puts on a white t-shirt. We go on to the party and suddenly it is in full swing. Everyone is dancing with everyone else, and there is a round dance, and we have a party train. I am wearing a giant rabbit mask so I cannot see anything, but I am being led and guided by my young friend. She suggests we sit by the lake with our feet in the water and talk more about the future. She wants to go to Africa, and I tell her about my experience of this, for me, somewhat frightening country. We move on to a campfire. It is about to be "night" and I am taken by the hand by a new young person. We lie in a big pile and have our hair stroked and look at the moon. Then I am invited into a new tent. This time the sound and the flash of light are longer and more frightening. Does it herald a natural disaster, an earthquake or just a scary future? The young person is scared and worried, she says. How can you bring children into the world when there are so many worries? I tell her about my children and the problems and worries that do not diminish over the years. She takes me by the hand, and we lie down outside on a blanket and look up at the stars, talking openly about dreams and the future.

Youth is autofiction, and young people talk about themselves, and that is what you react to. It is a meeting, but tightly staged. What the participating actors come up with is not necessarily the truth, but it seems credible in the meeting. The self-narrative is installed in a theatre frame: Republique, which is an established theatre. The young people are unique and exceptional, but youth life itself also appears as a general metaphor for an uncertain and fluid part of life. The part where identity is particularly uncertain, fragmented and appears as an open choice to be tested.

Youth also points to one of the crucial problems facing young people today: the lack of community overburdens the individual subject, who is pressurised to cultivate individual success, self-control and originality. This creates a fear of failure. *Youth* is a representation of the possibilities and impossibilities of community. The performance itself becomes a kind of exchange between the role and the personal identity, which emerges in its imperfection, vulnerability and humanity.

It is morning and the sun is rising. It is a marvellous sight as the whole of one of the back walls becomes one big sun. The morning mist is in the room and slowly we rise and the young people point to the exit, which the spectators drift down towards. When we leave the room, the young people are left standing in the sand, abandoned. I want to run to my first friend and say goodbye, but I just wave, and she slowly waves back. Is she in another world? At the exit, I turn round again and see the young people standing like statues. There is no applause, and no one bows to mark the end of the performance.

Fiction and Ritual

The whole performative event had the character of a kind of ritual. The young people are themselves, but they are also "storytellers". My young friend read out various texts she had presumably written herself, showed pictures, clothes and teddy bears and was the narrator of her story. At the same time, she is here and now: She held my hand firmly and determinedly, and her authority created trust so I surrendered completely to her specific proposals for action.

The encounter and the interaction tight and compressed. We follow an evening and night until sunrise. Time is divided into sequences where something threatening returns and foreshadows future catastrophes and ultimately death. The exit suggests to me that the young people are leaving this *now*, the present, which we are already losing.

The camp has the delimited character of fiction. The young people are acting subjects, they take charge, take on responsibility and calmly and authoritatively direct the spectators, who (in my case) could be their parents.

The communication between adults and young people is a kind of inversion. The young people are the authority, and we follow along as “ignorant”. The tent camp is a borderland and a passage or transition between childhood and adulthood, where the process and possibilities are open. It is limitless and a particular field where one is neither one nor the other, but in a kind of transition and dissolution (like a drunkenness and “blue Monday”): we can try out a variety of identities and mutually see each other.

Identity and Identification

As a spectator, I was “young” and “not young”. I could identify with the young person, I wanted to party and go all out, but at the same time I was also in the role of an adult and older. Should I explain to her what I think she should do and help her with her problems? Should I ask her for advice about my difficulties with my children? Who was I in her eyes? Who is the teacher, and who is the pupil? The most important thing is almost what her hands tell me, creating trust, a sense of uncertainty and the necessary yet sad goodbye.

It feels like a mutual exchange. Of course, I cannot say whether I have made a concrete difference to “my young friend” or to the performance, but I see it as a form of theatre of the future, where the actors engage in a kind of exchange with the spectator.

What Do the Young People Say?

17-year-old Astrid Haugensen and 19-year-old Jonas Slotorub are both high school students and performers. They know that they have to share their private thoughts and experiences with the audience every night:

“The day I went to the casting I had just broken up with my friend, it was a very crazy day and perhaps I saw it as a kind of therapy”.

“I feel like I have a very special relationship with the person I’ve had inside my tent, precisely because I’ve given so much of myself – and because they’ve given so much back. In fact, I have thought about that person for a long time afterwards and imagined what it would be like to meet that person in real life. (...)”

“For us, it’s a special opportunity to talk to someone who is perhaps more experienced and can give advice, but who you don’t know and will probably never see again. It can trigger some new thoughts – and the 60-year-old will hopefully come out of the performance with a sense of having been young again.” Quoted from Trine Munk-Petersen, *Berlingske* 29 January 2015. <http://www.b.dk/kultur/ungdommen-den-fantastiske-og-frygtelige#>!

Youth creates freedom and potentiality, but also a sense of loss, because we will never see each other again. Young people talk about themselves to strangers they do not know. That this is probably

related to the security built into the dramaturgy. In addition, a special group culture has been established that also meet outside the theatre and has introduced new symbols of community.

Youth can be seen in the light of recent attempts to combine art production, user-oriented strategies and pedagogical development work, leading to experiments with new audience forms, participatory culture and new ways of consuming theatre. There is a responsibility both to the young people and to the spectator in this community. This can be described using Rancière's concept of the "emancipated spectator":

"What is required is a theatre without spectators, where those in attendance learn from as opposed to being seduced by images; where they become active participants as opposed to passive voyeurs." (Rancière 2014, 7)

Rancière establishes an analogy with the pedagogical relationship, where he believes that the role of the teacher is to close the gap between his own knowledge and the student's non-knowledge.

"In pedagogical logic, the ignoramus is not simply one who does not as yet know what the schoolmaster knows. She is the one who does not know what she does not know or how to know it. For his part, the schoolmaster is not only the one who possesses the knowledge unknown by the ignoramus. He is also the one who knows how to make it an object of knowledge, at what point and in accordance with what protocol." (Rancière, Jacques. *The Emancipated Spectator*. London: Verso UK, 2014.)

The spectator is not simply ignorant because of the lack of narrative and lack of central focus. The polyphonic universe can inspire the formulation and development of the spectator's own fairy tales where they can verbalise their own experiences. *Youth* does not point to a specific knowledge but establishes a relationship where the spectator activates his or her own agency and composes narratives in words, images or movements. This is reminiscent of the model that Jacques Rancière calls ignorant learning.

FIX&Foxy's Work with Youth

Interview with Jeppe Kristensen

How did you choose the performers?

We wanted to do something that could be interesting for a bigger theatre, and we had talked to Republique and had the possibility of a big space that could be used for something grand, and we also had a dream of some interactive theatre. What should we look for and pay attention to? The casting consisted of exercises that we had worked with before. They had to tell stories to each other in pairs with a few headlines. It could be funny, sad or for instance describe a change. We asked them to tell these stories in a line, not their own, but the ones they had heard, as if they were their own. What came out of that was fantastic. We realised that it wouldn't make sense for us to choose who to include. It would be completely wrong.

How had you made contact with those who had come?

It was through adverts in the newspaper. We decided to say that anyone who wanted to could take part and it wasn't up to us to decide. The work consisted in creating a space that was interesting for them to be in. A rehearsal space that made them want to come and make friends and tell stories, to look for something they could be happy with and that we could watch as spectators.

It wasn't a particular problem or theme?

No, not at all. The normal hierarchy was turned upside down: we have privileged children and working-class children, and it was quite clear that those who felt that they could normally handle everything they had a challenge with the performance. Because they didn't have as much to say, and it was easier for those who had had various problems.

How did the process take place? Is it the individual participant who chooses? Where did you process the stories?

Very little. It was a long process from September to February with individual days and weekends. Most of it was about working together to find out what kind of performance it was and then two weeks to make it. Something that was very important was the idea that someone takes you by the hand and leads you.

Is that something you have rehearsed?

With us, it's typical that we don't stage through rehearsing, but we develop it by understanding why we're doing it. For a long time, our rehearsals consisted of us turning up and sitting in a circle and telling each other what we had done since the last rehearsal. It took a long time. An hour. And then we said: Now we'll split into two teams. One team will have the premier of the performance in five minutes, and the other team will be spectators. We went outside, and when they were ready, we came in and watched a performance that was their improvisation. We worked like that for months, watching and talking. Some things have been included in the performance. For example, the big hug scene on the floor. We're making lights for it, but that's their suggestion. We had a feeling that it would be impossible to time the performance: we couldn't teach them cues, so we did a lot of exercises. 50 young people walk around and have to stand still at the same time and then walk around again at the same time. Exercises where they lay on a blanket. Where nothing happened, and if something did happen, they were to use it as an impulse.

What about themes? I experienced a conversation about intimate shaving, which was interesting to participate in with the young people. How tightly structured is it?

I hardly know, I haven't been involved in everything. We also asked about casting, which scenes should be included in a performance about youth. And we welcomed suggestions. We had ideas ourselves, of course, but not any that were more important. We kept asking: What do you think should be included? The themes they suggested first were: We are busy, Facebook, homework.

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Things that take up space, but that was not what remained. It was more: How do you get a girlfriend? Why do you get drunk?

There were 50 people who had never met each other. And you couldn't skip a step and go straight to "now I give myself completely". But we got to the point where they were telling crazy stories. Up until two weeks before the premiere, we had a performance that consisted of admitting the audience into a room and then they improvised for two hours. They were in a tent camp and we had sound and light that created moods that they had to react to. There was this stress sound, there was a romantic sequence, but they weren't allowed to do what they did the previous time. The rule was that they had to meet new people. That's how it was until shortly before the premiere. We had a rehearsal audience and it was difficult because all of a sudden there were a lot of people in the room who were kind of drifting around and didn't know where they belonged.

We changed that to a tighter structure. In the first part, they all talk about themselves and childhood memories that they bury and talk about first memories such as the first kiss. The second part is preparation for the party. Here they get the spectators to tell them about their excesses. Then there is the party, which is a joint improvisation that is completely planned so that they know what they are going to do. Here they can change spectators if they need to. There is a chaos scene that ends in a pile of people. Then there is a night scene of anxiety, fear, dreams, and finally a wordless sunrise that ends in a farewell. The space is divided into a tent, where you talk about the body, and a room underground: the coal cellar, where you talk about sadness and fear. By the lake, emotions are shared. The hut in the tree has the theme of the unique or particular. In the pee tent is where you talk about scoring. The spaces create structure, and the young people were able to draw the spectators into these spaces. There is also an area where you can get rid of a spectator with whom it doesn't work. There were usually two spectators for each player, and they were responsible for a certain number through the performance, although they could be changed.

How does sound work?

Sound marks shifts in dramaturgy that players can react to. Apart from the party, it's soundscapes of birds, the sound of night and sounds that set the mood and follow a 24-hour period as background music. It prevented everyday small talk and the sound was used to change scenes. We tried without sound. But we discovered that many spectators just wanted to talk about themselves. If the performance was too much on the spectators' terms, it was a bit uninteresting. The sound was a form of dramaturgical control.

Did the performers or the spectators sometimes break out of the fiction?

Many rehearsals revolved around what to do with the spectators who do not accept the fiction. Some spectators might ask: How many kilos of sand are there? Do you know each other? It became uninteresting. So the young people had an emergency script they could pull out if they got a talkative spectator who asked: Is it exciting to be involved? They didn't have to answer that.

It was a practical problem to get everyone in. It could take 10 minutes. So some had long awkward pauses, but it gave an interesting tension and it made sense. But I didn't find that the players said too much. It was important that they had chosen to do so themselves.

We wanted to recreate some of those memories you have where something amazing happened at four o'clock in the morning. It only happened this one time and it was amazing. The tents, the water, the bare feet in the sand, the sound and the light was getting the spectators there in a hurry. I think it happened quite a few times depending on the relationship between performer and spectator. I don't know if some spectators left the performance, but some sat off to the side and watched. There were actually some young people who became romantically involved during the performance.

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Lampedusa Cruise