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The Management of Audience Discomfort FIX&FOXY's Practice of Political Confrontation

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By Laura Luise Schultz

A key feature of FIX&FOXY's political remediations is their sophisticated engagement with the audience. Inspired by international groups such as Gob Squad and Rimini Protokoll, FIX&FOXY have developed their own subtle yet confrontational way of involving the audience in their performances. FIX&FOXY also work with so-called everyday experts, such as prostitutes, war veterans and other social groups not usually found on the theatre stage. The aim is to confront the audience with our own blind spots in our encounters with people and experiences of reality that we do not normally meet in the theatre. The nuanced positioning of the audience is crucial to the complexity of this encounter and the overall statement of the performances.

In recent years, Tue Biering has expressed a desire to not only represent oppressed groups and social realities on stage, but further to make room for people with whom he himself fundamentally disagrees, such as internet trolls or right-wing extremists – people whose worldviews he also expects his audience to be provoked by.

The question is if Biering, in this endeavour, risks sacrificing the complexity of the audience dramaturgy, because he positions his audience as more unambiguous and prejudiced than we necessarily are – after which he can provoke and undermine our supposed preconceptions.

By critically analysing FIX&FOXY's negotiation of the audience contract in a number of controversial performances, including among others *Dark Noon* (2019) and *Rocky! Taberens genkomst* (*Rocky! The Return of the Loser*, 2017), I will, based on Jacques Rancière's concept of the emancipated spectator, examine some of the dramaturgical devices that influence whether the works manage to create diversity and complexity in the positioning of the audience, or whether the audience is rather confined to a more unambiguous and predefined position.

It is my thesis that the more nuanced dramaturgical leeway the performance gives its audience, i.e., the more potential – and preferably mutually incompatible – audience positions the performance opens for and brings into play, the greater the space for critical reflection.

Benevolence and Discomfort: An Ambiguous Spectator Position

We stand in rows behind each other and are asked to place our right hand on the shoulder of the person in front of us. Then we just have to take a step back and raise our hand slightly, just a tiny bit... Almost imperceptibly, almost unknowingly, we raise our hand halfway, almost to the point of *heiling* – before hastily withdrawing our arm! With socialising, nudging, communal eating, mild peer pressure and collective instructions, we have quietly been lulled into the national socialist community, and before we know it, we are almost standing there *heiling*.

We are in the middle of FIX&FOXY's production of *Viljens Triumf* (*Triumph of the Will*, 2012), a theatrical remediation of Leni Riefenstahl's famous tribute film to Hitler and Nazism on the occasion of the National Socialist Party's spectacular congress in Nuremberg in 1934. Along with Riefenstahl's *Olympia* (1936) about the 1936 Berlin Olympics, *Triumph des Willens* (1934) is one of the most influential but also controversial films in cinema history. As audience, we are invited to the theatre to help remake "the most beautiful staging in the world", as the trailer for

the performance says.¹ Using *green screen* and video camera, cotton wool that turns into clouds, and rows of folded pale yellow post-it notes illustrating an infinite tent camp, it is the actor Anders Mossling's job, single-handedly, to play the roles of the supposed 700,000 participants – with a little help from the audience.

The audience is keen to contribute when the benches have to be moved to make room on the floor. We help pass soup around and enjoy ourselves with guitar music around the campfire. We play the waving people who greet the Führer as he enters Nuremberg, and we listen to the speeches of Hitler, Goebbels and other prominent Nazis. Anders Mossling moves his bangs cartoonishly from side to side to act as first one and then another caricatured Nazi. We pull on long rubber boots after we have practised walking in step... Only an elderly couple draw the line at the rubber boots, so that they do not end up (almost) *heiling*.

Triumph of the Will (2012) is one of the plays in which FIX&FOXY work with the audience's discomfort. They have done so to varying degrees since *Come on Bangladesh, just do it!* (2006), when they outsourced the Danish national treasure *Elverhøj* (Elves' Hill, 1828) – and bought pizza for the audience with the money they saved by using cheap foreign labour.

Since then, FIX&FOXY have worked systematically with varying degrees of audience involvement in order to make visible the audience's own investments in specific socio-political conditions. This has occasionally led to polarised political debates, not least in the wake of *Pretty Woman A/S* (Pretty Woman Ltd., 2008). Here, different street prostitutes were hired every night to play the leading role in the 1990 film romance in which the street prostitute Vivian Ward (Julia Roberts) is rescued by the wealthy businessman Edward Lewis (Richard Gere). FIX&FOXY's version exposes the hypocrisy of the Cinderella story: in reality, no saving prince appears, on the contrary we send the women back to the streets at the end of the performance. The performance was accused of exploiting women who supported themselves as street prostitutes, but one could suspect that the criticism was rather based on the fact that the audience could not bear to get so close to the prostitutes and be confronted with their real living conditions.

In both performances, the discomfort is linked to the ambiguous spectator position: on the one hand, as a spectator, you want to support the performance and play along with the premises it lays out; on the other hand, you are uncomfortably confronted with your own complicity in social and political abuse.

Feel-Good Theatre and Political Contradictions

FIX&FOXY's practice is inspired by international groups such as the German-Swiss Rimini Protokoll and the German-British Gob Squad, who in the 1990s and 2000s developed audience-involving post-dramatic formats that moved out into different public and social spaces while responding to global market mechanisms and a globalised media reality by exploiting new technologies such as video, internet and mobile phones.

FIX&FOXY have found their very own expression in this genre. Especially their feel-good way of inviting the audience to participate is in line with the relational and interventionist current in both art and theatre, which dominates both avant-garde art and post-dramatic theatre from the 1990s onwards. This kind of art and theatre is more socially intervening than politically agitating, inviting the audience into dialogical interaction rather than attempting to provoke and incite

1) See the trailer: <https://fixfoxy.com/en/viljens-triumf/>. FIX&FOXYs: *Viljens triumf* 2012 (consulted 28 May 2022).

specific political or revolutionary actions in a confrontational gesture, as seen in activist theatre from the 1920s and 30s and again in the 1960s and 70s.

Art historians such as Claire Bishop and others have been critical of relational aesthetics' soft and consensual form of social interaction and, drawing on political scientist Chantal Mouffe's concept of an agonistic public sphere, based on a shared recognition of legitimate conflicts and antagonisms, have insisted on the need to recognise real political contradictions in participatory art that seeks to intervene in public space and activate audiences.²

It does not seem obvious to accuse FIX&FOXY of being afraid to challenge consensus. But in their very invitation to the audience, there is an openness at play, rather than an aggressive politicisation. A group like SIGNA, by comparison, inscribes the audience into its performances in a far more heavy-handed way, literally enrolling us as for instance hospital patients, disciples of a sect or hotel guests in universes with clear house rules, regulations, etc. Similarly, SIGNA does not shy away from sanctioning, excluding and expelling the audience if they violate the power hierarchies of the game universes. On the contrary, it is a central part of the project to investigate how these power mechanisms work and make the audience align so that we submit to the rights of the strong rather than risk actually challenging the universe and its hierarchies and laws.

At FIX&FOXY, the audience may be seduced into playing along, but the approach to audience participation has usually been based on a fundamental openness and trust, where the premises are continuously laid out so that the audience is almost gently guided into the dramaturgical rules of the performance.

The Shared Responsibility of the Audience

What is at stake in FIX&FOXY's audience involvement can be analysed using Rancière's critique of the position of the spectator in modern theatre. In his essay on "The Emancipated Spectator", the French philosopher Jacques Rancière highlights two main currents in twentieth century theatre thinking, represented by Antonin Artaud and Bertolt Brecht respectively.

At first glance, these two main figures seem to represent opposite ideals in modern theatre: Brecht wants to raise the spectator's awareness by introducing alienating elements that break theatre's seduction of the spectator using distancing devices that activate the spectator's critical sense and mobilise the audience for revolutionary action. Artaud, for his part, wants to completely overcome the distance between stage and auditorium and draw the spectator into the pure energy and presence of the theatre.

However, it turns out that both Brecht and Artaud attempt to overcome the very theatricality of theatre by simply creating a theatre without spectators. In both cases, the aim is to overcome the passivity of the spectators and mobilise them to action. In a curious analysis, Rancière points out how both strategies aim to overcome the cultural distrust of theatre, which Rancière traces back to Plato and his criticism of the poets for assigning a passive role to the audience.

Plato wanted to replace dramatic (and democratic) theatre with a choreographic community where everyone moved to the same beat and rhythm. In other words, he wanted to overcome the distance of representation in favour of *communitas*. Rancière's surprising point is that the same distrust of the theatre that motivates Plato's rejection of it also motivates the formal experiments of modern theatre innovators.

2) See for example Bishop 2004, Mouffe 2005.



Triumph of the Will. Photo: Søren Meisner

They are based on the idea that the theatre is fundamentally an expression of falsity, with its seductive shadow images which make the audience passive – an idea we know especially from Plato's allegory of the cave and Guy Debord's concept of a capitalist society of the spectacle permeated by false representations. This false theatre must now be overcome by a more authentic theatre of pure action and unmediated community, an idea we also know from the celebration of theatrical *liveness* as an expression of a unique presence that transcends all systems of representation and trumps all other art forms.

They intend to teach their spectators ways of ceasing to be spectators and becoming agents of a collective practice. According to the Brechtian paradigm, theatrical mediation makes them conscious of the social situation that gives rise to it and desirous of acting in order to transform it. According to Artaud's logic, it makes them abandon their position as spectators: rather than being placed in front of a spectacle, they are surrounded by the performance, drawn into the circle of action that restores their collective energy. In both cases, theatre is presented as a mediation striving for its own abolition. (Rancière 2021, p. 9)

Rancière does not buy the idea that the theatre is a space of undivided community that is particularly enabling for social or political action. He does not believe that there is any fundamental difference between being in a theatre or in a museum, in a school or in front of the TV at home in the living room. The romantic insistence on physical presence is in fact irrelevant, because the ability of art to generate community depends on the ability of individuals to interpret what they experience in their own way. We share this ability to individually create meaning through associations and dissociations, not by merging into one large unmediated community.

Rancière therefore does not believe in the unbridled activation of the audience. According to Rancière, the audience is always already active in its critical interpretation of the work unfolding on the stage (or the wall or the screen). And the apparent passivity of the audience merely ensures the distance to the work that is necessary for such a critical space of reflection to occur. The performance or the work is the third thing, the material that we can refer to from different points of departure as the basis for a free dialogue. The work generates a space of reflection that is the basis for our free translation into different constellations of meaning. Therefore, the real basis for emancipating the spectator is not to eliminate the distance to the stage and activate the spectator, but to ensure an open and democratically equal space of reflection in a form of theatre that Rancière describes in this way:

Faced with the hyper-theatre that wants to transform representation into presence and passivity into activity, it proposes instead to revoke the privilege of vitality and communitarian power accorded the theatrical stage, so as to restore it to an equal footing with the telling of a story, the reading of a book, or the gaze focused on an image. In sum, it proposes to conceive it as a new scene of equality where heterogeneous performances are translated into one another. For in all these performances what is involved is linking what one knows with what one does not know; being at once a performer deploying her skills and a spectator observing what these skills might produce in a new context among other spectators. (...) An emancipated community is a community of narrators and translators. (Rancière 2021, p. 17)

Such a “stage for equality” can of course easily emerge through interactive forms of theatre such as those developed by FIX&FOXY. Audience involvement does not have to be the same as uncritical *feel-good* theatre or aggressively lecturing theatre of provocation. Just as classical drama or conventional proscenium theatre do not guarantee the emancipation of the spectator. Regardless of genre and form, according to Rancière, the emancipation of the spectator depends on the extent to which a critical space for reflection can be left open. With their post-dramatic dramaturgy, in which all effects and positions are in principle equal, FIX&FOXY place themselves firmly between Brecht and Artaud when they play on the very connection between the audience’s need for presence and its ability or willingness to take direct action. At the same time, they work to put real material for political conflict on stage as Bishop argues for. What is interesting, however, is how the audience dramaturgy, i.e., the positioning of the audience by the performance, affects and defines the space the performance leaves for antagonisms in Bishop’s sense and critical reflection in Rancière’s. As mentioned earlier, I will argue here that the more different and contradictory audience positions a performance allows for, the more complex its potential space of meaning becomes.

This does not mean levelling out real differences and insurmountable disagreements – nor is it about whether the performance is interactive, experimental or conventional. It is about dramaturgically making room for a complex and conflictual space where the audience has access to several possible points of identification, rather than closing the space of meaning in one position – even though the content of the performance may deal with a fixed and irreconcilable social or political antagonism. In the following, I will examine how the audience dramaturgy in a number of FIX&FOXY’s performances affects the critical scope of the performance.

Black Sun and White-Facing: A European House of Mirrors

Dark Noon from 2019 is a performance that works with a high degree of complexity in the casting of the audience.³ In an almost exemplary visualisation of Mouffe's agonistic space of contradictory positions, *Dark Noon* works with the conflict of opposites in the space as well as in the positioning of the audience, without at any point identifying a pure position from which the truth of the play can be said to emanate, and where the audience can seek refuge and settle in the secure conviction of having sympathy on its side. Specifically, the conflicted space is mirrored in the structure of the stage, where the spectators see the performance from different angles and also enter the different parts of the scenography and the performance from different positions and with incomplete perspectives – but still enter a common projection, a common space. Although the performance can be said to make use of Brechtian *verfremdung* as well as intensive moments of presence in Artaud's sense, I will argue, based on its complex positioning of the audience, that *Dark Noon* in its overall dramaturgy first and foremost creates space for Rancièrian reflections or translation manoeuvres in a space of diverse conceptions and experiences.

Dark Noon is something as rare in theatre as a Western, performed with seven South African actors in *whiteface* and co-directed with South African musician and choreographer Nhlanhla Mahlangu. The idea of staging a Western based on the massive migration from Europe to America, which lasted for over a hundred years and culminated in the early 1900s, serves as a complex commentary on the European panic over the many African and Middle Eastern refugees and migrants heading to Europe today.

The seven actors unfold the whole of American history through a genre pastiche, where we see *the land of opportunities* come into being before our eyes, as we are taken to a slave auction in the South and head west across the prairie with Indians and cowboys, settlers and gold diggers, Chinese railway workers, preachers and prostitutes.

At the same time, current American politics are folded into the representation of the historical United States when we see a Trump-figure with a red tie and yellow toupee signing the Constitution, or when the Indian reservation on stage is marked with wire net of the same type used today to separate Mexican children from their parents at the US border. In this way, the performance reveals how the racist violations we see today are rooted in the colonial history of the United States. Furthermore, it seeks to tell this story from a non-Western perspective, which is emphasised towards the end, when the South African actors recount their experiences of watching Westerns as children, experiences that range from fascination to alienated indifference.

The Stage as a Field of Social Experience

One of the most interesting things about *Dark Noon* is how it not only works to break different perspectives against each other in the staged narrative itself, but also in the way it positions its audience. *Dark Noon* is a complex performance that specifically works to break up the perspective, so that it is both told and experienced from several angles and positions at the same time.

Specifically, the audience was placed on three sides of the rectangular stage area, which consisted of red sand. Along the way, the actors build a town out of boards, reminiscent of a classic Western set, but also drawing references to Lars von Trier's 2003 film *Dogville*, which in turn refers back to Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* from 1938 as the classic *all-American* drama about the American small

3) Parts of this article have previously been published in another form in my review of *Dark Noon* in *Norsk Shakespearetidsskrift*, cf. Schultz 2019.

town. In combination with the red sand and the black actors, the set suddenly also resembles the poor houses made of boards and corrugated iron that we know from the South African townships to which black South Africans were forcibly relocated under the apartheid regime. In this way, the thread is traced back to European imperialism, just as the title itself invokes the European idea of the uncivilised wilderness, be it the American prairie or Africa as the dark continent that has been used to legitimise and whitewash the European colonialists' own inhumanity.

The performance upsets the North-South balance, but it also manages to weave together many different historical times and perspectives. Along the way, the role of the audience slowly shifts. We become less neutral and more exposed as the audience becomes involved in the performance: the benches are removed from under us as they are used to build the sets. Some of us become customers in a bank that is being robbed, and we are encouraged *at gun point* to scrape together the South African banknotes that fly around the stage. We are encouraged to queue for Coca-Cola but are refused as we have no money. As churchgoers, we suddenly become participants in a civil rights demonstration.

Finally, at the very end, we get the actors' own stories of how they experienced American Western films as children and young people growing up in an ethnically divided South Africa. Some have been fascinated by Westerns, some reflect on Westerns as a direct expression of the violence and guns that Europeans brought to Africa – others have not been able to relate to the genre at all: seen from the outside, this western mythological basic narrative is not necessarily very interesting or fascinating. Although European colonialism is of enormous historical significance, it is not necessarily very relevant for a South African to engage with it in its western, mythologised form.

Addressing a Complex Audience

The performance employs a number of devices along the way to address these different perspectives on the material. First and foremost, it refrains as far as possible from addressing the Danish audience as a homogeneous, white 'we': Just as the entire performance is an attempt to apply critical perspectives to a dominant historiography, the performance also makes a concrete effort to spread the perspective and both address and position the audience differently.

The audience is seated all the way around the red sand of the stage and thus has different views of the action unfolding across the entire stage area. As the set emerges, it partially blocks the view of some of the spectators. At the same time, however, live cameras project central parts of the action onto a screen on one end wall where there is no audience. The different spectators who are invited on stage further have varying experiences of the action. In other words, not everyone experiences or sees the same thing, but at the same time the stage still functions as a shared social field of experience. The effect is that the audience is addressed as diverse and complex. In this way, *Dark Noon* manages to concretise diversity in the theatre space itself, in the dramaturgical and scenographic devices, and in the relationship with the audience. The story is in a sense familiar material, but we get it in a fragmented and decentred version, where different, parallel narratives, points of view and experiences challenge each other – and thus require of the audience that we connect what we know with what we do not know, in a reflective translation work in Rancière's sense.

The Beast on Stage

"The left wing is characterised by an enormous self-righteousness", Tue Biering claimed in an article in the daily paper *Berlingske* in 2017, explaining how he was completely unaccustomed to seeing opinions other than his own represented on stage:

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*I myself am part of the echo chamber that has emerged in cultural life. Many of those who sit in the theatre are the 'true believers.' They go to the same church as I do. In that way, it's also very safe. We can put on a lot of performances about the bad guys, the right-wingers, and sit and laugh at them. And because it's a left-wing artist on stage portraying the others, it's nice and recognisable. In this way we just emphasise the division into us and them.*⁴ (Biering in Almbjerg, 2017)

With his statement, Biering attempts to reflect critically on his own positioning as an artist and ask whether he has been good enough at creating a theatrical space that can accommodate contradictory positions. However, it seems as if Biering, with this statement in *Berlingske*, is simply reproducing a criticism right down to formulations, sentences and metaphors that is already widespread in the bourgeois press. The interview was a prelude to the performance *Rocky! Taberens genkomst* (Rocky! The Return of the Loser), which, based on Sylvester Stallone's 1976 boxing film, tells the story of a loser who becomes a winner, and in Biering's version mutates into a demagogue who, with money in his pocket, gains access to the media and cultural education, and in this way wins over even former leftists to his racist *white-trash* agenda.



Rocky. Photo: Henrik Ohsten

The performance is built around a dramaturgical circularity in which it is the handsome, and one might understand, centre-leftist actor on stage, Morten Burian, who tells Rocky's story. At first, he holds Rocky at arms-length like a loser at a safe distance from Burian's own self-evident access

4) All translations from sources not previously translated into English are by Marianne Ølholm.

to education and privilege, but gradually he embodies Rocky more and more. It begins with homophobic, racist and sexist jokes – carefully dosed with one of each kind – but accelerates, especially when he hangs a slaughtered pig on a hook as a punching bag. Gradually, he takes over the pig’s position. From punching away at it when language is inadequate to express the loser’s frustrations, Burian moves towards the point where he literally hangs himself by the feet like an animal to be slaughtered and sacrificed. Like a pig.⁵

For Rocky’s successful rebellion causes increasing frustration for the benevolent narrator-actor, to the point where the Burian-character breaks down and wants to smash both Rocky and democracy... and in this way suddenly becomes like Rocky himself, the inarticulate loser who cannot help himself because he has no language for his own anger and humiliation.

We physically feel the sickening coincidence between the collapse of language and the dominance of hatred when Burian stuffs the pig’s torn out tongue into his own mouth and breaks down in inarticulate sounds. He then replaces the pig with his own body, which he has previously marked with red paint like a pig for cutting: a sacrifice of his own left-wing position in order to get *the other*, that is the right-wing populist position, on stage – and at the same time an extreme physical performance that rivals the boxer’s in literally taking over his macho performance before our eyes.

As an epilogue, a politician from The Danish People’s Party, Cheanne Nielsen, enters the stage and talks about how she has been reported to the police for racism, while the media simultaneously tell charming stories about peaceful refugees, but fail to tell us about all the “aliens” who abuse “our hospitality” by cheating, stealing and murdering.⁶ Finally, the last death blow to the “leftist echo chamber” comes in the applause, when Burian enters hand in hand with Cheanne Nielsen, so that if we want to applaud his acting performance, we have to applaud her xenophobia as well.

Echo Chamber or Critical Public sphere

Biering undoubtedly has a point in his analysis of how, in a broader societal reality, the progressive part of the culture-bearing segment that seeks out experimental theatre sometimes acts in a patronising manner towards the minoritised or excluded groups that they also wish to represent on stage or in the debate – and that this elitist approach is problematic. The rest of the analysis, on the other hand, appears more questionable, especially when it comes to the perception of the art field’s link to the surrounding socio-political reality.

A fundamental device in *FIX&FOXY* is to use the theatre space to let the audience meet social groups we do not normally encounter – in other words, to exploit the function of the theatre as a shared democratic space. In *Rocky! The Return of the Loser*, however, Biering short-circuits the critical potential and complexity of this space when he tries to force the audience to listen to the same shrill voices that fill the rest of the media public sphere.

By virtue of its relative autonomy, art is one of the central places in a modern democratic public sphere where a critical analysis of society and ideas of a different socio-political reality have been

5) This physical application of a slaughtered pig’s body was also used in Cecilie Ullerup Schmidt’s gymnastic performance *Landbrug* (Agriculture) at the Café Theatre in 2012, where she had hung herself on a hook with a slaughtered pig while explaining her research into the working and production conditions in pig production. Ullerup Schmidt, however, hung with her head up. The scenography in that performance was by Lisbeth Burian.

6) Dansk Folkeparti (The Danish People’s Party) is a national conservative, right-wing populist political party.

allowed to be heard and articulated. However, at a time when free research, free media and critical art are shamed and subjected to aggressive nationalist mobilisation and censorship by policy-makers, experimental art is put under pressure as a legitimate field for critical thinking.

In democratic, bourgeois society, art has been a public space where we could meet around a common object – a work of art – and form our individual opinions in interaction with and against others, as the old Enlightenment thinkers envisioned it. Rancière builds on this Enlightenment idea when he insists on a radical and potentially transformative equality, both in his ideas about the emancipated spectator and in his more extensive analyses of the political as the designation of a democratic and anarchist process that reconfigures the established structure of society.⁷

That such a critical, democratic space should be disavowed in favour of populism's artificial division of society into the people versus the elite is, in my view, a bigger societal problem than whether the left becomes patronising in its defence of weak social groups. When Tue Biering includes a right-wing populist politician in his performance in order to provoke the cultural elite, it appears more than anything else as an internalisation of the bourgeois suspicion of the critical function of art.

It is a strange logic to hold critical thinking responsible for the rise of populism – should this responsibility not rather be attributed to populist politicians and opinion makers? In *Rocky! The Return of the Loser* Biering wants to analyse a mechanism whereby populism is driven by the people's opposition to a patronising elite, but in his eagerness to open up the space for the position of the radical *other*, it apparently escapes Biering's attention that he thereby becomes part of the anti-*woke* attack on any legitimate critique of the exclusionary mechanisms of bourgeois society.

The very premise of the theatre as a left-wing echo chamber is a truth with modifications. First of all, the bourgeois power elite are happy to go to the theatre, although they tend to go to the big theatres rather than the small experimental venues. Nevertheless, the institutional theatres benefit from the fact that the progressive artists in the independent field develop the language of the performing arts at a low cost and prevent it from stagnating in pure old-fashioned melodrama and popular comedy. Experimental theatre is thus not a closed circuit. FIX&FOXY attempt to challenge and reconfigure the prevailing division of society and the public sphere by giving voice and visibility to groups that are not usually heard. It is commendable to try to make this a truly equal encounter in a space where you have the right to speak yourself, and to try to let yourself be genuinely challenged by the voice of the other. The question is, however, what political gesture this endeavour will translate into.

Biering is to some extent on the same wavelength as Rancière, who has also criticised the critique of populism for being left-elitist. Rancière's position is that the quasi-fascist currents of our time do not emanate from right-wing populism or from the masses. Rather, it is the need for state power to ensure the free movement of capital, on the one hand, and to control the movements of the populations, on the other, that gives rise to discriminatory and racist legislation that serves to produce groups of precarious workers and second-class citizens who can potentially lose their citizenship and legal rights at any time. States need to legitimise their so-called security measures by maintaining a constant state of alert with a series of enemy images that ultimately conflate the democratic concept of the people with the spectre of extremist mass movements, so that any challenge to the legitimacy of power can be dismissed as potentially totalitarian. In this way, the ruling power appears as the only reasonable option and model of society: "*The current polemic*

7) See for example Rancière 2021, p. 51.

over the mortal dangers of populism seeks to establish in theory the idea that we have no other choice." (cf. Rancière 2017). According to Rancière, far-right populism merely exploits the xenophobic defamation of Muslims in particular, which already emanates from the centre of power.

In Biering's dramaturgy, however, this critical analysis is reduced to teaching the audience to be tolerant of intolerance. Cheanne Nielsen ends her incriminating denigration of "the alien" with a plea to the audience to accept that voices like hers are out there, because "I respect yours." But that is simply not true. Her entire speech has been one long expression of disrespect for voices that are different from hers. What she says can therefore only be understood in one way: that she perceives the audience as consisting of one kind of people whose presence she can acknowledge, namely white, ethnic Danish people like herself, who unfortunately just have the wrong opinions. People who differ from this category, on the other hand, she has just demonstrated that she does not respect in any way.

The Casting of the Audience

This brings us back to the question of the dramaturgical positioning or *casting* of the audience. From the outset, FIX&FOXY's central artistic device has been to confront the audience with parts of reality that we tend to look away from and avoid encountering: the prostitutes in the red-light district, the unemployed, the Rocky types, the populist politician, etc. The way to get there has very often been through an alliance with the audience: we are going to shoot this film together, we are going to build this western town together, we are going to investigate this phenomenon together...

In performances like *Rocky!* and also, for example, *Vi de 1%* (*We the 1%*) from 2021, however, there is a shift in the way the audience is positioned. In *Rocky!* we still have the alliance between actor and audience – but we are dealing with a completely unambiguous audience position, where the audience and actor are cast in a clear antagonism to the Rocky character, who is portrayed as *the other*.

In *We the 1%*, super-rich Danes are on stage to feed the audience's curiosity about their lifestyle. The rich are challenged in a play between pride and discomfort at having their wealth on display, and they are met on stage by an underclass of homeless, unemployed, criminals, etc. while the privileged middle class of the theatre audience looks on. An interesting encounter in itself, but both dramaturgically and conceptually the whole exercise seems somewhat diffuse and unresolved. A lone actor, Maria Rich, has been given the task of keeping the actors busy in the scenography, and it appears most of all like a directionless pastime – perhaps mimicking our prejudices about how the rich squander their lives in idleness: We ask the rich man probing questions and let him brag about his Rolex, then we set up a suitable environment for him with cake and champagne and bar cart and maid, then we put pressure on him by introducing the intrusive poor who never become really dangerous, while we play a little tennis and go hunting and have a little conversation about why he should have all the cake and why the losers do not get more angry about it. Although there may be a point in the fact that a united front against the rich does *not* arise – as we saw, for example, in Rocky's populist revolt against the elite – it is mostly the lack of dramatic direction that gives rise to the feeling of embarrassment and cringing, and not the actors themselves. Apparently, there is only one idea behind the whole production: to turn the mirror on the audience itself. Just as the audience in *Rocky! The Return of the Loser* is confronted with Cheanne Nielsen and the limits of our own tolerance in the form of our intolerance of the intolerant, so, as the title almost suggests, we are confronted with our own wealth in *We the 1%*. Because in a final twist, we face-time from the stage with a poor family from Moldova, after which the camera is turned towards ourselves,

and in comparison with the living conditions of the Eastern European family, it becomes clear to the audience that just by being Danes, we ourselves belong to the richest part of the world's population – seen in a global perspective. We are thus to end up looking at ourselves and realising our own privileges, but here, in my opinion, lies the problem that we as an audience are cast in a somewhat simplistic way. The surprise is not really a surprise, because it is already anticipated in the 'we' of the title. The unambiguous casting of the audience serves mostly to cover up an unresolved political analysis and a lack of dramaturgical idea behind the play itself, which means that nothing really comes into play in the encounter on stage or in the theatre space.

The Reconfiguration of Reality

Here we can appropriately return to Rancière, who in 'The Emancipated Spectator' takes as his starting point his book about *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* where he describes the French teacher Joseph Jacotot's method of intellectual emancipation. Jacotot argued that the traditional idea that the teacher must impart knowledge to his pupil leads to stupidity, because the pupil learns first and foremost how ignorant she herself is. The method of intellectual emancipation, on the other hand, confirms the fundamental equality of the talents. The ignorant teacher does not attempt to impart to the pupil the teacher's own knowledge, but on the contrary to help the pupil to acquire knowledge for herself in a process of poetic translation:

From this ignoramus, spelling out signs, to the scientist who constructs hypotheses, the same intelligence is always at work – an intelligence that translates signs into other signs and proceeds by comparisons and illustrations in order to communicate its intellectual adventures and understand what another intelligence is endeavouring to communicate to it. (Rancière 2021, 10)

The basis of any learning, according to Rancière, must be such a fundamental equality of knowledge and talent. Concerning the ignorant teacher, he states:

He does not teach his pupils his knowledge, but orders them to venture into the forest of things and signs, to say what they have seen and what they think of what they have seen, to verify it and have it verified. (Rancière 2021, 11)

Similarly, according to Rancière, the relationship between director and spectator can be conceptualised as a radically equal relationship. It is not a question of the theatre inciting the spectator to action, or of returning the theatre to an original cultic fusion between the agents. It is about recognising that the spectator is already active in her own interpretative effort, and that the spectator, as well as the director or actor, by virtue of her interpretation of the world, is always already in the process of reconfiguring reality here and now by challenging the current division of society and thus disrupting the established order in a political gesture.

Tue Biering criticises the left for being patronising rather than appreciative of *the others*, whom they at the same time want to lift onto the stage in order to bring them into the theatre. This approach corresponds precisely to the position criticised by Rancière, where the teacher tries to impart his own privileged insight to the ignorant pupil, or the intellectual tries to lift the worker to his own higher insight, rather than recognising the equality of talents. But how does Biering position himself as a director when he unfolds his critique from the stage?

A fundamental device in FIX&FOXY's contribution to a reconfiguration of the prevailing division of society consists in bringing about encounters between social classes and population groups that otherwise do not meet, by literally putting them in the same room and making them interact with each other. It is the equal refraction of different perspectives as such that keeps the (interpretative) space open and creates the dynamics of the performances. This is not to say that there are no strong opinions, uncomfortable truths and insurmountable disagreements at stake. In *Viljens triumf* (Triumph of the Will), we experience what happens when people become followers of a totalitarian power, and we realise how we ourselves have the follower in us. In *Dark Noon*, both aggression and irreconcilability are at stake. It is a central point that the Danish audience is challenged by encountering the experience of growing up and living with violence, which is the reality of the South African actors. The performance does not invite a soft, conciliatory exchange between Danish welfare citizens and South African post-apartheid reality, but a realisation that the violence is real. At the same time, we as spectators clearly experience that the perspective is fractured, partial, complex and inconstant through the scenic disposition of the space and our different access to it.

In *Rocky!* and *We the 1%* we also have this encounter between incompatible groups. But here there is another one-sidedness at work in the positioning of the spectator, where we are potentially reduced to a certain monolithic position in society, a certain class or segment. In doing so, the performance narrows the interpretative space in order to make a particular point. In *Rocky!* there is a certain aggression in the device of turning the gaze towards the audience and forcing us to listen to – and applaud – the xenophobic speech of the politician from The Danish People's Party. This very hands-on approach may possibly be conducive in conjunction with the performance's analysis of the mechanisms of populism and its basis in class differences – but it may also just be a thinly disguised confirmation of the prevailing populism. Cheanne Nielsen's function can be compared to the role of the prostitutes in *Pretty Woman Ltd.* But the premise is quite different. In one case, we are specifically confronted with the relentless social exclusion of a vulnerable population group. In the other, we are invited to accept a person who relentlessly advocates the social exclusion of a vulnerable population group. In *We the 1%*, however, the final scene's device of turning the camera on ourselves becomes a somewhat self-fulfilling gesture, despite the performance's intention to challenge our preconceived ideas about other classes and our limited understanding of the economic divisions we ourselves benefit from.

My concluding point is that audience dramaturgy plays a crucial role in relation to the overall statement of the plays. It is crucial to whether FIX&FOXY in a given performance succeed in opening up for a *reconfiguration of the sensuous here and now*, as Rancière describes it, where existing categorisations and divisions of people are experienced as changeable. This experience requires an open and critical space for reflection that can arise in an equal relationship where the spectator is free to form her own interpretations of the work between sender and receiver, director and spectator. In this way, the theatre realises its potential as a public space for shared critical reflection. In an interactive theatre such as FIX&FOXY's, the dramaturgical positioning of the audience becomes a decisive factor in the emergence of this complexity.

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