



Article

Against All Odds

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Tragedy and Statistics

By Erik Exe Christoffersen

FIX&FOXY's *Against All Odds*, 2019, is a representation of today's young people as they will statistically look in the future. The question in this article is what means the performance applies and what dramaturgies are used? Is it a documentary and "scientific" representation of young people or a subjective self-presentation of young people as they see themselves? In any case, it is a staging by FIX&FOXY, who observes the young people from different positions. At the *Reumert Award 2019*, *Against All Odds* received the award for Performance of the Year with the following motivation:

"Here the figures from Statistics Denmark, were embodied as the flesh and blood of 22 children. Who rises to the top, who falls to the bottom? Who will die, who will go to prison, who will become a bank manager? Classes and categories became concrete when the children reported what the statistics predict. The children were given voice, some more nervously and shakily than others – all equally touching."

(<https://iscene.dk/2019/06/02/aarets-reumert-2019-her-er-vinderne>)

What is it more precisely that creates this "touching" effect? In my opinion it is a combination of the energetic and affective presence of the young people and a dramaturgy based on the structure of the tragedy. The tragic is seen as an element in late modern life, where young people have the freedom to create their lives as they want, but where there is also a number of unknown forces that intervene in their reality – randomly or predictably – and this will shape their lives and lead to their end. The performance is a hybrid between the presence of the young people and the form of tragedy.

The Statistical Method

Statistics is about predicting and thus creating a basis for the most favourable development, and in this way avoid disasters or reduce the risk of accidents. Statistical calculations rule our modern daily lives. Will it rain tomorrow? Should I cycle to work or take the bus?

Are the performance's questions about the future conditional on the young people's choices, the interplay of chance, or is the future given by virtue of, for example, a particular class upbringing and privileges? How do biological and social conditions interact with subjective dreams? The aim of statistics is to reduce random coincidences, but there are of course many different approaches to statistics, just as there are differences in emphasis concerning the relationship between personal agency, biological, genetic and social inheritance, education and the ability to break with predictable life patterns.

The use of the statistical method seems to be inspired by the German artist group Rimini Protokol, who use statistics as a starting point for creating new ways of looking at reality. In 2013, in collaboration with Metroplis, they created 100% København (100 % Copenhagen), which was shown at the Royal Theatre with the participation of 100 statistically selected citizens from the city. It was a city portrait that portrayed the identity of Copenhagen as a statistical image of a city's culture.

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Statistics can resemble a kind of fate narrative, about what is (probably) going to happen. It is reminiscent of classical tragedy, for instance Sophocles in King Oedipus, where the oracle predicts that Oedipus will kill his father and marry his mother. Both his parents and Oedipus himself try to avoid this prediction, but in doing so tragically come to realise it. The tragedy ends with Oedipus recognising and acknowledging his fate and taking it upon himself by gouging out his eyes and going into exile abroad. The tragedy leaves a question: is it fair, just or could this fate have been avoided? Is it a condition of life that we cannot change fate? This is also the question in *Against All Odds*.

Young People as Ghosts

There is no classical dramaturgy, no plot and no fictional characters, but 22 young people chosen to represent youth. They slowly fill the stage and are organised into five groups, each with a sign marking their class affiliation: Upper class, upper middle class, middle class, working class and lower class. What will their youth, adulthood, old age and the journey in time leading up to their deaths be like? These are the questions posed by the performance, based on the adults' concerns in relation to the young people.

The performance brings together a number of different parameters such as inheritance, environment, relationships to adults, education and personal circumstances, without specifying, however, which is the most important. It lets the young people form a community that resists an overly concerned adult. As they say: "*We do not give in to your worries*" and "*we fight against all odds*". In this way, their own voice is included in the performance.

The performance alternates between closeness and distance. The young people's bodily vitality and sensuality create closeness and empathy, while the set design and sound, for example, create an investigative and cool distance. The scenography is stylised and consists of geometrically drawn spaces and tracks on a white stage floor. Outside the stage platform, there is a dark backstage where the performers are visible in relative darkness – a kind of "ghosts". It is a classic set-up: the stage opposite the auditorium creates a duality. It is both theatre as theatrical art and a statistical demonstration and study.

Structure of the Performance

The performance alternately presents the young people as individuals with a more or less personal and monological expression and as a visually mediated choral community. The performers form a "we" as a group but are also singled out as individuals. The initial presentation of 22 young people of different ages is followed by a clarification of the factors that shape the young people and their identity: these are categories such as academic competence and personality, the quality of the school, parental resources, expectations and values, and parental presence. The factors that create identity in the performance are economic factors and psychological parameters such as substance abuse, obesity, homelessness, success, divorce and social status, alcohol consumption, domestic violence, sleep, competition, divorce in the family and the number of children.

The first part is a presentation of the young people here and now, and the second part is a prognosis for the future. What can they expect in terms of education, work, leisure, housing, gender and relationships. External factors such as war, climate, disasters and old age also play a part and lead to the young people's different ways of life. The play ends with the young people lying down one by one on the stage floor and marking their deaths. The play has a reflective epilogue in which the possibility of evading statistics is prominent.

Between Fiction and Reality

The young people demonstrate agency through their participation and performance in the show. The energy is high: they dance, do gymnastic exercises, perform a ritual score, mime their parents and the well-meaning advice of various other adult voices on how to deal with the future. There is a high tempo choreography both by the whole group, small groupings and solo performances, with a series of dynamic transitions in and out of the stage. The young people take turns holding microphones for each other, taking turns as “narrators”. Finally, the young people’s costumes change along the way, which also creates dynamics, along with a sound backdrop where sound signals and music mark transitions to new scenes. The young people are both vital and representatives of categories. The statistical narrative construction is presented by different young people in turn from a special “narrative table” so that statistics become a narrative with integrated interruptions that create a certain irony and undermine the credibility of the statistics. At the same time, there is also a pathos effect by virtue of closeness and the actual reality of young people. Their performance is, in and of itself, a form of denial that they are subject to a fate or, for that matter, a director who has forced them to perform. They perform voluntarily, which means that they have become a group that relates to statistics with a certain irony: *“My friends here and I all have different backgrounds ... what we all have in common is that we believe that the future is open to us”* (script). They say what is written in the script, but they also occasionally interrupt and come up with their own ideas, which, however, seem also to be written in the script: *“No one can predict what will happen. I decide for myself... Except for what I’m saying now. Someone has decided that I should say that”* (script).

At the same time, however, they are selected and inscribed in a theatrical framework from which they cannot escape: *“It is also no coincidence that it is precisely us who are standing here. We are generally a statistically broad cross-section of children in the Danish population”* (script).

You could speak of a double irony here: on a dramaturgical level, the text acts as a predetermining figure, and as it turns out, the text is in a way “cruel”, leaving the young people to die one after another as a consequence of the statistics. At the same time, there is a paradox because it is also the text that determines that the young people free themselves from this fate and become self-determining. It is the irony of the dramaturgy that it expresses a paradox: the young people are both free and bound.

On a theatrical level, however, the young people are credible and manifest a “we” that is capable of action. This creates an ambiguous relationship between the young people and the text and the audience’s reception is indeterminate and ambiguous. The young people talk about their potential future, which is thus a form of fiction:

“I’m completing a long higher education programme, even though I never really liked going to university (...) I choose instead to become a single mother”.

“It’s going to be pretty awful for me”

“When my father dies at an early age, I will start drinking ...”

“I will never get over being bullied in primary school”

“According to the statistics, it doesn’t look good for me. I will most likely develop social anxiety...”

“The statistics say I can rest assured with my parents’ long education and their high annual income (...) I will have a good job and three children, but my depression will keep coming back and I will die at 37, committing suicide in a hotel room in Vienna.” (script)

These prophecies of the future are the fiction of the text, but the lines reflect back on the perception of the young people as if it is their future reality. And this, of course, creates a marked contrast to their scenic vitality. The statistical prediction of their deaths is denied by the young people in a kind of epilogue:

“There are probably some people in here who think that this performance may keep us stuck in a narrative about who we are and what will happen to us. That we will believe that the statistics apply to us and that we can’t do anything about it.”

But the young people’s conclusion is: *“We are the ones who can change the statistics”*.

The performance both highlights and emphasises that the actors have become a group and the production has contributed to creating a unique group community. It is as if the young people are taking on a collective agency. The creative process has created a community, and even though the young people are different, they radiate commitment, dynamism, energy, unity: there is no doubt about who does what, holds signs, speaks, who dances or sings. The performance has created a “We”, even if there are social differences that can have consequences unless the young people take responsibility for the inequality and the challenge it is to change the prediction of statistics against all odds. The solution is, for good reasons, not clear-cut: How can the individual offer the statistics resistance? What are the given conditions that cannot be changed? The young people fight against all odds, but the performance is an achievement in itself.

Theatre as a Space of Difference

Morten Kyndrup (2010), professor at Aarhus University, calls the mediality of the theatre a space of difference, because there are different out-distributed senders: for instance, playwright, director, actor and set designer. You can also speak of different recipients, as the spectators do not see and hear the same thing in the auditorium and do not have the opportunity to check what they might have missed, as you can with a book. Thus, a central part of theatre is addressing the audience itself, which helps to emphasise and reinforce the specific character of the communication: that is, to sharpen the spectator’s attention, concentration, curiosity and focus, but not in the same way for everyone. A theatrical performance has an idea of its spectator and addresses this ‘virtual’ recipient, who is not necessarily the same as the actual spectator. The same applies to the sender, who is a complex figure:

“Who says what to whom? Who can know what and when, also in relation to a possible fictional space, which the act of signification in question may evoke and refer to? (...) So who speaks? The author does, the director does, the individual actors do as characters, as artists respectively. All these positions of enunciation are, of course, “embedded” in the performance, and in practical terms they are part of every single act of enunciation on stage. That is to say, corresponding to this complex of embedded sender positions in each statement, the performance contains a matching set of embedded receiver positions, of model or implicit recipients. The actual spectator in flesh and blood is thus offered to listen to the author, to the director, to the individual characters as characters, as actors, as living human beings. All of these are different positions of enunciation that are expressed simultaneously in the individual act of enunciation.” (Kyndrup, 2010 Translation: Ølholm)



Against All Odds. Photo: Søren Meisner

Kyndrup calls this complexity of enunciation a space of difference and emphasises that this is a fundamental feature of the mediality of theatre, where the spectators are the recipients of the work.

Works stage different voices addressing the spectators, and they draw on irony as well as pathos – both distance and empathic immersion in the work. *Against All Odds* has this complex staging of different “voices”, which means that factual uncertainty is a dimension of the dramaturgy and is amplified as the spectator is drawn into concerns about the future: for example, when we hear about the statistical fate of young people, which we may or may not share, and which we may be ashamed of or contradict. The tight structure of the staging creates an adult perspective that coincides with a spectator perspective.

The text, the young people as a social group, the staging, the scenography, the sound design and the choreography are different “voices” that do not say the same thing. The Betty Nansen Teatret is a specific and institutional art framework with its own tradition and atmosphere, and it is probably the first time 22 young people and children are on stage selected according to social and not professional criteria. Furthermore, FIX&FOXY is, of course, a completely different theatrical organisation.

Are the young people the director’s material in FIX&FOXY’s representation? An artist can sometimes be suspected of exploiting reality, the actors and their stories for his or her own (artistic) gain. Is that the case here? Young people are a fragile material. What happens when they are part of an artistic framework? In the theatre, a construction of enunciation is created with multiple voices present simultaneously and side by side: the actors are their own reality, so to speak, but also part of the staging, choreography and sensory effects such as intensity, rhythm, sound and light.

The General and the Unique

One of the basic structures of the performance is the contrast between the general presentation of the future of young people in the statistics and their actual reality. In principle, the statistics speak of an abstract generality. Seven out of ten will do such and such. But the individual can be either one of the seven or one of the three unique exceptions. This creates a conflict between the singular and the general, which is perceived by the spectator, and where the statement of the work appeals to the spectator's choice between the exception and the rule.

The performance is open to various projections, and there are both sensory, artistic and symbolic forms of representation in a complex statement: the young people speak, dance, sing, show signs, where utterances can be both concrete and actual, as well as having the character of an "utterance" that is said because it is in the script. The passage of time itself takes on a fluid character because, in addition to being here and now in time, we move into a future and an imagined reality created by statistics. The device of the performance is precisely to allow the time and space of enunciation to change imperceptibly, while at the same time the local here and now is maintained by virtue of the reality and vitality of the young people. Is the young people's "resistance" real, or is it inscribed in the text as a form of ambiguity? This is the fundamental irony of the performance.

The spectators are entertained by the young people, and they may feel a little guilty about the predictions of the statistics, but on the other hand, they can rejoice in the fact that the young people claim that they can decide and change the statistics.

The performance dissolves the hierarchy between person and role and between present and future. As mentioned, it is a very tightly composed performance, and the young people practically run in and out and perform their tasks: the text must be spoken into a microphone, which they hold for each other, they change clothes, take part in solo and group scores at a relatively fast pace. It is a rhythm that creates an almost old-fashioned gymnastics drill emphasised by the painted tracks on the floor. This staging creates a kind of compassion that takes on a metaphorical character. They are busy realising their statistical destinies and at the same time a community is created in the struggle with the choreography and sound directing the pace.

The Indeterminate Space

Against All Odds touches on the mutability and instability of late modernity. It creates an uncertainty in the affective space, which can be solemn, concentrated, cheerful, melancholic, disorientated, catastrophic and with an ambiguous atmosphere. The young people on stage address the adults, the spectators, who react to their performance with laughter, applause and empathy. The performance creates an atmosphere of "we" communicating about what is usually without words: an indeterminate future. The enunciation as a whole presents the statistic both as a modern prediction that is simultaneously deconstructed by the young people's unity, responsibility, energy, courage and recklessness: *against all odds*.

Closing

Against All Odds as a concept can be applied in several ways. It is particular for this type of theatre that it is possible to incorporate different, also more pedagogical forms of realisation. The concept could be developed and adapted to another group of young people in another city or another country, with the variations that this might create. You could also use the conceptual idea to study and present a given group: a school class, a youth school or a folk high school:

What elements have particularly influenced your identity? School, parents, expectations, ethnicity, health, genes, heritage, other communities: sport, hobby, religion, scouting. What does the future look like for you as an adult and as an old person, when and how do you imagine your death?

For many, the experience of fragmentation, discontinuity, a gap between the internal and the external, doubts and uncertainty about the future are dominant. What is it that I want? Who am I when I am constantly changing? A large proportion of young people today are characterised by neurodivergence, anxiety, gender diversity and loneliness, and they find it difficult to recognise themselves as anything other than a tragic statistic. Prospects for the future are bleak due to climate change, political conflicts, the rise of autocracies and developments in technology and communication.

The concept can be used to explore a range of identity markers. How do I profile myself? How can my identity be represented and to whom? And which ones are inapplicable? About what and in which media? This is what *Against All Odds* as a concept can explore and possibly create a community as a theatre act.

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Against All Odds:

Produced by: Betty Nansen Teatret in collaboration with FIX&FOXY.

Concept & direction: Tue Biering. Set & costume design: Karin Gille.

Choreography, casting & co-direction: Freja Rault-Lykkeberg.

Cast: 22 children aged 10-14 years – Anna Olympia Bøss, Artianne Olivia Søgaard Andersen, Asta Bundgaard Wanscher, Conrad Bengtsson, David Prammann Schrøder, Emma Skov Dahl Christiansen, Falke Lindegaard Hvidtfeldt, Felix Worsøe Alegre, Frederikke Holm Bergendorff, Ida Møller, Isak William Bjerregaard, Jaafar Machal, Kajsa Krogh Larsen, Luka Gry Selander, Michael Basse Theobald, Molly Grand, Nicholai Kristensen, Ronja Emilie Clemens Tillebeck, Samir Abdi Elmi, Thea Hagelskjær Godskesen, Ursula Outzen, Zeraphina Corrie Bendtsen.

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