



Article

Love Theater: Intangible Conflicts

Love Theater: Intangible Conflicts

By Jeppe Kristensen

When working with theatre productions, you are often faced with a fundamental problem. What do you do when the craftsmanship you have learnt and the conventions your profession is based on and applies in your daily work do not seem to be able to satisfactorily answer the challenges of the surrounding (or inner) world you want to deal with?

In FIX&FOXY we have had a wish to make performances that were politically and socially engaging, socially relevant and that *did* something. In collaboration with a large group of actors, production teams and other creative artists who loosely make up FIX&FOXY, we have created over 20 performances. All of them are about some form of societal issue. *Europæerne* (The Europeans, 2005) was about war, *Come on, Bangladesh, just do it!* (2006) was about outsourcing, *Pretty Woman A/S* (Pretty Woman Ltd., 2008) about prostitution, *Friends* (2009) about asylum policy, *Guldfeber* (Gold Fever, 2009) about class differences, *Parsifal – et operakorstog* (Parsifal – an opera crusade, 2011) about ghettoisation and racism, *Sex og Vold* (Sex and Violence, 2012) about the perversion of the media's entertainment approach to abuse and tragedy, *Viljens Triumf* (Triumph of the Will 2012) about political manipulation, *Love Theater* (2015) about sex tourism, *Det store adegilde* (*La Grande Bouffe*) 2015) again about class differences, *Ungdom* (Youth, 2015) a little atypically just about being young and *Et dukkehjem* (A Doll's House, 2013) just as a typically about modern relationships, *Velkommen til Twin Peaks* (Welcome to Twin Peaks, 2016) about the neglected and stagnant province and *Landet uden Drømme* (The Land Without Dreams, 2017) about our future.

The performances are characterised by the fact that from the beginning it has been social issues that we have been committed to. These are conditions where we have been convinced that something was wrong in the way social, political or economic relations have ossified, but not in what way this was problematic or what it would take to improve the situation.

How then, as an artist, can you approach the process of making a performance that does not just aim to describe the situation, but is a participant in it and tries to change something?

Conflict as a Dramaturgical Concept

The theatre's approach to such issues has been to understand them as conflicts. The common thread of a drama, Danish dramaturge Birgitte Hesselaa notes, is "*the conflict in which the main character (the protagonist) becomes involved because he/she has a project that meets resistance. An opponent (antagonist) has an opposing project*" (Hesselaa, 2001, p. 23, original italics). In Michael Evans' *Innføring i dramaturgi* (Introduction to Dramaturgy, 2008) this is formulated as follows:

"In dramatic narratives of all genres, the actions are conflictual. The characters act because of a conflict, otherwise they would stay still" (ibid., p. 30)¹

Evans places conflict as the central element of dramaturgy from which all action emanates – following Ferdinand Brunetière's *La Loi du théâtre* from 1893 (Brunetière, 1893) and thus sees all dramatic theatre since then as conflict-based. This is not only about drama as *action* on stage, but more importantly as the formal construction that can create meaning. That is, what can make a

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

theatre play about something. And can stimulate the audience to change their perception of an issue – and ultimately help to bring about change in the world outside the theatre. Evans introduces different levels of conflict: external conflicts, personal conflicts and internal conflicts (Evans, 2008, p. 31).

Working with Hyper-Complex Issues

When we have chosen social issues to make theatre about in FIX&FOXY, one option would be to look for the essential conflict within them. We have chosen to go a different way. The issues we have worked on share some characteristics: first, they can be viewed as non-conflictual. When we set out to create a performance about outsourcing in *Come on, Bangladesh, just do it!* (2006), we thought that the globalisation of conditions of production was deeply problematic and that the exploitation of labour by slave economies was a quite extreme conflict between companies with almost unlimited agency and workers with little or almost no agency.² But this seemed reductive. You *could* see the issue as one of the most powerful and socially transformative forces in the world without seeing a conflict. That was essential. Second, these were issues that we soon realised we had opinions about, but not extensive knowledge of. The risk of creating a narrative or a basic conflict that simply confirmed what we already believed seemed far too great.

A basic idea in our work has been that the issues we find interesting are probably so complex or hyper-complex that it makes no artistic sense to work with them as a traditional dramatic conflict, because we cannot make any suggestions as to what a solution might be. And maybe it does not make sense to talk about solutions at all.

As a basic premise of our work, we have not been willing to give up the idea of the need for change. This has placed us in the particular position that we have wanted to participate in conflicts as creative theatre artists in a different way than through a classical, critical position; that we have wanted to create positive change without a positive end goal; and that we have wanted and needed to connect an agenda for change with an equally open-minded curiosity. We have had to learn along the way, not only research enough to be able to see the conflict clearly and choose, but understand the complexity of the situation and experience its intractability, as well as giving that intractability a form on the theatre stage that in some way initiates positive change. How do you do this?

Our only response has been to explore it during rehearsals. Our daily work of shaping a performance and making tiny choices about how to create the performance has been about staging this uncertainty in the face of the political or social situation we were dealing with, which we could at the same time recognise as constructive.

It has been essential for these thematic choices and creative processes that we have not carried them out alone. In situations where we did not think we knew what the right choice was – where we did not know whether our “Nora” should walk away or not but were curious about her own attitude to the situation, we have resorted to a double strategy: We have invited the people affected by the issue to participate in the creation of the performance. Often as actors and also as co-creators. In addition to using theatre fiction to give form to a problem (by making a performance that in fictional form presents a problem as a story with actors in conflict with each other), we have also turned the theatre situation itself and that is gathering spectators and actors in the same room, to

2) Our main source for thinking as we did about outsourcing was Naomi Klein’s journalistic insight into the mechanisms of outsourcing in her book *No Logo. Mærkerne, magten, modstanden* (Klein, 2001). The result was a performance by Bangladeshi actors at the Royal Danish Theatre in Copenhagen.

make the spectators watch the actors perform a performance, as part of our signifying material and as something we could work with artistically. In this way, we have tried to stage complex issues and maintain our own uncertainty as an essential element, while at the same time holding on to the idea – that it should somehow become a performance that leads its spectators through a change and thus, on a small scale, contribute to changing the surrounding world and the present time. In the following, I will take a closer look at *Love Theater* (2015) as a concrete example of this work.

Love Theater

In the spring of 2014, I travelled with set designer Sille Dons Heltoft and our “fixer”³ Hanne Thornager to Bangkok, Thailand, as the first step in the work of making FIX & FOXY’s theatre performance *Love Theater*. We each had our own area of responsibility for the trip. Sille was responsible for finding everything that would later make up our scenography in Copenhagen, which was to be a Thai hotel room. She spent her days in Bangkok seeking out Bangkok hotel rooms with her camera, and then working her way through the markets of the city in search of Thai electrical sockets, soaps, hotel towels, lamps, bed linen, incense sticks, bamboo leaves, dressing gowns, waving cats, mass-produced backlit pictures, porn films, artificial flowers, dried fish, disposable toothbrushes, slippers, preoccupied with small details to recreate a Thai hotel room when we returned to Copenhagen.

I was in Bangkok to cast. We had to find a Thai prostitute to play the leading role in our performance. A prostitute who was interested in coming to Denmark for a few months to develop and perform a theatre production with her as the only actress on stage. The theatre performance was to be based on her own life and her own experiences as a prostitute.

This kind of casting has been a central part of our work in FIX&FOXY. Our performances feature people who are all very different and (also for us personally) worth knowing as individuals, but who have appeared in our performances under some kind of label such as “Bangladeshi”, “prostitute”, “poor”, “social housing resident”, “asylum seeker” and the like.

This is an expression of our personal point of departure in working with the themes of the performances. The issues they deal with are not particularly relevant to us in the first place. We can go about our daily lives without worrying about prostitution or outsourcing or the continuing imbalance in housing opportunities between ethnic and non-ethnic Danes. These issues, which we genuinely believe are of great importance, appear in our lives first and foremost as stories. (And probably the same is true for a very large part of our audience.) We read about them in the newspaper, see them in the news, in films, as stereotypes in the music we listen to. The conceptual basis of our performances is often that we all come into contact in our lives with stories, whether imposed or acquired, about who we are and who others are. These stories vary from pure prejudice to more nuanced attempts at understanding. They are fictions we have about each other, but they are not just fictional, they seep into our lives and become real. They affect the way we perceive each other and the way we perceive ourselves.

In our performances, we invite people who are affected by such a narrative on stage, often to encounter a popular culture version of that narrative. Our idea is that popular culture narratives are

3) The fact that in the process of making a theatre performance, we use a “fixer” who, as a professional with skills in organising and carrying out work in difficult environments, often works in international business or in the development and humanitarian sector, is a very concrete example of how the shift from character-based conflicts to person-based issues not only affects what happens on stage and what theatre art looks like, but just as much how we have to think about theatre production and creative work.

not innocent. They are the sea we swim in in terms of our understanding of each other, and their way of smoothing, romanticising, or demonising affects the way we look at people we do not know.

FIX&FOXY's performances deal with the alien. We create narratives to fill in the gaps in our worldview and the impact these narratives have on all of us. In the performances, we work with a problematic, tension-filled discrepancy between the real life of a person, or a group of people, and the ideas the rest of us have about them. If the classical dramatic conflict can sometimes seem too clear-cut – and it clearly is in its pop-cultural variant – we experience again and again that the encounter between these all too simple stories we have about each other, and the real human being brings us into an incalculable and fascinating wealth of meanings, staging possibilities, and new discoveries.

In *Love Theater* we did not want to work with a pop story as a starting point. We thought that the preconceptions a theatre audience might have about a Thai prostitute and what sex tourism would be is a sufficient starting point for the work. We wanted to let the audience meet a Thai prostitute and her own stories. The question then became: which stories?

Casting

In Bangkok, through a collaboration with the prostitutes' union, I was faced with the choice between three potential lead roles. And thus, also between three completely different potential performances. We carried out the casting by borrowing a hotel room and here asking the women to talk about their first experience as a prostitute. As they recounted situations, we also tried to recreate them with me as the client. I kept asking about details in the narrative and quite practical, small observations: How did you get into the room, what did you do then, what did you say, what happened next? The women thought it was incredibly stupid to ask about such things, because to them it was obvious how it was done. But I knew nothing about prostitution and sex tourism, so it was important to me. And at the same time, small situations began to occur between us that could be seen as a kind of realism, where the small details in the relationship between the prostitute and the customer began to make sense beyond the practical – small images of security, desire, care, anxiety, business.

One of the three women arrived several hours late. She was angry that we had planned to meet in the early afternoon. She had been up all night and was still intoxicated. When we finally started the audition, she repeatedly scolded me, refused to participate and several times almost fell asleep. At the same time, there was a great indignation about her own life situation; she was angry with the customers and quite explicit about seeing her work as a continuous violation. It was chaotic and wild, difficult to see how a further rehearsal process would go, but also a really good story, a personal commitment and an attitude towards sex tourism that corresponded well with my own.

The second woman worked mainly with Thai men. Her first prostitution experience took place in a local restaurant, where she and other young women sat behind a glass window in the restaurant room while local men came to eat and drink, occasionally picking a woman from the window. Her work as a prostitute in this Thai environment was completely different from the prostitution environment aimed at Western men. On the other hand, she was skilful at recreating situations. It was not just about details and facts. She also managed to create a relationship where it felt very intimate to be with her, and comfortable in a way that emphasised the attractiveness of prostitution.

The third woman was politically active in EMPOWER, a kind of local labour union for Bangkok's prostitutes. She was sharp and funny, competent in the situation we had set up. It was uncertain how much experience as a prostitute she actually had. Relatively good at English and

with a clear attitude towards prostitution, which she saw as a personal liberation project that could provide her with her own income and make her independent of Thai men whose views on gender roles she disapproved of.

Casting in a situation like this, where we had to choose to work with a person who will be our theatrical representation of a political problem, and thus a representative of a large group of other people, is a task that can only be solved by delimiting huge parts of the field. Everything cannot be included. For us, the important thing has been to continuously consider the criteria by which we should navigate. In all casting situations, including this one, we *must* be focused on the theatre experience for the audience. This involves some practical considerations. For example, we need to have a good feeling that it is possible to conduct rehearsals and performances without a participant dropping out. We are interested in the stories of our participants. Is it interesting for others? This can easily be the case even for small and undramatic stories. Finally, we spend a lot of time thinking about how a participant can convey this story, both in terms of their own ability as performers and our idea of what kind of performance we are going to make. The performance can be organised according to the participant rather than the opposite.

In the situation while casting in Bangkok, this appears as a balance between pure practicality on the one hand and the theme and message of the performance on the other. Seen from a distance I am less sure that this is the case, and our way of dealing with the dilemma is also shaped by experiences that the contradiction may not be so great. It is clear that the three women I met for casting in Bangkok represent the political issue of 'sex tourism' in completely different ways and would convey completely different images of what sex tourism is and what the consequences of this industry are. The considerations concerning production and theatre practicalities are essential because a performance *has* to come out of it. Considerations about the representation of the political problem are equally essential because we have a specific aim with our theatre. But at the same time, the work of giving form to a problem is also processual and is about discovering different aspects. The most important thing is almost to end up making a different performance than the one we dreamt of from the start. In the face of reality, practical considerations play a crucial role in our daily work, helping to lead us to new places.

In Bangkok, the idea that it is annoying that the only practically suitable candidate for the role is a supporter of prostitution, therefore also becomes the idea that this can become a quality of the performance.

Rehearsals

Two months later, the third woman, Ping Pong, arrived in Copenhagen. We embarked on a rehearsal programme, where only the framework was in place. We knew that we wanted to continue working with the kind of scenes I had used for the casting, where a spectator and Ping Pong together recreate a situation from Ping Pong's life as a prostitute. And we knew that this would take place inside the hotel room that our set designer had collected elements for in Bangkok. Other essential elements of the performance were still to be determined. What would each situation be about? Which specific stories would be retold? What image of sex tourism would these present?

It also added an element of uncertainty to the rehearsals that Tue's and my own basis for the whole project was a very clear, critical attitude towards sex tourism, while Ping Pong's attitude was the opposite. How could we work together? How to make a performance we all liked?

In the traditional theatre production apparatus, some things are a given: you always work with professionals. The work is their profession, and they are interested in applying their skills.

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The people you work with know the elements and the process of a theatre production. They know what the different staff members are doing, they know the creative processes of theatre, and they know that there are good days and bad days. They know the specific routines of a rehearsal process, which makes it easier to organise collaboration. They are also part of the process of creating the performance because they have a professional interest in working in theatre and want to further their career.

None of this applies when working with a non-actor protagonist. A fundamental premise of the work changes. As directors, we cannot demand anything. We cannot push the actor to use her acting skills or professionalism or ask her to play a role she finds uninteresting or ask her to express thoughts she does not agree with. We have to organise a process she wants to be part of and make a performance she likes.

This does not mean that we are not ambitious. We find that when we are professional and fully committed to our performances, it becomes more attractive and rewarding for others to join in. People are nervous and have doubts, so it is our responsibility to guarantee the quality of the performance we have asked them to participate in.

Making a performance that is adjusted to the actor's personality, both in terms of acting skills and attitudes, is not very common in our field. We are used to thinking that we, as directors and concept developers, should conceive a performance and then stage it. But Ping Pong had not come to Copenhagen to do theatre. For a trial process like this to work, it was necessary to create a performance where she could show her views on sex tourism. The attraction and the reason to engage with Ping Pong and our other performances is that they can show or tell the audience something that they feel there are no other opportunities to see.

The most obvious point when working with people who are not actors is that we cannot get what we want. We have to accept that they play differently, that they act differently in rehearsals, and that they have different opinions than we do. Perhaps a more important point is that we are no righter than they are. We have to accept that we do not know what is right and wrong, even if we may have a clear political vision and a strong opinion. And what is more – this in itself is the whole basis of this kind of theatre. In our roles as directors, we are the spectators' representative in the rehearsal process. And we want to lead our audience to a world, a view of the world, an experience that is new to them. We want them to be uncertain, to question what they are convinced of. So of course, we do not know what is right and wrong, that is how it has to be, otherwise we would have no reason to make the performance.

In the rehearsals for *Love Theater*, this work began by getting Ping Pong to tell us stories. Tell us about situations she had experienced. She told us about her first experience as a prostitute, about funny episodes and about experiences where the men appeared a bit silly. Gradually we got an overview of a material that could become nine different scenes.

We had to rely to a great extent on Ping Pong's stories being true. There was no possibility of fact-checking. Our strategy was therefore to keep asking about details in the stories, and also to look for details that were not necessarily quite as positive as she herself presented the overall picture.

At the same time, we started on the physical staging. This was also very much about asking how it had happened in the original situation. How the customer had looked, how he had sat, how they had touched each other. We became more and more concerned with concrete details that helped us to transcend our own attitudes towards the subject matter and to understand the needs of some customers. When we stepped into the role of customer and were directed by Ping Pong and drawn

into conversations, touching or just being allowed to make eye contact, the situation seemed less like an assault than we initially saw it and more like a situation where Ping Pong was in control.

There are, of course several objections to this that are deeply relevant. As mentioned, it is problematic to let a single woman, who is resourceful and independent, appear as a witness of truth for an industry where many women probably have other experiences. It is also problematic to uncritically trust a woman's version of her work without taking into account that she may have a political or psychological reason to portray her life more favourably than it may actually be.

The details, the insistent form of documentarism, therefore became essential in our rehearsal process. It became a way of bringing us – politically engaged, humanist artists – into a landscape where our norms did not apply. And conversely, the details established a level of the performance that had a different narrative from Ping Pong's own versions. Much of this was in micro-situations that were repeated with each encounter with a new client. In every single situation, we see Ping Pong place a mobile phone with a friend on speed-dial as a safety precaution, so that in every encounter with customers she is only one keystroke away from getting help. Between each meeting, there is a constant repetition of mechanically putting on new bed linen and putting out new towels, and there is a constant repetition of exchanging money. These actions, as presented in the situation descriptions, were far more sad than Ping Pong allowed us to understand.

In this way, the rehearsals came to be about bringing narratives, physical touches, repetitions, and interaction together in a form where the political, social, relational phenomenon of sex tourism can be experienced as a hyper-complex conflict, and that the very act of entering into it and experiencing it is less black and white than normally - can be a step towards changing it.

The conflict we wanted to present to the audience was not necessarily part of the stories that Ping Pong recreated. Here there were not, in the classical dramaturgical sense, two characters in conflict with each other, or at least not on such a conscious level that an event or course of action emerged from it. It was rather the case that neither of the two characters experienced the situation as a conflict. Instead, we wanted to present the audience with a conflict between their own preconceptions and the narratives they encountered, between the narratives of the performance and the repetitive form of the performance, between being able to recognise the problematic in sex tourism and at the same time experiencing the positive in the physical contact and care from the prostitute.

The Love Theater Performance

In the performance we ended up presenting to the audience, the prostitute Ping Pong performed nine scenes from her life. Each scene showed an encounter with a foreign sex customer, and each scene was performed with the help of one of the ten spectators to the performance, who were then given the role of the customer. The performance was staged in an industrial hall in Copenhagen. It took place inside a white box measuring approximately 6×4×3 metres. When, as one of the ten spectators, you were let into the box, you entered a paraphrase of a Thai hotel room: a Thai woman welcomed you at the door. Inside, it was warm. It smelled of curry, and the colours were differently garish than outside. Along one wall ten orange folding chairs were placed where you could sit with the other spectators. In the centre was a double bed with a bedspread with colourful cushions. A large mirror hung over the entire bed. To the left of the bed was a jacuzzi with a shower curtain in front of it and further to the left, all the way past the door you entered, was a cupboard full of towels. To the far right, up to the row of spectators, was a sofa, and in the back right corner, there was a small desk or dressing table with a mirror. On the wall next to it was a TV. Thai music was

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playing and the audience was surrounded by real sounds, Thai street life on the other side of the wall, footsteps above the ceiling, etc.

The Thai woman sat on the end of the bed and looked at the audience for a long time, smiling. Then she focused on a spectator, smiled invitingly and patted the bed, waiting for her or him to get up and sit next to her. Then she said the following ⁴:

PING PONG:

You are my first foreigner customer. Twenty years ago. I am 22 years old. I am scared of foreigner. They are ... everything is big. My friend told my foreigner they are very polite. You can get more money. And quick too. You can finish in five minutes. So, I would like to try. Hi, I am Ping Pong nice to meet you.

OK:

Anders. Nice to meet you

PING PONG:

Where are you from?

VISITOR:

I come from Denmark

PING PONG:

That time you come from Germany.

TILSKUER:

Okay, I come from Germany.

PING PONG:

You a big guy. Have a white hair. And you are sixty years old. And you have a big belly.

(both laugh)

And you have some beard in your face. You look like Santa Claus!

She was very careful to wait to continue until she saw that the spectator realised that she/he had now been chosen to be an old German man with a white beard who looked like Santa Claus to her. And if she was nice and smiling in the conversation with this German gentleman, she could be quite determined in case the spectator started to improvise in the role. “*We meet in a beer bar. Would you like to buy me a beer? That time you said yes!*”, she explained.

In the scene, she recounted her encounter with this first foreign sex customer. The story was quite short. They met in a bar. She chooses him because he does not look scary. They go to his guesthouse where he has a small room that smells of bamboo. She takes a shower. Then he takes a shower, and while he showers, she tries to look sexy on the bed. He comes back, she puts him down. She does not know what he wants and tries to read his body language. She does her job, takes a shower and asks for money. Then she hugs him and tells him that he is a kind man.

The performance consisted of nine such scenes – one per spectator and a single one involving two spectators. The stories were all ‘small’. There were no big dramas or conflicts. In headlines the scenes were: 1) The first customer, 2) A customer who wants her to teach his wife about sex, 3) A man whose mother has just died, 4) A young man in love, 5) An older man she goes travelling

4) The lines are quoted from the internal video documentation of the performance. The exact wording changed slightly from spectator to spectator, depending on their reaction.

with, 6) Two threatening young men, 7) The customer who satisfied her, 8) A depressed customer who is weary of life, and 9) Her last customer who made her feel old.

All the scenes use the same devices, which gradually become quite familiar to the spectators. They become a special set of rules for this particular performance that everyone in the room learns throughout the performance: in each scene, a spectator is invited on stage with a smile, a little wave or a discreet “Come”. Ping Pong then tells the spectator where she wants her or him to sit. Often just with a gesture, a pat on the bed next to her or something similar. She tells the spectator who she or he now “is” in the fiction and where they are: “*You are young man. You very handsome. We meet in beer bar*”. Or: “*You are professor. You drink coffee*”.

As in the example of the elderly German customer, the spectator will often respond based on who they are. And as in the example, they will then be talked into the role of this particular customer. Their own life is not interesting as a generator of lines, and even though the individual spectator is on stage without any form of preparation, they are not given any room to improvise. If the spectator tries to improvise lines, Ping Pong will correct and stop this by talking about the role as for example “*No, you not laugh. You very quiet guy*”.

In this way, Ping Pong gets the spectator to recreate a situation in words and actions. This can take a long time. In the second scene, this little situation unfolds, where you can see the very special theatricality that the performance gains through the joint re-creation. Very set frames and stage actions are intertwined with an unprepared conversation. First, Ping Pong tries to get the spectator to take on the role of customer by addressing him as “you”:

*PING PONG (sits on the bed with a spectator.)
I meet you in a beer bar. You are ...
(She looks at him intently).
... 35 year old.
I'm 32.*

Ping Pong begins to give instructions about the customer's physique:

*Every time you sit comfortable like this.
(She shows him how to sit, leaning back, resting on his arms, relaxed)
SPECTATOR:
I was a bit younger.
PING PONG (sits up again):
And that time ... every time I meet a customer in a beer bar, I do like this.
(She slowly runs her hand up his inner thigh.)
For check about your size for the condom.
SPECTATOR:
Oh.
PING PONG:
You're size ... 52.
Yes?*

When they have come to a common understanding, Ping Pong can take the spectator into an intimate scene:

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PING PONG (*getting up*):

I take mobile phone. I can call my friend very quick. If I have some problem.

(She places her phone on the bedside table and takes a towel.)

I would like to take shower.

(She wraps the towel around her, outside her clothes.)

Would you like to take shower with me?

(He hesitates a bit and she answers for him)

yes!

(She shows a towel on the bed and waits for him to wrap it around his waist, outside his normal clothes. Meanwhile she takes a packet of condoms by the bed.)

(To the audience) 52!

(When he is ready, she holds out her hand. He takes it and together they get into the bathtub.

She takes off her towel, then his, takes his hand.)

Can you sit?

(They sit facing each other in the empty bathtub, she on her knees, he more relaxed.)

I take care for you...

SPECTATOR:

Okay ...

(She washes his hand and forearm with a pink bath sponge that has been soaking in perfumed water. He closes his eyes as she does so. She reaches for a towel hanging by the bathtub and dries his arm and hand thoroughly and gently).

PING PONG:

And you take care for me, too.

SPECTATOR (*in a low voice*):

Okay

(Without further instruction, he takes the sponge and washes her arm. She holds the towel near him, he takes it and dries her arm).

PING PONG:

Then ... like this ...

(She puts him further down in the bath. And leans slightly over him.

I put a condom on you. And we have sex in the bath.

(She smiles at him.)

Initially, again it becomes part of the performance that the spectator and Ping Pong have to “find each other” – the spectator needs a little time to figure out the rules of the game. The scene then unfolds as a re-creation of a concrete situation. The emphasis is on details that can be recreated. How they sat, what they said to each other, how and why Ping Pong placed her mobile phone within easy reach, that they washed each other clean, where they had sex and so on. Details that cannot be recreated are referenced or narrated. How old they were when the action took place in real life, what the motel looked like, the size of the condoms, and so on.

Ping Pong spends a lot of time performing the actions and waiting for the spectator to participate in performing their part of the actions.

The situation Ping Pong has experienced with a real customer is only hinted at as classical acting. Ping Pong sets the tone of what she said at the time so that it appears realistic and as a quite mimetic and empathetic form of theatre, and she also performs actions with identification and the

ability to create images in the spectators' minds of what it would have been like. There are scattered fragments of actions and acting mixed into a performance that consists equally of instructions, concrete actions in the space, retellings of things that cannot be seen in the space or that are clearly distinct from the space and the actions that take place in it.

In the first scenes of the performance, it is clearly not obvious to the audience where the boundaries are for what should be recreated and what should not. And how and with what degree of identification it should be recreated. This results in a number of awkward situations, but first and foremost a great deal of uncertainty, which probably stems from practicalities, but becomes the mood of the performance.

Much of the audience's experience in *Love Theater* derives from the theatrical situation rather than the dramatic fiction. There are few and brief opportunities for the spectator to forget themselves and their presence in the space and disappear into the narrative. The role of the spectator in *Love Theater* differs significantly from the classical spectator situation. Peter Szondi describes the latter as follows in his analysis of the drama:

The theatre goer is an observer – silent, with hands tied, lamed by the impact of this other world. This total passivity will, however (and therein lies the dramatic experience), be converted into irrational activity. He, who was the spectator, is pulled into the dramatic event, becomes the person speaking (through the mouth of the character, of course). The spectator-Drama relationship is one of complete separation or complete identity, not one in which the spectator invades the Drama or is addressed through the Drama. (Szondi, 1987, p. 8)

The ideal for Szondi is that the spectator forgets himself and his presence in the theatre and instead fully immerses himself in the action and experiences this action through the characters. In our performance, this is replaced by an experience where the actual theatre situation – being in an intimate space with the prostitute and nine other spectators – is far more significant.

This is a deliberate strategy that has to do with the kind of signification the performance offers the audience. And perhaps one might say, what kind of experience, if by experience one understands what it means to open oneself up to become someone else to some degree.

In the performance, the theatre situation continuously mirrors the action in the story. It was a circumstance for the performance that Ping Pong had to spend time creating a good relationship with the first spectator so that he or she understood the fictional contract and wanted to participate in the game. But it was also a reflection of the real situation, Ping Pong described, where she met a customer and spent time negotiating the terms with him. The same was true of the linguistic challenges that constantly characterised the performance and the way she dealt with the spectators and told them what was going to happen.

This meant that a large part of the spectators' perception took place outside the fiction, and that the meaning that emerged was often only associatively linked to the fiction. The awkward yet sensuous beauty of sitting in a bathtub being washed by a stranger *in the theatre space* mirrors the awkward yet attractive quality of being washed by a stranger *in Thailand*.

Compared to traditional theatre, and the theatrical modality Evans (2008) traces in his analysis of Ibsen, identification with character and action is here not replaced by but combined with a theatricality where one understands through the body and the senses in the interaction with Ping Pong in each scene. Through being in the social situation in this room with a strange woman and nine other spectators, and together being responsible for creating a performance, meaning is

experienced and created. Here, kindness, politeness, curiosity, understanding for others and similar social competences suddenly become as important as critical reflection. And at the same time, it is possible to sit on your chair and immerse yourself in the action, just as it is an essential part of the performance that you constantly have the opportunity to reflect on the very idea of paying a Thai woman to come to Denmark and entertain with her experiences, and why and whether it is okay that you are placed in this position as a spectator.

Conceptual and Drama Pedagogical Roots

Love Theater is a form of theatre and a way of creating perception that can be considered in relation to two major trends in contemporary theatre. One is the conceptual and interventionist turn in contemporary theatre, with clear links to developments in the visual arts, and which is about *doing*. In conceptual thinking, the modal forms of the art forms become part of the material. The conflict is moved out of the treated material into the treatment itself *by doing*. In *Intervention og kunst – socialt og politisk engagement i samtidskunsten* (Intervention and art – social and political engagement in contemporary art), Solveig Gade (2010) pinpoints this development in contemporary art as a development from the media-specific to the debate-specific, and as being concerned with “intervening in and interfering with social systems and rationales other than those of art” (Gade, 2010, p.11).

The second tendency is the simultaneous, though not parallel, immersive turn with clear links to the artistic-didactic strategy of drama pedagogy, which is about *being in* and experiencing from within. This gives the participant a completely different empathic and reflective way of understanding complex issues. Through the artistic-didactic situation, the participant is given the opportunity to experience through his or her own senses and his or her own body, and this results in learning that is more nuanced and, paradoxically, more reflective (Bailin, 1993).

The interest of art theatre in experiencing from within, known as *immersed theatre*, remains intense. At one extreme of this field is the British Punch Drunk Theatre that can be mentioned, which creates overwhelming and eventful *feel-good* universes where you can move around and still be seductively led through a story. At the other extreme is Danish/Austrian SIGNA, whose immersive total experiences are far more challenging and problematic, forcing you to experience sexual, gender political, power-related themes from the inside.

Love Theater positioned itself between the conceptual and the immersive. In one out of nine scenes, the individual spectator was there – and then not. The immersive being-in-the participation in some scenes had its quality in the fact that you were given the opportunity to understand a conflicted situation from the inside, which was continuously challenged by the narrative form. You were precisely not this character but had the relationship with Ping Pong and the experience of the physical touch, the care, and her acting, moved to a private level.

In the other eight scenes we witnessed a conceptual doing – the re-creation of Ping Pong’s encounters with Western men with Western spectators. But even this position was not ‘safe’, partly because of the extreme intimacy of the theatre space, and partly because of the immersive awareness and discomfort of knowing that in a moment it would be your turn. Even here, where the other spectators lent their bodies, sympathy and kindness to the customer, no special space was given to normativity.

The hallmark and strength of this performance is thus to avoid narrating a conflict and to avoid depicting the positions in the complex situation as “good” and “bad”. It simply conveys –from an

immersive and conceptual position – experiences in which neither customer nor prostitute sees sex tourism as a problem or a sharply defined conflict. It is much more complicated than that.

And so what is really left? First, I think there are a number of important scenes about longing, caring, boredom, fear and the course of life that we would have missed or censored if we had been looking for a conflict.

In addition, a conceptual framework and procedural structure is provided in the form of the performance's almost tedious repetition. Each scene begins with a smile and a hello, then a beer, a shower, sex, another shower, payment, goodbye, all the time with rapid shifts between acting, joy and sober narrative. And then clean-up, preparation, next customer/next scene. In the repetition, the performance becomes discreetly political.

Finally, there is an immersive event that lies *in* the spectator's experience through her/his *being* in the situation. Here, the spectators were asked to represent sex clients. They were not in any way compared to them or held accountable. But they were placed in a non-normative situation where norms are common, and they were given the opportunity to feel, via their own sensory-emotional apparatus, these sex clients' need for touch, care and relationships – sex only to a very modest extent. This in a situation where others were watching and where others had been watched.

Change

For me, *Love Theater* was about staging uncertainty. In the first instance to my and the spectators' attitudes, in the next to a worldview and an identity. The important thing was to create a form where you took the step into the uncertainty of what is *right* by being guided safely but challengingly into an unusual space of perception.

Perhaps, based on *Love Theater*, it could be said that there is an ongoing identity formation that takes place when we do something unusual. This is true in the theatre as well as in real life. We want to do the right thing and be seen as someone who does the right thing, knowing that we do not know what the right thing is. Instead, we have to step into the world and experience it and do it as best we can. So in *Love Theater*, we tried to refrain from staging a conflict and instead give shape to this mud, this fundamental uncertainty that underlies our position in all conflicts.

Love Theater does not have a dramaturgical progress in the classical sense. Compared to the dramaturgical conflict described by Evans (2008), *Love Theater* is static and without real development. Nevertheless, I think it makes sense to see the performance as an *event*, or at least to evaluate and criticise the performance based on this ambition. The particular idiom of the performance has emerged as a response to how we in FIX&FOXY feel that there are social structures and phenomena that are perhaps conflictual and certainly of great importance to us, and which our classical theatre tools do not seem able to handle. Instead, devices such as physical contact, re-creation, a shared meeting, repetition, sensuality and role-playing are moulded together into something that can happen for and with the spectators, and hopefully lead them from a state where they feel quite certain in their positions and at a safe distance from the problem to a new state where they are intertwined in the problem – and less clarified. The performance is thus a suggestion from our side as to why it is important in a theatre context to shift focus from the sharply defined conflict to the intangible conflict. It is about training the ability to allow oneself to change.

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