



## Essay

### FIX&FOXY's Distribution of Management

# FIX&FOXY's Distribution of Management

By Ida Krøgholt

How does FIX&FOXY involve, curate and facilitate the people who participate in the performances? And what does this say about FIX&FOXY's poetics?

FIX&FOXY has developed an interesting form of participatory curation and facilitation of their performers, which interacts with the theatre's directorial concept and poetics. The participatory approach is expressed in production processes where the performer-participants are each other's co-producers and in performances where they showcase each other through handheld video recording and mutual interviews. It is the link between the participatory directing concept and the poetics of FIX&FOXY that I explore in this article. The investigation is based on conversations with Tue Biering, interviews with the cast of *My Deer Hunter*, and observations from the performances *Ungdom* (Youth), *Mod alle Odds* (Against All Odds) and *My Deer Hunter*.

During the work on performances such as *Youth*, *Against All Odds* and *My Deer Hunter*, there has been a redistribution of dramaturgical responsibilities and organisational positions. As concept developers, director Tue Biering and dramaturges Jeppe Kristensen and Tanja Diers, are strongly bound by their performers' material, and in order to promote the production of material, they distribute the management of part of the process from the director and dramaturge to the participating performers.

I examine the devices and methods by which this distribution takes place and the issues it raises. In particular, the challenge of the director's position of authority in relation to deciding the form of the final work is highlighted, and how FIX&FOXY balances managerial authority and distribution of management while working with the live actors.

## The Emotional Community of Youth

The above-mentioned redistribution of responsibility interacts with several factors that define FIX&FOXY's productions. In one of our conversations, we ask Biering what has been the incentive for making productions like *Against All Odds* and *Youth* with children and young people: What is the knowledge that the participating children gain that makes them interesting for FIX&FOXY? Does FIX&FOXY intend to perform a social critique through the young people's narratives about their precarious lives?

Biering takes the conversation in a slightly different direction. He explains that the concept for the performance *Youth* came about when he and Jeppe Kristensen, after a series of works dealing with economic and political issues, wanted to do something that could touch the spectator in a different way – something emotional:

*"In that sense, we are not interested in working with young people. It's sort of a consequence of the concept. We identify the area we want to delve into, and here it was the emotional, our efforts were aimed at, and consequently we need some people to be in that place. Because, what does it mean as a young person to be in that place and state of mind? It is, for example, lying in a tent, being completely open and sharing thoughts. That's why it became a performance that was about getting the audience to go back in time and for a moment be where you once were in your life yourself."* (Biering, 2022)

Here, Biering describes how the performers are suppliers of a piece of reality that is intended to bring the spectators into an atmosphere and an issue. Distribution should be seen in the context of this, as characteristic of the way FIX&FOXY organises the actors' contributions. Biering goes on to explain how the actors in *Youth* were distributed responsibility for the narrative:

*"When we were casting and from the first rehearsals, I clearly remember saying that 'we are these aging men, and to be honest, this shouldn't be about our youth, but about yours. It has to come from you. You're the ones who are experiencing something now that we may have forgotten, so you're the ones who have to deliver it'." (Biering, 2022)*

What Biering describes here is characteristic of FIX&FOXY's directorial concept, where the actors' realities are combined and made accessible through the performance. It is the actors' social conventions, forms and expressions of emotionality that Biering, as director, provides a framework and space for in part cultivating and in part communicating to the theatre's spectators. In *Youth*, the directorial concept is based on the fact that something emotional actually *happens* in the relationship between the cast, which the spectator both becomes witness of and takes part in. About the performative element, Kristensen has stated that FIX&FOXY's performances often have a double plot:

*"One is, for example, to tell the story of the nice prostitute or Parsifal's experiences in the vicious Arab world, while the other is about 'making it happen'." (Kristensen, 2022)*

Several other logics are connected to the double-plotted starting point of the theatre. Since it is the performers' realities that form the basis of the concept, the performance process cannot begin with a script and a reading rehearsal. The script develops quite naturally through working with the performers, which also explains why the concept of 'rehearsal' is clearly of no interest to Tue Biering. On the contrary, one of his essential techniques as a director is to create opportunities for resonance and response. He typically asks the actors to perform very specific tasks and *show* something in the room that others can relate to and give feedback on – like 'the worst and the most beautiful thing you have experienced'. From this starting point, the actors are invited to build each other up, and this method proves to be a significant resource in the direction process. Biering talks about working towards *Youth*:

*"We worked in groups and let them watch each other, and they reacted with a 'wao, this is really nice' – and we can do it this way and that way. All of a sudden, things moved really fast. Then we brought others in and let them watch, and in this way they built each other up. We have discovered that they facilitate each other by watching and being each others' audience." (Biering, 2022)*

### **The Poetics**

Ideally, the performers in FIX&FOXY's performances are involved as co-facilitating dramaturges. Biering, in collaboration with Kristensen and later Diers, develops the concept and brings the threads together, while the performers are established as respondents to each other's work. The concept provides the answer to what kind of people and realities are to be cast, while the performers'

expert knowledge as actors is not a quality criterion for casting. Often the concepts are oriented towards marginalised worlds, which through staging can challenge the spectator's view of their own reality. During an interview, when we touch on FIX&FOXY's protection and challenge of often vulnerable performers, Biering brings the process of *My Deer Hunter* into the conversation:

*"We realise that the whole engine of the story is that people put themselves in an extremely pressured situation with the audience on either side, where there is no exit. The performers are not supposed to be protected. They must be vulnerable."* (Biering, 2022)

In line with this, FIX&FOXY's theatre poetics is about presenting certain more or less invisible realities and people in an unprotected position, but viewed through and shielded by the theatre framework. As an art form, theatre has an ability here, FIX&FOXY argues: it can create a space for voices that are rarely presented in the performing arts *"because we believe that we can make a difference when people meet face to face"* (<https://fixfoxy.com/om/>). This argues for the diversity perspective that is substantial in FIX&FOXY's idea of what the function of theatre should be – that is, their practice and poetics.

### **Optimism in Spite of Everything**

*Against All Odds* like *Youth* is based on a team of quite young performers. As in *Youth*, it is not the representation of children and young people that is the basis for the performance concept, but the thematisation of a problem and the creation of an atmosphere, touching togetherness, discomfort or tension that the cast can give access to. In *Against All Odds* it is about fate, injustice and unequal social conditions. Biering explains that the initial idea for the concept was to create an installation with far fewer children involved than the final performance: the spectator would enter a room, a drug addict's flat, where a 10-year-old child would sit and talk about the statistical evidence that he or she would become a drug addict as an adult. During the development of the concept, another agenda also emerged, which was that FIX&FOXY had so far made performances that appealed to quite few spectators. This concept they wanted to challenge. Tue explains:

*"It was getting smaller and smaller. But I wanted to reclaim the theatre as a site-specific space. I wanted to see a statistical representation. When we were casting for the performance, I did an exploratory workshop, because how the heck can we do this? Then we got a whole class in and I tried saying to the children, for example: How many of you sleep badly at night, and then you step forward to this line... I also did some different choreographies with them, and then it was amazing that there were so many children. I knew then that we have to have at least 20 children."* (Biering, 2022). With 22 children, it became necessary, as in *Youth*, to think through how to work with such a large group, and here the idea for the statistical performance, similar to the German theatre group Rimini Protokoll's performance concept, *100 % City*, was born. *Against All Odds* is about children's living conditions and is performed as a statistical study of the cast, with the performers acting as numerical data. Based on their sociological circumstances, their individual futures are predicted, and the performance depicts, with the statistics' mixture of cruel and optimistic prophecies, how each child's personal history in childhood determines what kind of life the child will have in the future. In the performance script, there is an introductory note which is noteworthy as it points out that it is crucial that *"everyone contributes truthful information, and that the text will be coloured by the actual cast, their individual personalities and characteristics"* (*Against All Odds* script). The script's explication of the actors as truthful and personal, but also distinctive exponents of a given reality, connects

with the diversity perspective of FIX&FOXY's poetics and theatre vision. It is about the actors, personally and relatively truthfully within the theatre fiction, taking ownership of the presentation of their own generation. This is reflected in the finished performance in the way the children are made their own and each other's co-narrators: they hold the microphone for each other and help to frame the performance of others by asking questions and summarising conclusions on behalf of each other. In this way, they are perceived from the outside as competent and responsible for the performance, which is emphasised by the fact that the group of children, despite the pessimism of the statistics, act as a coherent and optimistic community: "*We are united in believing that the future is open to us*", they proclaim, and at the same time they discuss whether and how statistical patterns can be broken, and how chance can play a role in one's fate as an uncontrollable factor.

The gloomy prophecies confront the spectator as the 'adult' and privileged who has established the governing premises for the fates of new generations, and the adults (read spectators) become involved in the gravity of the theatre situation, both explicitly, as a spectator is cast during the performance and interviewed by the children about his childhood, and implicitly. For it is hard to avoid feeling complicit as responsible for their future adulthood. As one (childless) reviewer wrote, the performance made her "feel like a parent of someone" (the daily paper *Information* 25 January 2019). With the children as co-producers, interviewers and narrators, the spectators are woven into a dramaturgical confrontation with their own position, where the roles and perspectives they normally find themselves in are turned upside down.

### **Actors in Each Other's Hands in *My Deer Hunter***

In an interview with the four cast members of *My Deer Hunter*, one of the performers describes what it was like for him to relive, edit and thus fictionalise a violent experience in a war zone:

*"I described it detail by detail. How I was sitting. What was around me. How I held the shotgun. That also made it tangible for myself (...). The fact that I could re-enact my own experiences in a more theatrical setting has in a way allowed me to tell it more honestly."* (Palle Würtz, in Christoffersen, E.E.2022).

*My Deer Hunter* brings four war veterans together to re-enact their experiences, and here there is a similar distribution of the directorial and dramaturgical function, as the performers interview and videotape each other as part of the mediality and expression of the performance. From a spectator perspective, the explicit use of live video means that the staging device cannot be overlooked, and in this way an experiential meta-view is offered: we gain knowledge of what is happening 'behind the screen' as we follow how the situation is constructed and mediated. The use of live video is a recurring device in FIX&FOXY and is discussed in several of the articles in this anthology. As in the German director Frank Castorf's theatre, there is basically no separation between actors and cameras, and the filming is not hidden, but takes place as an integrated element of reality on stage. The video filming means that the actors for the sake of the spectator can be observed in close-up on a screen, and that the actors meet and approach each other when they film and witness each other's stories with a hand-held camera. In this way, the live video concept intensifies the production process and affects the mutual relationship between the actors and the potential mirroring of each other's narratives. However, the relationship-building part of the directing concept can also be quite challenging, and in certain situations tensions arise that make it necessary to interrupt the work. One of the performers describes a situation where telling a story to a fellow

actor resulted in discomfort and shame related to the situation the person was talking about. On the whole, the construction of the community does not necessarily flow smoothly by itself but requires determination and discipline of the performers. The actor Sara La Cour describes in the interview how their expectations of each other can be a driving force, but also a quite tough obligation:

*“One of the things that was crucial was that we went into this together. I remember one of the first times when Jonas says: I don’t want to do this if we do it halfway (...) I knew then that I had to talk about the accidental shooting experience that has tormented me, even if no one was hurt.”* (Sara La Cour, in Christoffersen, E.E, 2022).

The situation described by La Cour illustrates how the performers negotiate, engage and pull each other up, while at the same time they can put each other under pressure. When the process was nevertheless possible for the relatively affected participants to carry through, I assume that this must be seen in the context of the distributive approach, where they are given responsibility for both the relationships and the production of the performance. Another important aspect of the actors’ work with the process towards *My Deer Hunter* is FIX&FOXY’s engagement of psychotherapist Sasha Kempinski. Kempinski is trained in therapeutic work with actors in connection with film production, and the performers in *My Deer Hunter* had the option to consult her during the production process, just as she was present in the rehearsal room during the development of the material and influenced the process through her professional approach. The alliance with Kempinski can be seen as a delegation of work between the theatre space under Biering’s direction and the therapeutic space that she manages. In this balancing of art and therapy, the performers participate in creating the performance, and the result is a work in which the spectator can observe both the participants’ energy as performers and their simultaneous struggles to deal with the effects left behind by their wartime experiences. Jonas explains how the theatrical doubling can have a kind of catharsis:

*“I feel much stronger than the person on stage, and it’s good to be able to say that I have taken back the power. It’s a crack that gives hope to other people”* (Jonas Hjort Andersen in Christoffersen, E.E, 2022).

La Cour points to something similar:

*“Bringing your story to light is an antidote to shame, but also empathising with the toughest soldiers you meet every night is important. It’s the feeling of being a unit but also retelling your story so many times”* (Sara La Cour, in Christoffersen, E.E , 2022).

### **Distributed Facilitation**

FIX&FOXY’s distribution of the director and dramaturge function has a number of advantages at the production level in terms of building performers’ relationships, commitment, participation and creativity, and at the work level in terms of the spectator’s encounter with the performer’ realities. However, the method is not without a certain risk, as there may be a dramaturgical and instructional void, a conceptual weakening or conflicts that need to be resolved at management level. The method is commented on in the interview by Würtz:

*“It was funny to see that Tue had lined up a lot of military toys on a table and Tue says: ‘See what you can do with that.’ Then we just started playing, and Tue sat there and said: ‘What does it mean when you do that?’ ‘Well, aren’t you in charge?’, but Tue didn’t answer. ‘Well, what the hell do you want, and now you have to step up as a leader and drop that socialist bullshit’ .” (Palle Würtz, in Christoffersen, E.E, 2022).*

You could call the way of processing that FIX&FOXY primarily engages in distributed facilitation. When Biering *“lines up military toys”*, it is presumably to turn the performers’ possible expectations of the direction towards a so-called fusion assumption. To put it simply, Biering simultaneously makes the performers play together by giving them ownership and fusing them with FIX&FOXY, so that they can ultimately contribute to the realisation of the theatre’s poetics. This not only gives the performers influence as participators, but also provides them with knowledge of what theatre and dramaturgy are. In the shift that takes place for the performers between being intuitive creators of a material and analytical observers of the realities of the other performers, an awareness can potentially be formed of where it is that one looks from when observing one’s own and others’ realities. In the creative position there is the possibility of presenting oneself and acting, while observing the material and process of the others is a reflected position where the performers can be encouraged to see what is being formed. Therefore, it is plausible to assume that the production processes, in which the performers are given a facilitation responsibility and ‘build each other up’, can create a dramaturgical insight and a theatrical awareness, where they are offered an understanding of what happens between one’s gaze as an observer and the scenic element that is taking shape – and how the scenic looks back at the spectator and *affects* the viewer. In that way, this way of working introduces the performers to the particular expression of the theatre medium, while at the same time there can be a certain release for the performers in being re-enacted in the theatre medium. And it is the result of this duality that the spectators might encounter in these theatre performances.

At first glance, this way of working with performers makes them less dependent on the director, who acts as a kind of positive reinforcement. But at the same time, the method reinforces the performers’ understanding of or surrender to FIX&FOXY’s concept, premises and values, because even though FIX&FOXY bases its poetics on a principle of diversity, the processes can hardly accommodate performers who do not accept the concept of directing as well as the concept of the performance. It is arguable whether there is a conflict in this. Tue averts this by describing the special agreement that the performers enter into concerning the power structure and form of democracy of the direction concept:

*“I hope that everyone has the experience of being involved in the process. I would find it boring if it was only my words that counted. I think it makes people calmer in a room, and the most important thing is that I never say that I’m in charge, because that would make the situation less fun for everyone. But if everyone knows that that’s how it is, you can play flat structure, and everyone can feel that they are being heard and being included.” (Biering, 2022)*

FIX&FOXY’s distribution of responsibility for parts of the theatre processes to the performers is, as illustrated here, a method of *making something happen* between the human beings and realities that the concept of the performance revolves around – with the spectator in mind. From a management perspective, Biering’s management style can be called a facilitative form of power (Frode Andersen 2017, p. 17), which is in line with his formulation that distributing responsibility

to the performers does not compromise his responsibility for curating them and his authority with respect to deciding the form of the theatrical work. As the director, he makes the final decisions for the form and expression of the work. However, the partial distribution of power can be seen as a rather probable advantage, as the performers' knowledge and suggestions for the development of the material are part of the investigation of the whole process of the production and therefore, at best, can contribute to sharpen the projection of the artistic concept. But balancing distribution and managerial authority is a cardinal point:

*"I don't believe in democracy in my own artistic work. I'm very fascinated by Superflex and Gob Squad, for example, who have an open democratic structure and an open form of management. I've tried it, but it really doesn't turn out well because my theatre requires some kind of management. I think people are deluding themselves when they say that it's not managed, it's not run by a manager. My main job is to be a curator and a manager of some talents. There should be no doubt that ultimately, I am the one who decides. If I behave wrongly towards other people, that is also my responsibility"* (Biering, 2022).

As a director, Biering along with the dramaturges set the premises and create the framework conditions for the concept-exploring collaboration with the performers. The curation of live actors requires a very particular understanding of the performers' processes, combined with the ability to incorporate the emerging material into a stringent aesthetic concept, which FIX&FOXY with Biering's directing concept has created a sensitive method for. In the curation of actors, the distribution method interacts with the whole idea of what FIX&FOXY's theatre is – that is its poetics – and it is this idea that the director and the dramaturgical team lead the performers towards the realisation of: a theatre space where people meet face to face, with the audience on either side and without exit, and where the performers' realities are given the status of unique knowledge positions.

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