



Article

World Theatre and Theatre of the Moment

Come on, Bangladesh, just do it!

World Theatre and Theatre of the Moment

By Jeppe Kristensen

“What exactly is world theatre?”, Milo Rau has the chorus of children he works with ask as he receives the International Theatre Institute’s 2016 award, and continues:

*[T]o actually explain what theatre or world theatre is for me I would have to tell a story that began sometime in the late eighties when my grandfather gave me a book of Chinese fairy tales and continued when my father gave me another book, *The Young Lenin* by Trotsky. I would have to tell him an extremely long and confusing story about me and my comrades-in-arms that spans from the nineties to today: Twenty crazy years that brought me to Chiapas, Cuba, Russia, Congo, Romania, Greece, Rwanda; to Euripides, Fassbinder and Gombrowicz; to Brussel’s Islamic quarter; to Brecht and Bourdieu; into the worlds of Pasolini, of Zapatist rebels, of judges in *The Hague*, of miners in the Eastern Congo, and of Russian Orthodox believers; to hundreds of farmers, proletariats, workers, hipsters, rebels, Nazis, actors, activists and crazies; to assholes and saints from Berlin to Bukavu; to Roger Köppel and Vladimir Putin; to nine and ninety-year-olds; to generals, CEOs, war criminals and the still warm bodies of the children they murdered. (Rau, p 265-266)*

It is a wonderful sentence. With brevity and linguistic pizzazz, there are links between poles: between childhood and life, between experience and action, between local and global, between political theory and activist practice, between good and evil, between art and life, the social and the geographical, between anger and pathos, between the anonymous masses and name-dropped heroes and villains, between coincidence and plan; but above all between the individual person, Milo Rau, and the whole world in its complete totality: “Worlding the globe” is what the English art philosopher Peter Osborne would call this dynamic exchange between the systemic, limited, socio-political geographical unit that is our globe and the individual perspective, the individual’s lifeworld, from which modernity is always experienced differently (Osborne 2010). World theatre, you might say with Osborne, is then the theatre that conceptualises this world making of the global.

Familiarities: The Cross-Aesthetic Context of FIX&FOXY

I refer to Rau’s speech here because it mirrors the aspects that I myself find important in FIX&FOXY, which finds its dynamics in similar pairs of concepts. Local/global, theoretical/practical, good/bad, anger/pathos, coincidence/plan, experience/action – all can be identified as artistic fields of tension. And here too, most importantly – the relationship between the individual and the global systems is staged and given form: *Worlding the globe*. We see this when Bangladeshi actors are brought to Denmark (*Come on, Bangladesh, just do it!* 2006). And when a Thai sex worker recreates her client relationships with the audience (*Love Theater*, 2015). We see it when unemployed people talk about their everyday dreams on stage (*Det store adegilde* (The Big Feast), 2015) and when children outline their statistical probabilities (*Mod alle odds* (Against All Odds), 2019). But we also see it when random children who are not part of the performance shout after the audience in Brøndby Strand (*Parsifal – An Opera Crusade*, 2011) and when street prostitutes joke about how many times they have seen the Hollywood blockbuster *Pretty Woman* (*Pretty Woman A/S* (Pretty Woman Ltd, 2008).

With their own flavour and approach to the craft, FIX&FOXY's performances have linked the personal to the systemic. Another reason for including Milo Rau is to emphasise that FIX&FOXY's works are not particularly special. They share similarities widely in an artistic practice that originates in shared experience rather than in a shared art form. This family is made up of artists within literature, visual art and theatre who were teenagers when the Wall came down. Like Rau –and with him Superflex, Pelle Brage/Parfume, the various incarnations of Nielsen, Santiago Sierra, Teun Castelein, Schlingensief, Von Trier, Renzo Martens and many more – FIX&FOXY is part of a generation for whom the world opened up, for whom Ryanair took off, and for whom globalisation unfolded with all its possibilities and horrors, prosperity and oppression. The bling and fun, complacency, inevitability and pointless development of globalisation is the geo-political-cultural basis on which all these artists work and their field of investigation.

Here are three fine examples of art projects that are historically, stylistically, conceptually and personally quite closely intertwined with FIX&FOXY:

1. In 1996-1997, Superflex developed a small, simple and cheap biogas unit in collaboration with the engineer Jan Mallen. The biogas unit has a clear aesthetic dimension, almost branding-like, with elements kept in Superflex's signature orange colour. But otherwise, *Supergas* is an extremely practical project. It is focused on developing and distributing a well-functioning biogas unit that can be used in sparsely populated rural areas, with a focus on the often underdeveloped rural areas near the equator. In *Supergas*, international development, engineering, commercial interests and global opportunities are as much the material of art as the orange plastic that is the physical dimension of the work. The essence and creativity of the work is quite simple: that a problem can be solved.
2. In 2003, at the beginning of the Iraq War, Das Beckwerk sent two representatives, 'Nielsen' and 'Rasmussen' to Iraq with a small metal suitcase, which they said contained the European democratic model in the form of a nomadic parliament. On this basis, Das Beckwerk travelled through Iraq and conducted parliamentary meetings with the country's various groupings (Das Beckwerk 2011). Unlike the sober gasworks of Superflex, Das Beckwerk's journey has an impenetrable layer of irony, role-play and fictionalisation around its serious project, and there seems to be no way for the spectator to access the project without this layer of fiction.
3. In 2008, the Peoples Museum @ Birzeit opened in Palestine. This people's museum is a collaboration between the artists Pelle Brage, Finn Thybo Andersen, Kirsten Dufour, Lauritz Sonne and the inhabitants of Birzeit. It is a museum in a very broad sense. It exhibits objects as diverse as a model of the city, traditional or ordinary household objects, costumes, more conceptual works by the visiting artists (such as a boat on wheels conceptualising the area's being cut-off from the sea), a popularity contest between FC Barcelona and Real Madrid – and much more (Pelle Brage & Co 2019). The museum is, in the words of Line Rosenvinge, "in motion" and refuses to stand still (Rosenvinge 2018). It is not only a museum that continuously updates and changes its collection based on what its users think belongs in the museum. It is also in conceptual movement between a conceptual artwork or happening, a political statement and a real place of use for the city. Despite the serious context, several of the works are humorous and playfully executed.

I believe that FIX&FOXY's performances from the very beginning have been global theatre in a similar way. We have been concerned with making theatre that in some way related to a part of our

global contemporary world. The ambition has been to break down the boundaries of what theatre can be made about and how. Issues and expressions that, because they are global, have difficulty finding their way into the theatre, have been our main interest. Parallel to globalisation in general, FIX&FOXY has worked *with* and *for* the breaking down of global borders.

In the following, I will take a brief look at FIX&FOXY's work based on Osborne's ideas about contemporary art. These ideas are based on an analysis of contemporary art as an artistic formulation of the inherent contradictions between globalisation and the mindset of globalisation, and the equally inherent contradictions in the present-ness of the contemporary. I should emphasise that I am not looking at our work with a list of answers in mind. The interesting thing is not to see if FIX&FOXY's theatre can qualify as contemporary art. For me, the interesting thing is that it allows me to see some facets of our work – plus a *blind spot* in this work that is extremely important to me. Some of these aspects are in themselves quite banal, but I will nevertheless take the liberty of going through them, towards what I see as our and contemporary theatre's great challenge – from which this chapter also takes its title: The significance of the fact that, for better or worse, there is both world theatre and theatre of the moment. I will begin with Osborne's concept of *de-bordering* (Osborne 2013, p. 28):

Global Theatre: De-Bordering as Conceptualisation of a New World

The breaking down of boundaries in our work has partly been a thematic form of de-bordering (outsourcing, global pop culture, imported refugee boats, internet-based global theatre, American history played by South African actors). At the same time, it is also an aesthetic breaking down of boundaries between high and low culture, between inside and outside, and between the traditional material of theatre art, between physical and conceptual art, between literature, theatre, film, visual art, new media, new technology – I hesitate to say that FIX&FOXY has *done* this – because to a large extent it has been something that many others also did and did for us. But in our own field, FIX&FOXY has contributed to an expansion of theatre art – and in general terms, the material of art – to what is in principle infinite. This breaking down of boundaries also applies to the boundaries between process and performance – it applies to the relations between audience and performance – and perhaps it also applies to ethical boundaries?

To Osborne, de-bordering is an analytical concept that can highlight concrete details of globalisation and thus of our contemporary world. How does the de-bordering of globalisation play out? It is striking, for example, Osborne points out, that in the age of globalisation the only thing that has built a truly global structure, that can flow freely everywhere, is capital. Another characteristic of globalisation that Osborne highlights based on the concept of de-bordering is that it is often a suspension of borders that only works one way. For the global north, opportunities for borderless movement have developed as never before, while for others, it is more a question of the cementing of borders (Osborne 2013, pp. 26-28). The fact that we have now started to export refugees to Rwanda within the refugee system shows how subtle and hard these borders are at one and the same time: While the geographical borders can be crossed in both directions, the social border that really counts has become even more impossible to cross.

De-bordering as an analytical concept can also be applied to the *specific performances* by FIX&FOXY as well as others, and not just globalisation in general. In that case, doubly:

First, as an analytical and political concept to investigate how thematics and practical production follow, are supported by and exploit globalisation in a world making of theatre art. In the case of FIX&FOXY, I think that the concept could be used to disentangle the complicated

relations between political activism, power exploitation, statements, production conditions and aesthetics from which the works draw their strength, in a way that can be quite differently precise than, for instance, postcolonial analysis, which might otherwise share many objections concerning representation, agency and profit.

Second, as an analytical and formalist concept to examine the aesthetic dimension of the works and how this conceptualises – and *exactly* how it conceptualises – the boundary-breaking aspect of globalisation. I use the term *conceptualisation* here as a term that both refers to an artistically well-known strategy of making theatre from a concept *and* alludes to an artistic affinity to conceptual art, *but also* directly alludes to the linguistic-cognitive nature of conceptualising and making comprehensible through theatre. De-bordering in this version can be used as an overarching analytical concept to elucidate aspects of the works – in the case of FIX&FOXY, work-internal strategies such as fictionalisation (Osborne 2013, pp. 24-25) and collectivisation (Osborne 2013, pp. 33-35) and their mutual relationship would be worth investigating. What is the fictionalisation that happens when a prostitute enters *Pretty Woman*, or an asylum seeker enters *Friends?* (In my opinion the movement in FIX&FOXY has gone against the fiction: to examine what stories we tell about each other, how and why – and not the authentic humanisation of fiction). How does this differ from the fictionalisation of the authentic that takes place in later works where more and more documentary material appears when, for example, residents of Odsherred talk about their lives against the background of the manifested strangeness of *Twin Peaks?* And how is the collective and co-creation in the works presented as an extension of the possibilities and necessities of the collective in the global?

Two Ways to Go I: A Globe of Increasing Diversity

Concepts such as de-bordering, fictionalisation and collectivisation (Osborne 2013, pp. 33-35) can connect the aesthetic work of FIX&FOXY and our generation with an analysis of the global. And because globalisation and its concrete forms and challenges are the overarching movement of our time, the three concepts are, according to Osborne, also essential for understanding the concept of ‘contemporaneity’ – as bridging concepts between ‘contemporaneity’ and ‘contemporary art’.

Osborne constructs a critical concept of contemporaneity. That is, a concept that can do more than describe contemporaneity as what is happening here and now. And thus also contemporary art as something other than art here-and-now, or the most modern of modern art.

His ambition is a concept that can expose concepts in our understanding of the world by critically analysing our present – and thus also our community (Osborne 2010, pp. 1-2). Two aspects appear in this spatio-temporal concept.

One I opened with: There are several possible ‘datings’ for the contemporary; after the fall of the Berlin Wall, or at the emergence of American dominance after the Second World War, or perhaps after the conceptual art of the 1960s (Osborne 2013, pp. 17-18)? These different understandings of the contemporary operate side by side and intertwine with each other. The contemporary as a concept is quite contradictory. Yet, in its contradiction, it has established itself as an absolutely indispensable and influential concept that frames our understanding of the world. The modern, which was previously from a Western perspective was understood as a Western concept, has now spread to all of us, everywhere – *the globe* in Osborne’s conceptualisation. The most important discrepancy he asks us to look at is that the modern looks different depending on where it is viewed from (Osborne 2013, p 27) The different worlds we thus see, he therefore sets as a requirement for contemporary art to conceptualise – *worlding the globe*. (Which does not

mean that all art that is made now must conceptualise this, but that art that does not cannot be called contemporary art according to Osborne's criteria.) It is this global realism in the form of different positions in and perspectives on modernity that appears again and again in FIX&FOXY as a concept, process strategy and artistic expression. This combination is far from always transparent in its power relations, and it rarely results in the same expression. But in the vast majority of FIX&FOXY's performances, it is either the clash between the perspective presented in a work with global resonance and the individual's positioning in relation to this, or the perspectives of specific persons on global developments, that gives the works their conceptual strength and brings some form of aesthetic innovation to light. The process of creating *Love Theater* is a good example, where the Danish artists and the Thai prostitute's views on sex tourism were completely different, and these disagreements drove both the creation of the performance and shaped the final work (Kristensen 2019, see Kristensen in this anthology).

Two Ways to Go II: A World of Shorter and Shorter Time

The second aspect is more difficult and unpleasant to recognise and to apply critically and creatively. It concerns the understanding of time of the concept of the contemporary. A few remarks are necessary in this short, somewhat tentative conclusion:

'What' I am trying to verbalise here is not alien to FIX&FOXY. It has been a consequence of the activist approach to art, with its belief that problems can be fixed in a foxy way. 'It' is what happens when the prostitute protagonist of *Pretty Woman Ltd.*, after leaving the stage at the same time as Julia Roberts and Richard Gere break up in their fake ending. And *after* Anders Mossling has acted out the film's final happy ending scene on the roof of the containers with her and brought her back into the containers for applause, and leaves the stage *again* and goes home. 'That' is what happens when the audience, after spending an evening in intimate company with the young people in *Youth*, is asked to walk into the artificial sunrise and leave the stage (Christoffersen 2015). In a paradigm of transformative aesthetics, our performances have often been characterised by articulating both that something has changed and that nothing has changed. A certain sadness has often been present, and although the performances are just as often articulated as socially engaged and aesthetically curious, this sadness is a crucial part of the performances, pointing to something other than the specific issue that the performances engage with.

'It', on the other – theoretical – side, is not very clearly articulated in Osborne's texts, although it is for this very reason that I find his ideas interesting for exploring and challenging FIX&FOXY. Let it be clear that in this little conclusion, it is me who brings Osborne into a mindset of loss of perspective and consequent depression. Osborne's analysis of time is all about speed – that this aspect of the idea of contemporaneity is crucial is on my account.

Osborne sees it as a consequence of the inbuilt self-understanding in the contemporary concept of the present as more modern than the modern, as the modern 'now' made even shorter and more essential; that one can see the present as the modern without the modern's contract with the future. The modern now, Osborne says, is to be understood as a transitory relation between past and future. Not so with the "now" of the concept of the contemporary. It stands alone, as a "disavowal of politics" (Osborne 2010, p. 4). Without an understanding of the future, no politics. Osborne states this quite coolly within a 'philosophy of time'. Combined with an emotional or existential view, however, it is a rather sad aspect of contemporary life. If at the same time, we take Osborne's demands on contemporary art seriously – that it must conceptualise and concretise contemporaneity – I notice two things:

First, that it is an important element of our work in FIX&FOXY that we have always endeavoured to be hyper-current. Not just to follow the news stream and make theatre about current issues, but to try to notice the forces that are shaping our world – both the local and the global – here and now. And try to make sense of it in a post-conceptual theatre. This work is fun, invigorating and engaging.

While the other thing I recognise probably is rather sad to an unspeakable extent. The lack of perspective, the loss of the future (which is essentially also the meta-analysis of my generation's world art and world theatre) is not only almost impossible to bear. It is also extremely difficult to give form to. Loss of future on a global scale and the parallel non-clinical depression are the great taboo of contemporary theatre. To me, this perspective is both quite paralysing and inspiring at the same time. It is an elementary, crucial part of our world that we have not yet managed to give form. For a theatre company that has in a way created an image of being able to accomplish a lot, this is a huge remaining dark area. It is my hope for the future – for FIX&FOXY, like-minded or newcomers – that this part of the present will at some point be given form and conceptualised. Not to fix it, but because there are simply limits to what you can ask contemporary art and contemporary theatre to fix – without this realisation that there is nothing to be done making us less relevant.

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Welcome to Twin Peaks. Photo: Søren Meisner