



Essay

FIX&FOXY's Representation Strategies

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By Anne Liisberg

Who can we represent? Who is never represented?

This was the question posed by director Tue Biering, who in his role as moderator of the Bikuben Foundation's art salon *De repræsenterede* (The Represented) was represented by actor Troels Thorsen. The salon took place at Teater Republique's small Reaktor stage on 21 May 2019. The theme was directly related to a thematic paradigm shift that has only become stronger in the past three years, and which, with a simple but effective approach, was highlighted and discussed in the salon. FIX&FOXY's performance *Dark Noon*, which, like the company's other works, also revolves around the theme of representation, played at the theatre at the same time. We will return to the two approaches to representation, but first we turn our attention to the beginning.

Just do it!

In 2006, Jeppe Kristensen and Tue Biering kick-started what would eventually become FIX&FOXY with the performance *Come on, Bangladesh, just do it!* Nike's slogan was a reference both for the global capitalism that the performance was about and for a performing arts credo about venturing into new formats that interact with the world and the audience in new or at least rethought ways.

Involving the audience in the performance was not in itself innovative in 2006. Political theatre had long been dormant, and *Come on, Bangladesh, just do it!* was not received with open arms. The theme of the performance was outsourcing, which was realised in concrete terms by having Bangladeshi actors perform Johan Ludvig Heiberg's Danish national play *Elverhøj* (Elves' Hill, 1828). The actors were paid 10% of the Danish rate, and among other things the audience was invited to leave the theatre to demonstrate against the concept in the street instead.

Mirror Images as a Space for Reflection

A seed was planted for a contemporary political theatre and has since been refined – and challenged – through a series of performances that involve the audience in a contemporary issue set in a known aesthetic frame of reference, typically a film script, that meets reality and the audience. Often only with the title of the original as a reference space, while the performance itself takes other directions. In other words: a concept where the known frames of reference and the recognisable audience positions are twisted to create a third surprising space for reflection.

FIX&FOXY's works are often characterised as provocative. They are not political theatre in the classical sense, but performing arts that stage contemporary political dilemmas such as poverty, globalisation, differences between rich and poor with an open view that carries the possibility of dialogue.

In 2006, *Come on, Bangladesh, just do it!* was received as a remake of the political theatre of the 1970s. Today, it would probably have had a stronger resonance in the light of the actualisation of the confrontation between the privileged and the non-privileged. The actors from Bangladesh painted their faces white to give a convincing impression of Danes in *Elves' Hill*, but not many people took notice of this at the time. Unlike today, where representation, and especially misrepresentation,

sets the agenda – in society and in art. Meanwhile, representation has been at the centre of most of the works that FIX&FOXY has put on stage over the past 16 years.

Art Salon VISION – THE REPRESENTED

For a number of years, the Bikuben Foundation has organised salons on current themes in the visual and performing arts. The foundation's concept *The Art Salon VISION* covers both classic debates, artist interviews and salon formats where artists take the lead. The salons all focus on dialogue, but use different approaches to put art in a societal perspective.

Tue Biering had previously criticised the Bikuben Foundation's salons for being conformist and boring, so it was an obvious choice to invite FIX&FOXY to give their take on the artist-run salon. With a simple, effective device that was identical to the salon's theme of (mis)representation, FIX&FOXY took control in a salon conceived in 3 acts and an epilogue.

ACT I

On the small Reaktor stage, we meet the doubled panel. Four actors representing four other people present who feel misrepresented in art. The last four were not allowed to speak themselves, but sat among the audience and could confer directly with the actor who represented them by summoning them with a bell. Actor Peter Flyvholm did not reach the second sentence of his first speech before the bell interrupted him and, in a whispered conversation with Eja, whom he was representing, he corrected his presentation of "Eja" from transsexual to transgender.

The stereotypical provocations were repeated in several of the panel's contributions. "*Why is fat almost always associated with stupid or funny, it's just a neutral word?*"¹, asked fat "Frederikke", represented by Ene Øster Bendtsen, for example. The same point was made by "Rasmus", represented by Elliot Crosset Hove, and "Amina", represented by Amira Jasmina Jensen. Rasmus has muscular dystrophy and finds that people with a disability are typically represented either as pitiable or, conversely, as an inspiration. Amina is a Muslim with a Somali background and has similar experiences being represented either as a terrorist or as a variant of the straight A girl, a super Muslim.

That it depends on the eyes of the beholder becomes apparent when "Amina" refers to the character Sana from the Norwegian TV-series *SKAM* (Shame) as an example of such a super Muslim. "Rasmus", on the other hand, has experienced Sana as a successful representation based on statements by the actress behind Sana, who developed the role herself and is happy with it. "Amina" believes it is not only about the actor's experience, but in this case about how the stereotype character is portrayed. While the panel and the audience, predominantly made up of professionals from the theatre industry, agreed that it is primarily about being and portraying people, the audience is inclined to believe that acting is just that – portraying different characters – while the panel points out that nuances are lost in representation when minorities are portrayed without sufficient research. Why are transgender people often portrayed by cisgender people, and why do slim actors in fatsuits (full-body suits) have to represent fatness, the panel asks. Why do you not just hire a fat person? It is because you sell more tickets if there are celebrities involved, is a laconic response from the audience, while there are also voices arguing that the industry must take responsibility and set a social agenda by actively seeking out and using both stories and actors from minority groups.

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

BREAK – 2. ACT

“Tue Biering” tries to sharpen the focus of the debate by handing out props to the four representatives so they can look a bit more like the people they represent: a wheelchair, a fatsuit, a scarf, studded straps and blue hair colour. A few of the couples agree to the provocation to show “how stupid it is”, while “Amina” refuses: *“It’s like being put on a headscarf by an imam”*.

The audience registers the provocation, but is more interested in asking questions about what many perceive as a narrow focus on making representation look like what it represents. The main consideration is whether 1:1 representation would limit acting and at the same time fix identities. “Frederikke” says that for her it is not about resembling, but about challenging the clichés, while “Amina” points out that it is not the responsibility of the actors, but of the theatres and directors to bring out diversity.

BREAK – 3. ACT

Now “Tue” becomes Troels and also lets the panel be the actors they are, while the four represented are allowed to speak for themselves. And there was a need for that. Eja found it “extremely provocative” to be represented by someone with a completely different language for emotions, while Rasmus thought “it was a bit caricatured and that Elliot was much more quiet than he would have been”. Amina was angry about the privilege blindness she experiences in the room. *“You never experience what I experience”*, she points out, while Elliot agrees that representation of minorities can easily become clichéd because there is too little time to prepare roles in general.

BREAK – EPILOGUE

Tue Biering now calls for the panel to break up and talk to each other across the room. Food and drink are passed around and the conversation flows pleasantly, before rounding off with a collective reflection on the form of the salon. Rasmus is positive, as *“the whole set-up shows that nuances are lost in the misrepresentation”*. In the audience, too, the form has had an effect. To some, the actors’ uncertainty has become a point in itself, highlighting the artistic responsibility for representation and for using all types of stories and actors. Other spectators insist that direct representation is only important in some genres, while Ene points out that *“all acting is fake, but I can understand the need to break the clichés”*.

Dialogue or Booring

With the artist-run salon, FIX&FOXY pushed the professional debate about representation out into the industry. The simultaneous presence of represented and representing made different aspects of the complex issue visible and opened it up to a sober and attentive dialogue. Despite Tue and “Tue”’s inbuilt provocative gear shifts, we were light years away from the atmosphere of the Bikuben Foundation’s more traditional salon on identity politics, held at Sort/Hvid the previous year in connection with the performance *Black Madonna*². Here there was no dialogue, it was drowned out by booing. At Reaktor, the dialogue was open both to those who want 1:1-representation, to those who want to see all the nuances and to those in the audience who are stuck in their role as a “white, heterosexual man with feelings”. The salon thus condensed in a format other than the aesthetic

2) Originally called *White Nigger. Black Madonna*, but the theatre cut half of the title after the salon. Reumertsalon: Kunstscenen i en identitetspolitisk tid (iscene.dk).

FIX&FOXY's particular take on the body's empathy as a path to enquiry and understanding without ready-made answers.

Entering Biering's Universe with Trepidation

Actress Ene Øster Bendtsen had worked with Tue Biering a few times before, so she was familiar with his way of working when she agreed to participate in the salon as "Frederikke". "It's always with a little trepidation that you enter his universe, because you know that he wants to give you a hard time. He doesn't like rules, but of course that's the fun part", she says. From her point of view, the theme of the salon is still relevant, but she also experiences that more projects are being created with a broader representation, bringing other stories on stage and in front of the camera.

"It wasn't an issue like that at all in 2019, so even though the ideas were not foreign to me, I wasn't 100 % familiar with the topic. Tue's concept carried representation to a head, so I was out of my depth", says Ene Øster Bendtsen. According to her, this experience was due to the fact that part of the concept was based on ignorance: *"I was contacted at short notice, there was an intro talk but no rehearsals, and I only had half an hour with the person I was to represent, so I could feel my own incompetence in presenting Frederikke's messages. She probably wasn't too happy with me".* The actors' lack of knowledge acted as a motor for the salon, both concretely in the form of visible perplexity and as a more general point about (mis)representation.

Ene Øster Bendtsen's participation in the salon made her more aware of her own attitudes and the many possible ways of looking at the subject: *"You have a great responsibility when you represent other people. Representation is extremely important on stage and in film, because as human beings we connect to each other. But we also have to have freedom as actors, because the essence of acting is to portray something you are not. You try with every role to understand it and the body it has, and I would die slowly if I only were to represent myself"* she says and summarises her current position as follows: *"The salon shook us up and we have to keep talking about representation so that it resonates with us and makes us wiser, but we also have to be gentle with each other and forgive. These are muscles that need to be exercised, and we are all practising to get better".*

A Frenetic Frontier Epic

"If you want to kill an African story, tell it in English" was the last line in *Dark Noon*, which played in the theatre space next to Reaktor in May-June 2019. With *Dark Noon*, Tue Biering makes a connection to *Come on, Bangladesh, just do it!* Both performances have actors from other continents portraying Danish and Western history respectively, but where the focus in 2006 was a critique of the obvious effects of global capitalism, in 2019, Biering works with the subject fully integrated in the particular Bieringian approach to the identity politics agenda that has crystallised more and more clearly in FIX&FOXY's works. Representation is the *device* in *Dark Noon* – as illustrated in the performance's closing line.

"Western movies are boring", says one of the seven South African actors staging the show's settler universe, which is literally constructed before our eyes in a high-tension *High Noon* atmosphere with a sprinkling of *Little House on the Prairie*, another hard-wearing mythological account of the settlers' journey west. The line is delivered at the end of the performance, when the audience has taken their seats on stage with the actors, who reflect the performance through their childhood memories and presumably appear as themselves. The "boring" refers to the repetitive narrative that perpetuates the white race's self-image and violent assertion of the right of the strong. In continuation of this, another of the seven actors wonders why his parents shielded him from the

apartheid he was surrounded by as a child, but not from the American westerns, which he sees as a cultural expression of the same fundamental worldview of might is right.

A Call to Open our Eyes

Violence breeds violence and must be fought with violence, one might conclude? This conclusion is obvious after two hours of mental, but especially physical violence in a merciless universe filled with suffering, need fulfilment, fear and the death drive. Fist blows, tar and feathers, cannibalism, gunshots in response to any disagreement, brutal rapes and the oppression of anyone of a colour other than white, which the actors maintain in their own faces with large amounts of kaolin.

Perhaps there is a faint hope in the final lines, which also announce that the end has come. The end of the West, the end of romanticisation. Perhaps there is another small hope in the fragments of South African culture that momentarily creep into the actors' gestures, lines and songs along the way. Maybe there should not be a hope, but a call? A call to open our eyes and see Western and South African history from other perspectives?

Disorientation as a Device

*"When we are finally brought in to sit in the middle of all the colonial construction rubble and racial mishmash, it feels exactly as if one's whole awkward attempt to find a position in the middle of the representation debate and the history of repression is effectively short-circuited"*³, wrote Monna Dithmer in her review in *Politiken* on 18 May 2019, which, in line with most other reviews, had difficulty orienting itself in *Dark Noon's* universe.

It was not a provocation to whiteface in 2019, but with disorientation as a device *Dark Noon* sparked reflections on representation. Disorientation understood as the company's brutally subtle way of involving the audience, where one first senses what is examined with the body, and then distances oneself in reflection.

Ene Øster Bendtsen – and to some extent the audience – had a similar experience of perplexity at the Bikuben Foundation's Vision Salon, which brought the representation debate to a head. Here, among other things, by integrating non-actors and their stories and by letting actors alternate between representing others and themselves, just as it is also done in *Dark Noon*, where the actors' final dialogue as themselves provides one of the keys to navigating in the universe of the performance.

The article is based on Kunstsalon VISION - DE REPRÆSENTEREDE - Iscene (Art Salon *VISION – THE REPRESENTED – Iscene*) published on ISCENE 23 May 2019 and the review *Tue Biering Turns the World Upside Down in his High-Voltage Western with a South African Tone* published in Berlingske 18 May 2019 (not digitally available).

Anne Liisberg is a reviewer and co-editor of Iscene.

3) <https://politiken.dk/kultur/art7177187/Hvem-bliver-egentlig-misbrugt-i-kontroversiel-instruk%C3%B8rs-white-facing-western>.