

## Rocky! The Left-Wing Theatre Ghetto's Auto-Knock-Out

By Solveig Daugaard

Reviewed in *Peripeti.dk* 2017

A raw stage space, a bucket of red paint, a meat hook with a dead pig in it. The devices are few in Tue Biering's newly written one-man performance *Rocky*. Husets Teatret's stage appears as a slightly dirty black box, where Morten Burian is alone with a few props and Biering's text and direction. Alone with his fascination with Rocky – the original 1976 film starring Sylvester Stallone – about the loser who becomes a winner in the end. And yet not. In fact, Burian is far from alone. He has the audience with him at all times.

It is impressive how captivating his opening paraphrase of the Rocky film is – and how fast he manages to establish a sense of connection between himself and us in the audience. Partly through his infectious enthusiasm for Rocky, but even more through the comfortable distance he immediately puts between 'us' and the Rocky character. His fascination – and ours with him – is sustained by our distinct difference from Rocky. In the performance's initial interpretation, Rocky is thus the story of how the loser at the bottom of society, the one no one bothers to listen to because he is a big dumb brute who has never opened a book, the one no one reckons with because he has failed so many times, quite unexpectedly gets a second chance and seizes it, to finally defeat everyone who has underestimated him, laughed at him and humiliated him. The rest of us, on the other hand, sitting here comfortably in a Copenhagen theatre, we are not like him. We have education and strength. We are rolling in chances – in opportunities – every day of the year.

### **I love Rocky**

As a leftwing, educated artist type, our narrator loves Rocky, cheers him on with all his heart: the little man against the big bad world. And he wants so much to understand Rocky. Rocky has not had it easy, it is no wonder that he has turned out that way. But the monologue also reveals, both through the precision of Biering's text and through Burian's – at once charming and quite deliberately overly self-infatuated – delivery of it, the disgusting condescension that lurks in the left-wing intellectual's worship of the loser:

*"I have the energy and strength to feel how Rocky feels. Even though I'm not Rocky, I can empathise with him, with his pain, his powerlessness, and I love being there. Inside Rocky. Because when I'm there, I'm free from being smarter than average, and when I see the world through Rocky's eyes, the world is so simple."*

Although this self-revealing gesture comes quickly, the performance still manages to maintain the connection between performer and audience. We are in it together.

Quite quickly, the text turns to the basic concept of the performance – which is also its scoop – that is the similarities between, on the one hand, the Rocky character: the loser nobody takes seriously, but who comes back, despite what the smart people say. And on the other hand: the currently popular political notion of the 'ordinary man', who, with his/her ordinary concerns and inferiority, has been excluded from the political debate for years, only to reappear in recent years

and take revenge through his adherence to right-wing nationalist currents. Thus, in the narrative of the performance, Rocky the boxer slips in and out of unnamed but recognisable European anti-immigration movements, from violent militias to legal, almost housetrained parties. They are all held together by two things. First, by the dislike of external destructive elements such as refugees. But, even more strongly, by the contempt for the cultural elite, who are the ones who obscure the true state of things and shame Rocky for his attitudes and actions. And who are represented here by Burian and all of us watching.

### **Politically Significant Theatre**

One of the things that makes Rocky politically significant theatre is that it recognises this fact. That the 'foreigners' in this context are a tool in a strategic power struggle in which two social groups, on the one hand "us" and on the other hand "Rocky", who do not in principle have an economic or distributional conflict of interest in Europe's current political landscape, are played off against each other so hard that it is difficult to see where a relaxation of the situation would come from. The fact that it is also difficult to see that it is actually the case that the left-wing creative class holds power in society is irrelevant. Because the object of the performance is not an actual analysis of economic and physical power in society, but an analysis of this very issue. Of the value-political consequences when the empathetic artist is confronted with his own picturesque loser figure who suddenly has the 'wrong' ideas. Instead of focusing on racism and the foreigners and dwelling on the victims, as it were, as many other works of art dealing with society's shift to the right have done, Biering chooses in Rocky to see the invulnerable victimisation of the loser figure (the fact that "Rocky is so good at being human", as Burian says) as the core of the problem. And it is precisely this narrative that the left-wing intellectual has repeated more tirelessly than any other.

In revolutionary circles in the 1970s, the intellectualisation of the worker was a much talked about danger. Nowadays, it is an unconditional goal: we want more education, more art and culture, and thus to educate everybody to the genuine, good, empathetic mindset. The romanticisation of the worker, now the loser Rocky, is still an important part of the left's rhetorical equipment. It is part of the self-understanding of the cultivated theatre audience that we can identify with him, understand him and wish for him to be lifted up to us, but at the same time a string has been cut. The old Marxist admiration for the working class is gone, and this has had the unfortunate side effect of alienating the cultural left-wing class from the loser. All those who feel threatened by globalisation, do not feel taken seriously by the left, they see only a desire to change them, not a desire to hear them. As a result, the theatre play Rocky is also not particularly interested in exploring the feeling of inferiority, the powerlessness of the losers. Rocky is far more interested in ourselves, the intellectuals, and what will happen to us as the hatred towards us intensifies. One could wish that the text of the performance reached out more by trying to tap into similar feelings, as, for example, the author Christina Hagen did when she published her controversial monster of a coffee table book *Jungle* in the spring. That Biering, in Burian's incarnation, also explored his own human fear of losing not only his privileges but, like the Rocky character, his entire livelihood. Despite its relentless self-criticism, and despite the gradual disintegration of Burian's confident narrator as he is confronted with the return of the loser in right-wing national colours, the text of the performance never departs from the division into a them (the losers) and an us (the passive-aggressive, self-righteous cultural elite) that is established from the first minute. Rather, it clings to it.

### **The Sound of the Body in Anxiety**

But if the text stays in the them-and-us rhetoric, something else and more happens on the scenic level. In Burian's incredibly strong bodily acting along the way, and in the physical and technical tricks the performance uses. When Burian, towards the climax of the performance, takes the microphone in his mouth and almost swallows it, it is not a technologically crackling, musical game, as when Laurie Anderson, for example, does something similar. What the audience hears are the violent guttural sounds of the body from the inside when it is at its most wracked with panic, anxiety and anger. This is what the body – our body – sounds like when it is on the edge. The same is the case when Burian himself hangs on the meat hook in the final scene, but the most violent effect is actually earlier in the same scene when the ever eloquent man takes a dead pig's tongue in his mouth and thus actually assumes the position that was Rocky's in the opening scene, and which he has so far only flirted with. Namely, the humiliated, unfeeling and powerless position of the man who is unable to speak for himself because he is simply unable to utter a coherent sentence. Speech only flows freely again on the stage of Husets Teater when, after the dramatic final scene, we meet one of those who, as Rocky, actually feels looked down upon and smeared ("racist") and also feels a palpable anxiety about the threat of globalised reality. Having failed as planned in his sickeningly empathetic attempt to speak on behalf of the loser, and having obviously given up in advance on getting the loser to speak as part of the performance's potential audience, Biering instead has a right-wing politician step in front of the audience. When I saw the performance, it was the Copenhagen municipal politician for the Danish People's Party, Cheanne Nielsen.

### **Getting in Touch with Rocky**

In a way, what must be a declaration of failure for critical, experimental theatre as an art form, is that it is unable to access a broader, not in advance politically initiated audience, even though in its own self-understanding it takes a deep interest in them – bordering on worship – and is therefore obliged to bring them on stage if it is to get them through the door. But if so, it is a declaration of failure it shares, not just with a number of other serious art forms, but with a whole political segment that is finding it harder and harder to make sense of their own worldview. As it says in the generic rightwing speech Biering has written in the play's programme, but which in the performance is replaced by the actual politician on stage:

*"The truth is that you are no longer the revolutionary force that creates the new ideas. The cultural left has done nothing but intensify the slogans of the 60s: more feminism, more multiculturalism, more passive aggressive. Today, the right is driving the world-changing, anti-authoritarian cultural revolution, which is labelled both punk and rock n' roll, while an adolescent left is crying and covering its ears, convinced of its own goodness. Perhaps that is why the left is afraid and so intolerant of the views of others. Because they have a lot to lose."*

That is why the most violent effect of the play is not the dead pig's body, Burian in the meat hook or the severed pig's tongue that stops the speech of the eloquent character, but rather Cheanne Nielsen, who enters the stage after Burian's exit. First, because her physical nervousness is so palpable: Her hands are shaking, her voice is determined but fragile, and the shrillness lies just below the surface. The hall is against her, and she knows it. If Burian was never truly alone, even when he was hanging in the hook, Cheanne is from first to last. But even more so because of what she says. Her speech tempers the contempt for the audience she is facing, and even the resentment at the police report

of racism she is facing and the contempt that follows in its wake. Yet her views are so unreasonable that I personally could not swallow them. Not even as a starting point for debate. For example, she kept coming back to the resentment she feels when sunshine stories about refugees and immigrants who, for example, crochet and feel good about it, are allowed to “steal headlines” in the media from the many stories where members of the same group are responsible for criminal acts that threaten the peace and cohesion of our society. When such a story made the front page of any national media last time is left to blow in the wind. Such attitudes obviously help to spread hatred and distrust between population groups, regardless of whether they can be legally judged as racism or not.

### **Theatre as a Left-Wing Echo Chamber?**

Still, the fact that I am so indignant at the sheer unchallenged stupidity I am sitting in front of that I can hardly contain myself should probably give me pause for thought. I was reminded of Lars Norén's criminal neo-Nazi cast in the scandalous production *Sju:tre* (Seven:three) back in 1999. How does Biering's approach compare to Norén's participants, who were cast as radical elements? They were avowed neo-Nazis, avowed anti-democrats, declared supporters of violence over dialogue. Norén's experiment in giving them a voice in the theatre ended, as we know, in the worst possible way, with the cast using their escorted exit to run away, rob a bank and kill two police men. Against this stands Cheanne Nielsen, who is legally a legitimate player in our democracy, with whom many people sympathise and some will vote for. The simple conclusion of her speech is that we should respect her because she respects us. Where does it place me that I find it difficult to honour that wish? It is a powerful theatre experience to sit there, so close and be confronted with the distance between the theatre space and the world Cheanne Nielsen represents. Regardless of whether Mungo Park had Pia Kjærsgaard's words on stage in the performance *De stuerene* (The housetrained) last year, Tue Biering knows his audience well enough in advance to be able to count on their (our) relative education and leftism, and it reflects on the theatre space as a ghetto that this is the case.

Perhaps what Biering's performance shows us is that the echo chamber of the left-wing artist types is hardly worse and more “distant from the world” than the echo chambers of all sorts of other groups, but it is nevertheless more dangerous, both to ourselves and to society, because the cultural capital, the shine of something desirable and glamorous associated with this segment makes it easy to stage us as elite, and together with our own arrogant analysis and disgusting sentimental worship of Rocky, this is what makes it so easy for the actual centres of power in society, the economic ones, to turn Rocky against us.

---

**Solveig Daugaard** is a PhD student in Literature, Media History and Information Cultures at Linköping University, where she is researching Gertrude Stein's cross-aesthetic reception.

---

**Text and direction:** Tue Biering.

**Scenography:** Peter Schultz.

**Sound design:** Ditlev Brinth.

**Lighting design, realisation:** Mathilde Niemann Hüttel.

**Cast:** Morten Burian Cheanne Nielsen and Kasper Frederik Mortensen.