Dark Noon

By Thomas Rosendal Nielsen

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In a film studio in Aarhus harbour, a group of South African actors act out the myth of the Wild West based on the Western film genre. Six of the seven actors are Black, playing white immigrants, pioneers and cowboys in a constant violent clash with Native Americans, Chinese guest workers and enslaved Africans. In a *coup de théâtre*, the latter are played by the audience, who, after being dragged onto the stage for a frantic folk dance, have a black line painted on their foreheads and are sold to the highest bidder. It is spectacular, it is surprising and often funny, but at the same time it is also deeply serious, because what is on display here is not only the story of The White Man's violence against other ethnicities in particular, but also the ease with which this story is turned into entertainment.

Photo: Søren Meisner

The performance was produced by the project theatre FIX&FOXY in 2019 for Revolver-scenen, Teater Republique, and has since toured Germany (Düsseldorf), France (Paris, Lille) and Spain (Gran Canaria) until this performance, which took place in Aarhus in early September 2022. It is directed by Tue Biering together with choreographer and co-director Nhlanhla Mahlangu. It combines a number of previous FIX&FOXY devices in a quite complex dramaturgy: remediation of Western popular fiction, outsourcing of Western roles to Global South actors, audience

participation, live video mediation, combination of theatre space and film set, montage techniques, demonstrative yet playful acting style, frontal address, accumulation of materials and references in the stage space, etc.

Double-Standard Civilisation

The progression of the performance can be illustrated by describing how the theatre space is transformed in accordance with the development of what is, after all, a relatively coherent narrative. The narrative starts with the immigration of poor Europeans to the New World and develops as the construction of a materialistic and double-standard civilisation based on opportunism, competition, violence, exploitation and vigilantism, but justified and naturalised through manifest buildings and institutions. Spectators enter a large black box, Studio 1 in Filmbyen in Aarhus, and take their seats around the sand-coloured performing area, surrounded by rows of audience on three sides. On the fourth side, a large screen on the wall initially simply states the title of the performance: *Dark Noon*. (A reference to Fred Zinneman's 1952 western, *High Noon*). Various equipment is lined up along the fourth wall in particular: a hangers rack with costumes, a kind of TV recording box – slightly larger than a phone booth, various undefinable folded wooden constructions. The arena set-up emphasises the theatre situation. We see the other spectators enter and take their seats, an usher encourages everyone to move to the front benches, where the performance is supposedly best experienced. Suspense is built up around the form of participation, and the audience's presence for and with each other in the theatre situation is continuously emphasised and utilised throughout the process.

The first few minutes establish the playful and complex fictional contract of the performance. The actors enter the room and stand at the edge of the performance area in front of the audience rows, facing the centre of the hall. The lights dim until only a single lamp glares like the sun over the desert casting long shadows from the two actors Mandla Gaduka and Siyambonga Alfred Mdubeki, who, now wearing cowboy hats and duster coats, move towards the centre of the performance area to the sound of Ennio Morricone's iconic theme from *The God, The Bad and the Ugly* (1966), which a third actor, Joe Young, whistles into a microphone from the sidelines. A fourth actor, Bongani Bennedict Masango, rolls across the stage like *tumbleweed*, completing the image while establishing a playful distance. After a long *stare down*, the duellists move away from each other in slow motion with exaggerated long strides, pistols are drawn, the sound of gunshots, one falls, the light is turned up, the impact is over.

A fifth actor, Lilian Tshabala, appears on the big screen – at the same time, we see her standing in the recording booth below – and asks the audience to applaud the two "amazing South African actors", and, as host and narrator, she introduces us to the premise: that to understand this time when human lives did not matter, we must begin the story with the poor white European immigrants. Meanwhile, the other actors enter the stage, put on white wigs and quickly cover their faces with white powder. The fictional contract is established: we are all participants in an entertaining game of recreating the Western myth. But the black actors' appropriation and inversion of the racist Blackfacing device is not only entertaining, but also confrontational and disturbing: of course, it is not only the poor white immigrants who are caricatured, but also the racist white entertainment culture, specifically the American Blackface convention, but I wonder if there is not also a sting directed at the present, primarily white audience? The latter is not unambiguous, as the contact with the audience is playful and filled with appeals for solidarity, but it does trigger an important play on identity and non-identity.

The Romance of the Wild Wild West

The story goes on to describe the pioneers' violent confrontations with natives, enslaved people, guest workers and each other. A high tempo football match between *natives* and *settlers*, mediated on the big screen, where an actor, Katlego Kaygee Letsholonyana, as an energetic sports journalist comments on the match and interviews the audience along the way. The scene changes to pathos when, after losing, the settlers shoot the natives. The audience laughs nervously. When one of the natives keeps getting up, he is shot again. And again. And again. Silence. More nervous laughter. An entertaining representation of a genocide? The poor pioneers struggle on to make a life in the Wild West and fortune smiles upon them when one of them, played by Thulani Zwane, strikes gold. A mine and a railway sprouts up in the middle of the prairie and with each subsequent scene, more is added: a saloon/a brothel, a store, a church, a jail, a reservation, a bank, in short: a Western town as a symbol of the entire Western civilisation. The violence and exploitation continue and takes on new forms as lawlessness is met with institutionalised violence and exploitation and 'brave' acts of vigilantism.

As the stage space gradually becomes more and more filled with scenery, materials and audience extras, the arena transforms into a theatre installation. The theatre space becomes a film set, the mine cart, for instance, is used as a camera dolly, and the staging makes the entertainment industry both the medium and the object of its critical gesture. The story ends in an aggressive patriotic "We are the people" speech (Letsholonyana), after which the narrator (Tshabala) observes that "the end of the frontier also meant the end of the romance of the wild wild west". The big screen ends the performance: "The End". Applause.

But the performance adds an important epilogue in which the seven actors, one by one, recall their relationship with Western films from their upbringing in South Africa. The common thread in the stories is the fascination with and contempt for the gun and the violence it represents, which Lilian Tshabala, for example, quite explicitly identifies as a direct factor in the real violence in South Africa. Joe Young's – the only white actor – story stands out: to him, Westerns represent a justification of the white man's violence in America, which he despises, but, he adds, a violence that is completely parallel to that of his parents' and grandparents' generation in South Africa, and in this way they mediate a kind of identity between himself and the white soldiers of his own age who, only a generation ago, were killing black children in the streets. The final narrator, Madla Gadukas, adds another layer to the connection between representation, language and violence when he talks about how he was made to learn English in order to be able to navigate in the white man's world by watching the same violent Westerns, where the white man was always the hero, over and over and over again. The final scene of the performance emphasises the connection between the physical and the cultural violence.

Africa America Europe

The dramaturgy of this "triangular drama" Africa-America-Europe not only means that this double crime, the White Man's violence and its reproduction as entertainment, is exposed; it implicates the cheerful and well-meaning audience in it. The implication[1] happens first through the geographical displacement logic of the staging: South African experiences of the Wild West myth played out in Denmark. The performance points out the elongated and problematic historical and geographical

1) Inspired by Maike Bleeker, I draw on the theory of American literary historian Michael Rothberg: *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators*, Stanford University Press 2019.

connections between the continents, not only in the dramatic fiction, but in the geographical intersection that the theatre situation constitutes by virtue of the casting and the specific location.

This is further intensified by the logic of racial interchange inherent in the white-facing device and the audience participation. Both, however, complicate the issue of guilt by preventing a simple reduction of the actors and spectators present to the victims or executioners of the story. In the situation, the South African actors are undoubtedly the ones who have the power to tell the story and literally drag the Danish audience around in the arena. They do not hide their own fascination with the violence, and in their roles as the White Man, they do not appeal to pity. We are not allowed to simply see them as victims. The Danish white spectators can evade any direct accusation by identifying the violent White Man with the American, but they cannot evade their complicity in the reproduction and consumption of violence as entertainment. The staging emphasises the audience's implication – not as executioners, but – as *bystanders* and *beneficiaries* (Rothberg) of the crimes depicted on stage. The audience's actual participation in the theatrical situation reproduces the violence as entertainment: most explicitly, of course, for those who are dragged onto the stage, but as the situation where the audience laughs uncomfortably or simply remains silent while the settler shoots the native illustrates, the performance makes us aware that the spectator position is never innocent.

When the narrative traces the threads back to the European continent, it does so with a double gesture that on the one hand points to European colonialism as the root of the problem, but also suggests a similarity between the European colonisers and today's vulnerable immigrants, thus appealing for solidarity. The short here-and-now implication is coupled with the long there-and-then implication, on both levels without a one-sided distribution of victim and executioner roles.

Breaking the Distance

The question is what comes out of it: a well-placed slap in the face for the White Man, which should also sting the cheeks of his unwilling accomplices? A growing sense of solidarity across the subject positions that history has assigned to us? It is certainly something like this that the dramaturgy of the performance appeals to. A bit like FIX&FOXY's *Viljens Triumf* (Triumph of the Will, 2012), where the audience was drawn into a re-creation of Leni Riefenstahl's Nazi propaganda film and was led or seduced into observing a kind of identity between themselves and the Germans who were both executioners and victims of German propaganda. FIX&FOXY's dramaturgy appears here as a kind of reverse *Verfremdung* effect. The social engagement and devices – the demonstrating acting style, the role changes, the montage, the humour, the direct appeal, the emphasis on the medium – originates from epic theatre. But where Brecht would interrupt identification to create reflection in preparation for action, FIX&FOXY undermines our ability to distance ourselves from uncomfortable subject positions. Not in order for us to identify with the victims or the perpetrators. We – the white European audience – are not allowed to rise above the crime through penance by assuming the role of executioners and showing our compassion for the victims so that we can get "moral relief" and return to our bystander positions. The appeal to responsibility and solidarity in FIX&FOXY lies in *Dark Noon*'s theatrical play with identity and non-identity, most clearly manifested in the white-facing device. The African actors are *not the White Man* and neither are the European spectators. But we are not the *non-White Man* either. And it is this uncomfortable difference that the performance forces us to consider.

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Dark Noon premiered in 2019 at Revolverscenen, Teater Republique.

Director and script: Ture Biering.
Choreographer and co-director: Nhlanhla Mahlangu,
Scenography: Johan Kølkjær.
Cast: Bongani Bennedict Masango, Joe Young, Lillian Tshabalala, Mandla Gaduka, Siyambonga Alfred Mdubeki, Katlego Kaygee Letsholonyana and Thulani Zwane.