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NO MAN'S LAND, TERRITORIES AND BORDER AREAS

Although the 11th of September produced a lot of confusion and two wars, polarised societies all over the world, generated heated warlike multicultural debates – and in my country one dead politician on election tour with voters electing a dead man – strengthened borders with ever more rules to prevent immigration, it also stimulated a general atmosphere in the arts already made more receptive by the use of multimedia to co-operate with other disciplines, artistically, scientifically and culturally.

OWN RELATION

In the beginning of the seventies I studied theatre direction and pedagogy at the Amsterdam Theatre School. At a certain moment a Portuguese student who was a political refugee joined our group. His problems with the Dutch language appeared to be considerable. We got to know him as someone who hardly ever uttered a word. Until a teacher asked him to play in his own language. He burst into a diarrhoea of words and improvised on and on. This made a big impression on me and influenced my ideas about the role of language in relation with the theatre.

For my final examination performance I wanted to direct Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and asked this Portuguese student to play the part of Vladimir. Everybody declared me crazy, as his Dutch although a little improved, still was often far from recognisable as Dutch. But in the meantime I had learned to know him as an interesting actor and I wanted to work with him. For the part of Estragon I asked a student from the Dutch Antilles (Caribbean). With the help of the voice teacher who consented to give voice training to the group, this Portuguese student raised his pronunciation to a presentable level. I asked the set design teacher, who was more than two meters tall, to play the part of Pozzo. The part of Lucky was played by a student in the mime school. I gave a physical acting training session. Right from the start we worked with an improvised theatre set in the form of a circle. The set design teacher introduced some spatial acting exercises. The final set we made together as a group. I finished my studies in 1974, and looking backwards, this was my first intercultural and interdisciplinary theatre project.

TWO DIFFERENT WORLDS

Through my marriage in 1975 with an Iranian political refugee my life inside the house became 100% Persian. We lived in a kind of tribal context. The length of time a guest used to stay in the house varied from three months up to two or three years. Outside the house I tried to live my Dutch life. But my Iranian family and friends appeared to be accustomed to moving themselves in the tribal context and I received accompaniment to my rehearsals and appointments. I often arrived late or not at all. At that time the percentage of mixed marriages was much lower than it is today. I did not know anybody who lived like we did. I learned to know by my own experience how it is to live in two totally different cultures, worlds and histories. Not being Persian I was not living like the Dutch. It is this experience causing an alienating view

on the things, the world, this detached way of existence that formed the inspiration for my work with the multicultural theatre group the Vier-7.

The Vier-7 was erected in 1983 and consisted of people with diverging cultural, subcultural and theatrical backgrounds and disciplines. The members of the group were of Moroccan, Surinamese, Aruban, Indonesian, Australian-Jewish, French, German and Dutch descent. The artistic team was made up by a female modern dancer, a set and light designer and myself as the director.

The group was a mixture of amateurs and professionals. We worked on an interdisciplinary, intercultural basis. The heart of the themes was existential and showed the human being wandering from space to space trying to find a small place to live in, a little love to share, a past to forget or to hold on to. But in the multicultural area it was not the general tone and taste of the time. Political correctness demanded issues like racial and social injustice. There were different amateur theatre groups of Turkish, Surinamese, Antillean and Moroccan descent working on a minority basis with these social and racial issues. There was a special festival for these groups, and my group participated in it as an outsider. Later, during the nineties, one of these minority groups was supported to transform into a multicultural youth theatre school with a theatre group and a building of its own. And another theatre building was opened during the nineties forming a platform for the presentation of minority and multicultural theatre performances.

After a year my group received subsidies from the minority corner, although official rules excluded a white director.

MY WAY OF WORKING

First, I will give some examples of how I dealt with the cultural diversity in the different groups I worked with.

One of the actors in my theatre group came from Surinam, and his story was that as a child he was hit by a tree trunk in the river. Anyway, he was not able to read a text with understanding. We discovered this when he was already incorporated in the group. He read every word separately, without any relation between the words. His memory was not what it should have been, neither motorically nor verbally. Not everybody always had the endurance to act with him in a scene, as during rehearsals, one was forced to repeat everything to him over and over again. To relieve the people that did play with him I used to do some extra in the head and body drumming which was also necessary before every presentation of a performance. But since he had a very strong theatrical presence the public never noticed. "It's always the black actors with the fewest lines" were the comments sometimes.

The members of the group accepted each other with all the ins and outs. I presume the group chemistry was strengthened by the "us against the world" feeling.

YOU ARE ABSTRACT

A different example concerns an international theatre project at the Amsterdam Theatre School I organised. In this project there were students of the Theatre Teachers' School, the Mime School and the Object Theatre School, as well as a student from Lima, Peru, two students from an actors' school in Moscow, two actors from a theatre group in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe and a Dutch theatre teacher from Managua, Nicaragua. The artistic team was formed by a set designer, a light

designer and myself as director. The two Zimbabweans adopted an attitude that said: "We are like this, and you are like that, and that is it". They always had the word respect on the tip of their tongues when they commented on the theatrical work being done. Everybody had made slides of their own environment and elements of these slides were being transformed into theatrical spaces, objects and costumes. From there, characters and stories were going to be developed. The Zimbabweans found our approach to theatre to be abstract. That was their fixed opinion: "Abstract". The Zimbabweans reserved their respect for the professional area mainly. Other things were criticised openly. Their apartment was too big, the food not salty enough (we had a Brazilian cook who was an acrobat with low budget cooking), the weather was too wet and cold, working indoors claustrophobic. The unity of the artistic team became threatened by disagreements. But eventually everybody relaxed. One of the Zimbabweans started to develop an interest in the people he was with, the work we were doing, the world he was in. The other Zimbabwean kept his distance and reservations. I had the impression that he was afraid to lose his theatrical identity, including his daily bread.

The diversity and complexity of this group were counterproductive for a long time. For a real exchange, especially during a project with an intensive character, mutual influence is indispensable.

OPENNESS

When I did an interdisciplinary theatre project in Nicaragua with a modern dance group the working process became infected by censorship because the group was part of the Sandinistic cultural organisation and depended on Sandinistic economical support. The première of the performance was postponed because the Sandinists lost the elections. This was February 1990. Everybody was devastated, sad and afraid for his or her future. These feelings established a bonding that was necessary for the creation of the group chemistry that had lacked so far. Censorship was abandoned, the whole working atmosphere changed. Suddenly we were a big family that wanted to prove it could produce a valuable performance in difficult times.

The last example is related to the student population of the Theatre Teachers' School where I work. This student population can hardly be called multicultural. So far it has been very difficult to attract a multicultural student and teacher population in my school. In general, the multicultural students that can and want to study at the Amsterdam Theatre School prefer the dance, actor or mime school, and multicultural professional teachers in the theatre are still rare. So the culturally diverse students are exceptions, and in order to survive, they have to adapt themselves to a strange environment, comprised of sometimes hostile, sometimes indifferent student groups and teachers that find it difficult to relate appropriately. These students often behave like loners, receive special coaching that creates jealousy among the other students and a problem case atmosphere will soon be generated. Because of all those problems it can become difficult to judge the qualities of the culturally diverse students fairly. Only the very strong, artistically and socially talented will survive.

With the light design teacher I do a first year project about the exploration of the theatrical space in connection with a Shakespeare text. Some years ago a Turkish student, an Antillien student and a student from Iraq were part of the group. The student from Iraq had become a problem case. There had been different clashes with the group. In the sub group designing a scene he played the part of MacBeth with a Dutch girl playing the part of Lady MacBeth. Her conception of acting differed

considerably from his. But their co-operation became interesting as they opened up to each other. He succeeded in transferring her his passion as an actor to her. And he taught her some phrases of her text in Arabic. She succeeded in diminishing the rhetoric with which he used to act and stimulated him to a more sober acting style. Through the passion, the mutually spoken Dutch and Arabic, and the sober but very physical acting style they became a MacBeth couple that apparently loved each other, which was part of the collective concept. Afterwards they both declared to have learned a lot from each other. However, this general atmosphere of satisfaction, the common ground and goal created during the project, turned out to be temporary. Soon new clashes between the Iraqi student and the group took place and the Iraqi student left our school. The Antillien girl also left, because she found theatrical creation to be too complicated for her and went to another teachers' school that was more focused on acting only. The Turkish student is surviving successfully.

Most primary and secondary schools in big cities have a multicultural student population. At the end of the nineties, the Dutch secretary of state for culture introduced an Action Plan for Art and Culture in order to stimulate the development of cultural diversity and the participation of the young. New educational strategies like peer education were adopted. The idea to operate from within got extra attention because an important part of the multicultural young population of the cities were and are missing the boat or get stuck in the middle. For instance, the Centres for Art and Culture developed projects with the cultural centres and schools of multicultural populated neighbourhoods. Youth theatre companies develop training programs for their members to do workshops with their young public after a performance. In the big cities theatre groups adopt a single school and, together with this school, develop an educational program related to cultural diversity. In the meantime, international exchange and co-operation in the professional and educational arts have become a general activity. Many different kinds of festivals are being organised in this context.

So the Amsterdam Theatre School is forced to think about cultural diversity and professional theatre training. At the Theatre Teaching School, this has resulted in a more open approach to the curriculum. Theatre theory now includes both western and non-western theatre history. Once a month a lecture with a multicultural theme is organised by a group of students and teachers. Periodically, non-western dance and movement workshops are given. The students are pedagogically prepared to do training periods in culturally diverse primary and secondary schools. I organise training periods to carry out workshops and projects in France, Croatia, Aruba and Curacao (Caribbean) to stimulate the internationalisation of the students and confront them with culturally diverse theatre work in a context where they are the foreigner.

THE PEDAGOGY OF THE ARTISTIC PROCESS

People have to be convinced they will gain and grow by their participation. Developing the sensitivity for each other's cultural diversity and qualities is important. In the exchange between the individual and the group, a process of becoming conscious starts in relation to what someone does and does not accept. What is the minimum space one needs to function? When does someone feel marginal, lost or denied? The higher someone puts the maximum level of their identity functioning, the less space there will be available to explore the unknown. In order to function, one should be able to become aware of a kind of minimum and maximum space for oneself.

I like to handle the working process like an investigation to collect and select material and decide together how it will be transformed into a performance. As a theatre maker and a teacher, one has to be very alert to create the space for every member of the group to come forward. Especially in the beginning, it is important to take care that everybody has their turn to speak and give comments. The aim is to establish a creative atmosphere and connect everybody with and make everybody responsible for the content and theatrical material of the project.

In principle, I work on the basis of individual and subgroup assignments. From the floor to the table and from the table to the floor continuously.

The assignments are given in order to stimulate an attitude as co-theatre maker. The artistic team accompanies the execution of these assignments and gives theatre training, which includes the production of theatrical sequences with the whole group. The results of the assignments are demonstrated to the group. In some cultures criticism is regarded as negative and impolite. But in the arts it is necessary. Good criticism is supportive; a good critique gives advice and suggestions in line with the character of the presented work.

By the time a common artistic ground is reached, a working vocabulary starts to grow. It is a kind of secret language, with self-made words, notions and concepts that will only be understood by the members of the group. Using and inventing this language is a sign of pleasure, engagement and bonding crucial for the necessary group chemistry.

Towards the end of the working process, the theatrical sequences are transformed into a performance through fusion, combination and assemblage. As my projects pedagogically approach the participants as theatre making subjects, during the final direction phase, I aim at keeping everybody in touch with the totality of the performance being created. Looking for balance is important, but I consider a certain amount of imbalance, chaos and danger to be fruitful for any artistic process or product. The possibility of failure should not be abandoned; risks should be taken. This keeps us alert and the theatre alive.

SEPARATED DISCIPLINES

From the beginning, I connected the interdisciplinary and the intercultural in my theatre work. It is difficult to clearly explain the relationship between the two. The separation of disciplines has to do with the history of the western academic system. This academic system entails the separation of disciplines and the development of specialised professional areas. Connecting these disciplines means organising the traffic, making appointments. It would be artificial to reconnect what has been separated for ages. The same applies for the intercultural. When a discipline or a culture is being considered as an isolated area, it closes itself up and becomes unapproachable. My interest lies in the dynamics between autonomous territories, discovering the tangent places and exploring the border areas and the in-between.

I find important to Stimulate people to act in their own language (like Turkish, Arabic or Dutch) because elementary creative sources can be explored. Then with an accent in spoken Dutch, like the Rotterdam accent or the Arabic and Turkish accents, forms a kind of musical in-between. Speaking the dominant language with an accent thus becomes such a border area. The multicultural street language that young people invent, dialect and jargon all form a familiar kind of border area. I consider movement to be a border area between acting and dance. A singing or rhythmic text treatment can become a border area between text, song, music and sound. As a

border area, the *mise en scène*, by its use of space, glues the dramaturgy of space, objects, lights, image and acting into the performance.

The borders of the territories of disciplines and cultures are not fixed. They become vague and flexible; they shift and disappear. Through the tangent places between disciplines and cultures, one can enter and expand the border areas. A discipline functions as a kind of culture, a way of thinking, a mentality. Visual artists not used to design for the theatre often tend to make an installation which is whole in itself and does not bear the complementary work of actors or use actor-unfriendly material. Theatre directors not used to co-operating sometimes wish to influence the design too much and avoid or reject the use of the space design altogether.

All territory can be penetrated and entered, but beware, autonomy should be respected. Territorial fights are not uncommon, so traffic rules are needed.

Theatre consists of unfinished creations that are complementary to each other. A costume needs a body. The lights, the set and objects all need space and movement as well as to be used by actors. A text and a character need an actor. The actor mediating between the text and the character can make himself theatrically present as a person to the public. A character can be played by different actresses and actors or be abandoned altogether. The performance needs a public. The very magic and life of contemporary theatre is based on the existence of imperfection, incompleteness and transparency.

To my mind, it is important to make theatre that is not anthropocentric. To make theatre which shows the relationship between human beings and their environment.

It is important to show how much we are influenced in our behaviour by the significance of the spaces we move through, the objects we use. This is a magic world of things that asks for a sensorial approach. The development of the content does not necessarily start with the interpretation of a text. It is not the kind of theatre where the set illustrates the state of being of the main character. The set, lights, objects and music function as a kind of counter actor. The space represents the world – theatre as a journey through space. I believe a sensorial, poetic approach is valuable for intercultural theatre, because too much rationality and logic becomes an obstacle in artistic communication and creation.

A theatre project, and art in general, can be experienced as a kind of no man's land, a free place that generates an atmosphere where a world of its own can be discovered, experimented with, created and celebrated. Celebration is an indispensable in-between area of society, and in the arts and theatre especially. People can escape from their daily life and break through established relations and rules. They become more daring and willing to test new perspectives and visions. That is why I think that, when handled in the right way, the artistic process of making theatre includes pedagogical achievements by itself.

Communication with the social environment is a matter of organisation and might be the bigger goal, a foundation and starting point.

During the last century there has been a continuing development of the interdisciplinary process in the arts. In the nineties the multimedia started to undermine the borders between the academically separated disciplines. Here was the hole where the intercultural could penetrate the wall. The impact of the multimedia is still considerable. The very use of the word interdisciplinary may seem old fashioned now, but in relation to the artistic process, I still find to be it up-to-date.