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## A Visual Kind of Dramaturgy: Project Theatre in Scandinavia

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Traditionally, Scandinavian theatre has been very institutional in its character, and this can be seen as the result of an unusual national theatre tradition. During the last two decades, however, a tendency towards non-institutionalized theatre has become apparent. It emerged, more or less, with the group-theatre of the 1960s and 1970s, inspired by laboratory experimental groups, such as the Odin Theatre, and by popular traditions, political revue, comedy and so on. The 1980s, though, were marked by a new trend: visual performance, inspired by more conceptual and minimalistic trends in direction balanced by aesthetic elements and means of expression. This further led to a special pictorial orientation, to a certain extent in the direction of Robert Wilson and later of the new Dutch and Belgian avant-garde. It was connected to names like the Mickery Theatre in Amsterdam, and the Belgian companies of Jan Fabre, Rosas or the Needcompany. Small but very specialized festivals have been passing on not only these trends to Scandinavia, but also the method of organizing theatre productions as projects. A few individuals bring together actors and either raise money from project to project or achieve a regular subsidy as production organizations.

### *BILLEDSTOFTEATER*

One of the first project theatre groups to work and organize like this in Scandinavia was the Billedstofteater of Copenhagen, Denmark. The central core consisted of Per Flink Basse, Kirsten Dehlholm and Else Fenger. They founded their project theatre in 1977 and disbanded in 1986. Their method aimed at recruiting participants from production to production, often making use of actors without any traditional background. To start with, they had been working with textiles, and this basis was incorporated into their name — Billedstofteater (lit. = Picture-textile-theatre). In spite of Robert Wilson being a clear source of inspiration, they differed from him on one important point: their predilection for undefined space, indoors and outdoors. Wilson was attracted to the traditional



proscenium stage, but in another way they were of the same mind as Wilson; namely the use of slow movement and pictorial orientation. Thus Billedstofteater put on performances designed for historical settings, art museums, open spaces and the such like. In an article, the Norwegian theatre critic as he then was, Kai Johnsen, wrote of his reactions to, and his analysis of Billedstofteater's use of slow motion in different types of surroundings. Referring to *Zones*, which was shown at the Avignon festival in 1983, he writes: 'Against the violent, ardent and continuous music (drums, guitars and wind-instruments) the movement appeared achingly slow, a diagonal on the set (15m) taking up to two minutes to cross'.<sup>1</sup> This was a performance based on the classic legend of *Amor and Psyche*. Another production was *Transsiberian*; this was performed at the International Theatre Festival of Bergen in 1984. In extreme slow motion the actors are led to a row of rowing-machines (otherwise used for fitness training), in front of which a number of transistor radios are placed. These are all turned on, producing a veritable cacophony. The actors, whose faces are smeared with clay, row for a period of time which must appear interminable to the spectators. Then, two participants arrive, moving ever so slowly, and carrying oxy-acetylene torches on their backs. They set the transistors alight with spurts of flame, and the cacophony slowly dies out as the radios burn. 'Theoretically, then, Billedstofteater make it possible to speak of a perpetual theatre', Johnsen continues.<sup>2</sup> A certain amount of confusion arises when comparing *Zones* and *Transsiberian* with each other. This is caused by the fact that they were originally conceived as a stated production and visual performance on the one hand and installation as a performance on the other.

Irrespective of how Billedstofteater came to define their productions, it cannot be denied that they all to a greater or lesser degree contain elements of a visual or equivalent dramaturgy. But before proceeding to other Scandinavian examples of a visual kind of dramaturgy, it is necessary to explain further what it really is, based upon the visual performance Billedstofteater probably was the first to represent in Scandinavia.

#### A VISUAL KIND OF DRAMATURGY

To be able to establish a fitting terminology for the type of visual dramaturgy of equivalence that project theatre seems to have been representing, one has to

<sup>1</sup> K. Johnsen, 'For øyeblikket eller evigheten' - Billedstofteater, *Spillerom*, Oslo, No.11-4/1984, p. 26. (*Spillerom* is an important Norwegian theatre periodical)

<sup>2</sup> K. Johnsen, loc cit, p. 28.

consider the concept itself. It indicates that elements or means of expression, such as space, frontality, textuality and visuality, are no longer arranged in the traditional sense of organic or hierarchic systems, but are equivalent, on an equal footing. The new theatre's non-semiotic character is referred to by Michael Kirby in his article on 'Nonsemiotic Performance'. He can be construed as saying that a correct or sole interpretation no longer exists, theatre having developed in the direction of the fragmentary, with apparently incidental effects.<sup>3</sup> In this case semiology loses much of its relevance as an analytical possibility. As far as the concept of visual dramaturgy is concerned there could be a methodical alternative also in the sense of performance analysis. This presupposes a realization of the intersecting relationship between visuality, textuality, spaciality and frontality, as well as representative and interpretive acting, and for the latter Kirby has developed a theory in his essay 'On Acting and Not-Acting'.<sup>4</sup> This can be further illustrated by setting up a system of axes where the point of gravity can be moved according to the performance to be considered. Visuality and textuality will then refer to the performance's orientation in relation to picture and text, with many possible variables related to the arrangement of space, use of tableaux or installations in relation to acting style. Thus the above mentioned performances of Billedstofteater, *Zones* and *Transsiberian*, could be analyzed and described in relation to their respective kinds of visuality *vis-à-vis* a small degree or total lack of textuality. Formal descriptions can, then, be put into the wider context of thematic analysis, like the mythical implications of *Zones* or the visual description of a voyage into vast and forbidden territories in *Transsiberian*.

#### *HIERARCHIC AND NON-HIERARCHIC WAYS OF PROJECT THEATRE*

Although the elements and the means of expression in a visual kind of dramaturgy are no longer arranged in the traditional sense of organic or hierarchic systems, where meaning is created by more established dramaturgical structures, a duality in project theatre aesthetics has evolved. This also applies to ways of organizing working structures or processes, and the duality, then, consists of hierarchic and non-hierarchic techniques of project theatre. In the hierarchic sense work requires a single point of view, having been developed as a conceptual idea in advance, as a strictly determined scheme of work, so to say. The period of production will consist of putting the elements together in their

<sup>3</sup> M. Kirby, 'Nonsemiotic Performance', *Modern Drama*, vol. XXV, no.1, March 1982.

<sup>4</sup> M. Kirby, 'On Acting and Not-Acting', *The Art of Performance. A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock and Robert Nickas, New York, 1988.



proper pre-arranged places. This single point of view has been projected by a team or by a single director, in co-operation with a scenic designer, a composer or a dramaturg — or even an artist or architect. The actors are then adapting to the concept during rehearsals, trying to realize the proper ideas of the project makers. Even though the elements as such are opposing each other in a juxtaposed fashion, there should be a total integration of equalized means of expression. This could be developed as a symmetry of performance style, dealing with an almost classical aesthetic consciousness.

In the non-hierarchic methods of project theatre, there would still be a pre-arranged projection, but more as a preparation to giving a line for a working process involving the actors. Even arbitrariness could be achieved as a working principle. This would correspond to a happening or performance art such as aesthetic consciousness. The actors are given the possibility of developing their parts, on a level of equivalence towards the concept itself, thus participating in changing it suddenly during the working process. Consequently, there will be a certain amount of surprise both outwardly towards the audience as well as inwardly towards themselves. It could be compared to free acting, but with a surrealist touch.

#### *HOTEL PRO FORMA*

After the Billedstofteater had been disbanded in 1986, Kirsten Dehlholm together with Willie Flindt, for the first projects, formed a new project theatre in Copenhagen, Hotel Pro Forma. Kirsten Dehlholm was referred to as saying that she wanted to get away from the slow-motion style of expression, that had been characteristic of Billedstofteater. Moreover she stated that she would like to achieve a 'crushing surface'. To quote the theatre critic Kjerstin Norén: 'This choice of words might indicate that dramatizing in the sense of textual work could become more important, even though visuality would still be of basic significance, as Kirsten Dehlholm stated during our talks in Bergen (author's translation)<sup>5</sup>. This corresponds to the fact that textual montages or poetry have constituted an important part of the work of Hotel Pro Forma, such as in the production *Yes, the Salt of Passion*, where the figure of Hamlet, understood in a context of mythology, was combined with local, rural rituals in Japan in 1987. As for examples of performances based on poems, one could mention *Carpe, Carpe, Carpe*, in 1988, with poems by Per Age Brandt, or *Why Does Night Come Mother*, in 1989, poems by Soren Ulrik Thomsen. *Carpe, Carpe, Carpe* recently

<sup>5</sup> K. Norén, 'Hotel Pro Forma pa vej', *Information*, Copenhagen, 25 Sept., 1986.

also produced at the Nieuwpoorttheater in Gent, Belgium, is defined by Hotel Pro Forma as a poetry performance, involving seven children aged eight, taking part in scenic expression in a sculptural way. One side of the room is a laboratory, where the children are carrying out experiments in physics. The other side of the room is a sculptural landscape, where fragments of animals and materials are placed in test tubes on tall pedestals. The highly concentrated poetry stands out against the children's voices and the way they move releases meanings that otherwise would have remained concealed.<sup>6</sup>

*Why Does Night Come, Mother* is a performance presented from a bird's eye view, a scenic composition combining architecture, song, poetry and the visual arts. 'A performance examining fundamental questions about space and visual perception in an aesthetic and sensuous way. The performance is devised for a narrow and high-ceilinged room framed by balconies on several floors. The audience is watching from the balconies, looking down towards the floor where a soprano is singing lying down and five performers are moving in patterns.'<sup>7</sup> Thus, this could fit into a definition of hierarchic style of project theatre in which elements are organized according to a strict conceptual point of view.

#### *BAKTRUPPEN*

Baktruppen from Bergen, Norway, is a project theatre group deliberately using the term equivalent dramaturgy in connection with their work. The group was founded in 1986 by Tone Avenstroup, together with the poet Oyvind Berg, among others. In a presentation of her work that she has written herself, she says, 'Baktruppen are looking for a form of expression based on equivalent dramaturgy; the visual, textual and musical elements are placed on an equal footing in the scenic action'.<sup>8</sup> Then she goes on to explain that the traditional hierarchy (understood as the ordering of the elements in an aesthetical system) should be replaced by an interplay of theatrical means, which should consist of contrasts and a play of different points of intersection. That which is to be expressed thematically is, amongst other things, excitement and stagnation, love and death, history and the present. Both physical expression and pictures are to amount to a presence which is capable of reaching out to the audience. In this case, equivalence also refers to the above mentioned immediate influence on the work itself that the actors could have in a non-hierarchic style of project theatre.

<sup>6</sup> Hotel Pro Forma, information portfolio, Copenhagen, 1989.

<sup>7</sup> Hotel Pro Forma, loc. cit.

<sup>8</sup> T. Avenstroup, 'Baktruppen', note, information portfolio, Bergen, 1989.



In this way, spontaneity has become a part of the revealing of the scenic potential. Baktruppen has through productions such as *Yes, I am Going Over to the Dogs* in 1987 and *Cur*, in 1988, arrived at the kind of production that most clearly seems to have realized their intentions: *Germania Tod in Berlin* in 1989, an adaptation of the play by Heiner Müller. His text consists of a number of images of German/Prussian history, stressing revolutionary questions, Stalinism and conditions in post-war East Germany. Baktruppen have attempted to adapt this point of departure to Norwegian conditions by reworking the text, by their use of music and scenic elements, such as an elk, a pine tree and slides depicting objects and scenes which are specifically Norwegian. They use a poem by Claes Gill and music by Grieg. There is direct communication with the audience through a recitation-like rendering of the text. The scenic design by Worm Winther, together with the group, brings to mind a production at the Mickery Theatre in Amsterdam in 1983: *North Atlantic* by the Wooster Group of New York (The Holland Festival), in which a large counter heavily laden with technical equipment was the main scenic element.

There are other project theatre groups in Scandinavia, like the Swedish Remote Control Productions, Stockholm, directed by Michael Laub, as well as Verdensteatret (The World Theatre), Oslo, directed by Lisbet Bodd. A younger Norwegian director and former theatre critic, already quoted above is Kai Johnsen, who comes from the State Theatre High School of Oslo. He has been working both inside and outside national theatre institutions in Norway, and has in 1990 formed his own project theatre, Prologos, co-operating with composer Cecilie Ore and architect Henrik Nielsen, to stage 'Prologos', based on texts by the Danish poet Inger Christensen. It has been produced by Bergen International Theatre and the National Theatre of Bergen. One actress that Johnsen took into his project is Anneke von der Lippe. She is normally engaged at the Norske Teatret (Norwegian Theatre) of Oslo, but was given the possibility to take part in other productions. She expressed some of her feelings towards being a project group actor working with a visual kind of dramaturgy, when she stated, 'at first I felt caught up in something that I could not control myself and this gave me the feeling of being an manipulated actress. But as work progressed towards patterns in which I would involve myself creatively the experience of acting in a deeper sense emerged'.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Prologos press conference, Bergen, 15 August 1990.