

## Anne-Sophie Erichsen

# Making the Text

*I write and write,  
text and physical actions. My  
hand hurts. Each day  
after having worked  
in the space, I go to my  
computer  
and fill in themes  
in the scenario  
and text in the script,  
developing what  
I find best for the story.*

The last performance I directed was part of a festival where, after we had performed, there were discussions about the work and questions to the artists. The director of the festival, Kristian Seltun, was interested in performance text, in rhythm and poetic language, and he asked me how I created a text. How do you make a text? *How do I make a text?* At that moment, I realised that I do have a system that is simple and functional. I will try to explain it.

The performance is called *The Happy Prince*. It is based on a story by Oscar Wilde, told by two lonely characters who meet on a rubbish heap. These characters also tell their own personal stories in parallel. This was the starting point for the work. It meant that we knew the skeleton of one of the stories, which is of course a great help: re-telling; re-inventing.

### TEXT IMPROVISATION

I ask the actors to prepare text improvisations. This means I give them a specific task, a theme, to think about for the next day's work. At the beginning, they make solo improvisations. First, I ask them to tell the story from the point of view of the character they are going to play, always using the first person: I was there, I tell you what happened to me.

They must describe everything that they can. How did things look? What were the colours and smells? What was the weather like? How is the other character? What feelings exist? They have to go into the story.

This is quiet work, requiring deep concentration. The actors sit on a chair or stand in the room and talk, talk, talk. When they get excited they start gesturing to show what they mean, and I write, I write it all down quickly. I have developed a technique of speedwriting. I must write everything down.

Afterwards, I offer this back to the actors. I read aloud the text I have written down. We agree where it was interesting and where it wasn't. There is always gold in this



Anne-Sophie Erichsen. Photo: Roger Hardy

work, but also a lot of rubbish. The gold... This always happens: details described there and then open up the story and give a surprising input that none of us could have foreseen.

We decide on a point of view, a place from which the story can be told; what we want to say with it; the overall intention.

### THE MAP

The next thing I do, immediately after the first days of improvisation, is to make a map of the performance - a scenario, where I split the story into a certain number of scenes. I give a number and a name to each scene and sometimes add small drawings as well.

Then I start to fill in the themes where I think they belong in the scenes. And I begin writing the script, based always on the scenario. Bit by bit, I fill in the words. These words belong to scene three, so I put them there. This theme could fit in scene five, so I put it there.

Then I choose the theme for the next day. One specific description from the improvisation seems to contain a possibility for development. It can be a detail that triggers a new angle, a personal angle. I focus on that, asking the actor to enter into that specific topic. At this point, the actor will probably start to make more physical actions while improvising text. What one actor describes in one sequence can be picked up by another actor in the next improvisation and developed further.

I write and write, text and physical actions. My hand hurts.

Each day after having worked in the space, I go to my computer and fill in themes in the scenario and text in the script, developing what I find best for the story. If one actor produces some text, I may take the liberty of giving those words to the other actor if that seems better. No hard feelings? Yes, sometimes. But I have to choose the best bits. I also sort out their physical actions, placing them in the scenario where I think they can be used.

### DIFFERENT ANGLES

In order to open up the story's possibilities even more, I can ask the actors to tell it from a different angle. One day, it may be the neighbour who is telling: what *she* saw and heard, how she reacted, what was her impression, how did she see the characters, what does she remember?

This leads to another interesting aspect, which is memory. Although two people have experienced the same story, they can still tell it in very different ways.

Memory is personal. Or I can ask the little fly that sat on the wall and saw it all to tell its version.

Perhaps I ask the actors to swap roles, to tell the story from the perspective of the other. What happens then? Once more new inputs and sequences, that can be useful, appear.

### THE DIALOGUE

After a few days, we have text material, or themes that the actors know, and they start improvising together. I give them a specific task: the first meeting. They are already full of information from the text work we have done, and now is the time for meeting physically in the space and attempting to make dialogue and action together.

These improvisations are often quite short and specific. I write them all down in my book. My hand hurts. After a week I have at least two big exercise books full of words that only I can read, but actually, the whole performance is already there, in the books.

Every day I put new words and actions into the scenario and the script. I improvise on my computer, building dialogue based on each day's work. I may also ask the actors to do pure physical improvisations, without words, always on a specific theme, in order to focus on the physicality of the character and on the space.

### FIFTY SCRIPTS

Step by step, I build the performance, always from the actors' own material, although I may transform it, put something in a scene where I think it fits better than in the improvisation, always using my map as a reference. This may seem impractical, because I end up with hours and hours of material.

The actors get new text from me

every day; then we change it again, arriving at another new text. They have to remember to throw away yesterday's script because today we have a new one! (We've had many confusing times when the actors each had a different script!)

Loads of words: but, paradoxically, this method enables me to work quickly, because we always know something about what we are looking for.

After seven days, we had a sketch for the whole of *The Happy Prince* which lasted two and a half hours (it is now only fifty minutes), completely unedited. The next step is cutting, cutting, refining the scenes, killing darlings, developing and fixing. And at a certain point, just before the premiere, we had to say stop: now, this is the text! We are not going to change it!

ANNE-SOPHIE ERICHSEN (Norway) was born in 1957. She has been an actress, director and pedagogue at Grenland Friteater since 1983. She has given numerous workshops for actors in different countries. She has directed three performances for the Saggiocco Ensemble, and *The Happy Prince* is one of them. With Geddy Aniksdal, she organised in Norway in 1989 a Magdalena Festival entitled *A Room of One's Own*.