

Kirsten Dehlholm

Plastic Storks, Panoramas and Polyphony

About the creation of Hotel Pro Forma's performance *I Only Appear to Be Dead*

Hans Christian Andersen is not dead, he only appears to be dead; as he himself wrote on a note he left on his bedside table when he went to sleep, for fear of being buried alive.

He didn't need to be afraid of dying alive though, or of being forgotten after death. If he ever did die, he has certainly been brought to life again during the last two years on the occasion of the 200th anniversary of his birth in 2005. In Denmark his works and his persona have become the object of new analysis, interpretations, passionate biographies and careful assessments of all his possible secrets. In addition we have had an infinite number of radio and television programmes, exhibitions, performances, musical compositions and books, as well as the countless number of times his name is used for fabulous 'fairytale' beer, porcelain, travel, ice-cream, biscuits, a stadium, a park and much more. Of course as a Danish icon - the biggest we have (though we should not forget Søren Kierkegaard) - he has to be used as a trademark for all that which is Danish, in these times when everything has to be bigger than reality.

The iconic status of the Danish fairytale poet, who lived from 1805 to 1875, made an immediate natural approach to him quite difficult for me when I was encouraged to make a performance about him some years ago. My first perspective was coloured by Hans Christian Andersen as a trademark, by thinking of this trademark as a phenomenon and by the temptation to make a 'trademark' performance. But this required distancing myself from my subject and an ironic relationship that does not normally belong to my creative process.

RESEARCH

I started reading about the world renowned Danish fairytale poet about whom in fact I did not know much. I read about his works - many more than the fairytales he is known for. I read about his youthful fame abroad, about his energetic, relentless self-promotion and self-staging. I read his novels,

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poems and especially the diaries he wrote throughout most of his adult life. I saw his drawings and was particularly inspired by his picture books for children, made as a collage using all kinds of illustrations, old stickers, his own paper cuttings and strips of coloured paper. I read about the times he lived in and about his interest in new technology.

All this was miles away from the limited knowledge I had received as a child about the poor poet who became so terribly famous but was always suffering from minor complexes, conceit, toothache and heart-ache. Everything I read and saw surprised me, widening my limited view of this strange artist and his deeply complex, intuitive knowledge. In his art, he used his tremendous search for the human soul and for the meaning of his condition, but he was not really able to apply it in his everyday life. He was very lonely choosing to live a life with art.

His life, his personality and his work completely overwhelmed my ironic attitude towards Hans Christian Andersen as a trademark, becoming instead a great inspiration and turning into the challenge of crossing swords with a real master.

POINT OF DEPARTURE

In Hans Christian Andersen's diaries, I looked primarily for texts, partly to use for a libretto, partly as starting points for situations in the performance that would be based on song and music. The volumes of his diaries are full of words, but I found the best ones in the 13th volume, an index of reference words. Here were listed all the concepts that, in brief, can describe the poet's particular personality, in alphabetical order and cross-referenced to the other twelve volumes: "admirers", "craving for letters", "happiness", "homesickness", "letters from Andersen", "obsessions", "quarantine

feeling", "toothache", "tummy-ache", "the world is my country", and so on.

Later, the many reading hours from the research phase provided whole sentences and short sections of remarkable text that said most about the poet and demonstrated his sense of humour and insight. Many of these excerpts were used both as part of the libretto and as inspiration for dramatic sequences, for example: "Have not eaten for two days. Oh no, my journey has not ended yet. They all leave, all all. Yes, but you are not a normal human being."

THE SPACE

For me, a performance consists of three elements: space, content and performers. This time the content is Hans Christian Andersen, his life and his many journeys. The space is a stage that must illustrate travel as a physical factor. To be able to develop the performance's concept, I must first find or create the space. The performance develops in dialogue with the space; the space is always a co-player.

The performance about the poet and his life as a journey is to be performed on a very long thin stage, a stage that cannot be absorbed in one look from the spectators' seating. It is twenty-eight metres wide and four metres deep and runs like a ribbon in front of a long landscape consisting of thirty-two playing cards that are no taller than a small person. The stage is the road on which life's events take place. The rows of audience stretch out along the whole width of the stage. From here the spectators experience the situations in both long distance and close up, while the performers, one at a time or in groups, move from left to right in front of the set. They perceive a foreground, mid-ground and background, while different tableaux of figures form in front and behind the cards. And they see how the illusion of a

fixed back wall is broken to pieces when the performers change round the cards in a casual order. In the same way as a real landscape changes, this one is also transformed by light, which makes it transparent, grey toned and massive, coloured or full of shadows.

THE SET

The stage landscape is made up of pictures of small cards with motifs that can be moved and changed in endless combinations, still managing to create a complete landscape of fields, woods, city and sea, which is held together only by the line of a horizon that runs through all the images. I found a little pack of cards that had survived in a drawer for many years, and realised that there lay

the set that would decide the shape of the space. The cards went through a process of computer based picture editing, huge enlargements and printing with a new technique which changed the national-romantic motifs into contemporary images. The original naïve simplicity acquired both a raw and refined complexity.

Hans Christian Andersen's own drawings were included as narrative visual figures. The cards alone define the performance's architecture and set. Each picture contains its own story, and together they create the view of a landscape, an extended visual story in which the fairytale, mystical and pictorial elements mix amazingly, both in the details and in the whole. It is a landscape that can vary infinitely, but that is set by the line running through everything. The



I Only Appear to Be Dead, directed by Kirsten Dehlholm. Photo: Hotel Pro Forma

cards create the long background for fourteen white figures and only one in brown clothes.

THE OBJECTS AND CLOTHES

Long before the music and the stage sequences were created, we worked only with the cards of the stage set, with objects and costumes. We find all kinds of props with the help of casual searches among everyday accessories as when, on our way home through town from another errand, we see a stork in a fishing shop's window - a real plastic stork. Of course it has to be in a performance about H.C. Andersen! More plastic birds, among them a white swan, are chosen from a catalogue, until we have enough to make a whole scene with birds that fly away (the *They all leave* scene). A trip to the low-price store to buy coffee and toilet paper gives us green plastic grass doormats (to wipe feet on during the *Oh no! My journey has not ended* scene), toy dogs in the shape of coloured balls of wool (to bend and twist in the *Toothache* scene), various picnic baskets, beauty bags, plastic buckets and other coloured containers for the luggage in the opening *Travel* scene. White teacups and coloured brushes are used in the *Tea* scene during which some people drink tea and others endlessly brush their clothes; pieces of wood with holes for torches make up a whole procession in the *Little Smoke* scene with the beware of fire text *Today it is me, tomorrow it is you*; and a long grey plastic rope ends the last scene stretched across the whole stage floor, while the words of the song are "How long do I have from now to my grave". As well as serving to measure the stage, the rope also gives associations with Andersen, who always travelled with one in his luggage for fear of being burnt alive inside a house.

In a toy shop we find building bricks

for houses that are shown as trophies and that become a whole town in the *Architecture* scene, where the text amongst other things is, "I went round in Odense in search of my mother's grave, but no-one knew where it was". Out of fourteen big bundles of long wicker canes bought in a furniture shop, we end up using only fourteen single thin canes to point at the person who is different and separate him out. It becomes the *Pointing* scene. The biggest trophy cup from a sport's trophy shop is not used directly, but it is photographed and included in the performance as a projection and symbol for ordeal and hardship, other characteristics of the poet. It is a trophy-projection that the small H.C. Andersen figure steals, with great pleasure in the *Cup* scene, by only stepping into the projection in front of other performers.

Stones of glass, real stones, big letters in big suitcases, a yo-yo, a lobster trap, scissors, a pink flamingo and a yellow bathtub duck are other objects that appear in the appropriate context to acquire a new sense and give meaning to the particular scene.

With the props we invent scenes and lay out rules for the compositions that use the whole width of the stage.

Everything becomes a stage companion that can be carried, pulled, trodden on and held out by the performing singers. Each prop gives the singers, who are not used to a disciplined body language, a defined way of walking or standing, and is the decisive factor in the singers' physical expression. With their props the singers transform into images that represent an object, an entity or a notion. In this way the performers become emblems and people at the same time, and this is also underlined by their costumes, hair and make-up.

They are all dressed in white, and have white hair and white skin. It was decided early on in the process that the

figures should be white from top to bottom. The white unites the different characters into a stylised, sculptural whole that avoids psychological realism and that, at the same time, can be associated with paper cuttings and white shadows.

Clothes and hair have a contemporary style and are unique for each person, enhancing a basic characteristic for each of them, for example cleverness, arrogance, evil, inscrutability, eroticism, excitement, selfishness, insecurity, elegance, an androgynous disposition, piety, childishness, attractiveness.

All the costumes are created in advance, without knowledge of the performers, their measurements or size. A mass of white clothes, shoes and different accessories are bought in the summer sales. Afterwards we start putting the clothes together. With ourselves or others as models we create all the outfits, from only what we had bought.

When the performing singers had finally been chosen, they each received a finished costume to become a figure that suited them. In this way we could also be surprised and avoid the first immediate psychological adjustment. If we had known the performers first and then designed and made the costumes, the result would have been a much more predictable, theatrical and cliché ridden system of casting.

THE PERFORMERS

The Danish National Choir had asked me to collaborate with them on a new production. Simultaneously I was asked by the H.C. Andersen Foundation to create something on Andersen. It seemed natural to combine the two ideas and use singers for the new piece. I have often used singers in Hotel Pro Forma productions. A singer's performance fits well with my way of working, which is

based on formalised visual expression and does not try to tell a story by psychological, narrative means. The singer's craft and precision adapts to general concept. The singer's figure and movement is always conceived as a part of the whole picture and action. At the same time song and music are the picture's supporting drive-force.

In *I Only Appear to Be Dead* the participants are fourteen singers from the Danish National Choir, one conductor, and one female performer with a background in dance and performance theatre. The singers, evenly divided between men and women, are among the top Danish choral singers. In the performance they sing *a cappella*, with and without the accompaniment of electronically processed voices and sounds. The conductor stands in the middle of the stage and all the singers follow him with the help of monitors placed along the edge, at the front of the stage. The singers perform with an understanding of the form's compactness and the need for precision in its execution, of the general composition and the understated playing style.

The female dance performer steps out decisively from the fourteen singers dressed in white. Dressed in grey and green tones, she is the figure of Hans Christian Andersen, old and young, man and woman at the same time. Her face is masked like the old poet's, while her body is wearing boy's clothes. The performer's female masculinity underlines the poet's androgynous character, in the same way as the mixture of child and grown-up gives an association with the childishness that never left the grown-up poet. "I look like a sixty-year-old, but I feel like a sixteen-year-old inside," he lamented in his old age.

For a long time I wondered about having a person who looked like Hans Christian Andersen on stage, but the chosen performer resembled him amazingly, so it

had to be tried. She becomes the poet, who arrives twenty minutes after the performance's start, creating a turning point. She is the omnipresent figure which can go its own way and follow completely different rules to the rest of the group. She performs without words, but expresses herself in a nearly silent movie style, in a simultaneously simple, grotesque, touching and humorous way. She uses effects economically, so the figure pulls along traces of meaning, mocking the old theatre's role play at the same. On the credits she is named only as The Boy of Fortune, as Hans Christian Andersen also called himself.

THE MUSIC

The music is written especially for the choir and three soloists with the original intention of adding two live musicians with percussions and viola, but I found it difficult to fit the musicians into the stage picture. They were later replaced by electronically processed voices on a tape that partly accompanies the live singing and partly operates by itself with a strong effect. The music is a meeting between the Middle Ages and the digital modern age, between memories of Gregorian singing and pre-baroque works with an electronic supplement. The music is a polyphonic soundscape that extends over the whole width of the stage giving a feeling of hearing both near and far away. Now and then the song stops, and silence is established for several minutes, while the singers soundlessly continue their ritualised action.

The music is composed without knowing the scenic arrangement, but written as modules of short duration that can be repeated, elongated, broken down, changed around and put together again. The libretto is made of words and sentences chosen from H.C. Andersen's diaries, from the index of

reference words and from some of his other works. The composer received the chosen quotes in Danish, German and Italian. Danish is the poet's mother tongue, while Germany and Italy were his favourite destinations - and also have fantastic languages for singing. With few exceptions, the composer himself chose the words and sentences for the libretto out of an abundant collection of words and quotes. In comparison to theatre speech, the amount of text necessary for song is always strongly reduced. Instead some pieces of text were included as recitative lines read on tape. These were particularly striking short descriptions, like for example:

6.5.1866

*My room has a view towards Cintra. Behind are hills covered in oak trees. I look over the sea to a great aqueduct. A terrible murder happened here a dozen years ago. The place had a bad reputation. A bandit lodged here and threw his victims down to the ground from the aqueduct. When he was caught and asked if he had ever had any regrets he answered that he did not. It had only been unpleasant once, when he threw a little boy in the air and the child laughed at him thinking he was playing with him.
- We walked in the garden, smoked cigars, were offered fresh flowers.*

THE PICTURE

When a performance starts from an idea or a concept, I always anticipate eagerly what concrete images will appear when the performance is finished. What will we see?

For *I Only Appear to Be Dead* I had the same questions. What will it look like? Now after many months the subject is studied, the space is found or built, the set and the costumes created, the text researched, the performers are chosen - everything that

needs to happen beforehand in order to create the final picture is finished as, after two years preparation, we sit down with a model on the scale of 1:100. We have fixed the rules for the singers' movement from left to right in front of the cards and from right to left behind the cards. We are familiar with certain notions that have to be in the performance like toothache, loneliness, the dead child.

The worst thing for the poet was the thought of the child dying within us. We want to make a daunting performance. We talk a lot about how to create such a performance without the unpleasantness becoming a cliché. Silence and alarm belong to intimidation. There must be a warning before the dead child enters. The performance starts with a silent tableau, an arrangement without the dead child, which is repeated much later with the dead child at the tableau's centre.

Other scenes are decided by the stage props. On the wide model stage the cardboard figures take position, are arranged in relation to the objects and their meaning. Stringent visual compositions emerge inside the scene's frame, alternating with sequences that could continue beyond the stage's width. The cards change places twice. The *Change Cards* scene breaks up the established unity and gives warning of a new chapter, a new journey into light or darkness.

In this way three principles are established: 1. scenes composed within the frame of the stage with the singers moving from left to right; 2. sequences that could continue independently of the width of the stage with singers moving from left to right; and 3. the *Change Cards* scenes and *The Dead Child* scenes, that are considered exceptions with the performers moving from both right and left in front of the cards.

In six hours the dramaturgy and the

composition are finished for eighteen scenes that make up the performance's eighty minutes. The whole thing is drawn and written down and presents itself as a visual score, that is the basis of the whole ensuing process of rehearsals.

REHEARSALS

The process of rehearsals with the singers from the Danish Radio Choir is short; five weeks before the premiere, including learning the music, composition and movement as well as trying out of the costumes and wigs, learning to do the make-up, photographic sessions and, later, video recordings. The choir's schedules follow other rules than theatre rehearsal times, and this makes problems for everything associated with, but lying outside of, the pure run-throughs. A choir representative makes sure that everything is respected, down to the smallest detail in the union agreement and the official rules for work breaks. A representative cannot be dealt with.

Because of shortage of time everything is carefully planned. The music is recorded in the first week to be rearranged electronically later, while the choir take their winter holiday. A series of practical assistants take their place in the rehearsal room. With them as figures we try out the visual score, change it where necessary to make the disposition of the singers on the stage clearer. At the same time the lighting designer works to light the assistant performers dressed in white. The lighting for each scene has already been decided, but it is tried out and finished now, not to be used in the following three weeks, when the singers have come back and we work with the choir. In close collaboration with the conductor, the learning of the musical and visual score begins.

Music and stage positions are

adjusted precisely in every detail so as to become a living organism, simultaneously intuitive and led. Some scenes fall into place at once, others need time to adapt the fixed patterns of movement. One scene is repeated twice in identical form and suddenly acquires a deeper meaning. The passage from one scene to the next needs a lot of care to achieve the same visual character as the rest of the material and to maintain the flow of the performance.

The lighting returns and everything is played with costumes, hair and make-up. The rehearsal room's low ceiling and view-obscuring columns are the last factors that hinder the performance, in terms of showing what it can be.

THE PERFORMANCE

On the seventh week we pack everything up to travel to Köln in Germany where the performance will have its premiere in an old industrial building of enormous dimensions. From being a wall that stretches along the whole space, the visual landscape of the set changes into an art installation standing in the free space of the airy building. The song and figures take possession of the whole space and a great vision of poetic, beautiful or daunting dimensions unfolds, both near and far away for each spectator.

A critic from *Kölnische Rundschau* writes, after the performance in Köln: "This silent, spacious and extremely precise set is flooded with wonderful music that, just like the staging, avoids invading its subject."

The space concept held. Now we only need to find all the big spaces where the performance can be presented.

Translated from Danish by Julia Varley

I Only Appear to Be Dead credit list:

Production: Hotel Pro Forma
Conception and direction: Kirsten Dehlholm
Music: Manos Tsangaris
Electro-acoustics: Simon Stockhausen
Visual dramaturgy: Ralf Richardt Strøbech
Set: Kirsten Dehlholm, Ralf Richardt Strøbech, Maja Ravn
Light design: Jesper Kongshaug
Costumes: Maja Ravn
Hair, make-up: Helena von Bergen
Dramaturgy: Claus Lyngø

Participants
DR Radio Choir 14 singers
Conductor: Kaare Hansen
The Boy of Fortune: Ninna Steen

KIRSTEN DEHLHOLM (Denmark) is the artistic director of Hotel Pro Forma, creating performances involving theatre, architecture, science, visual art and music. With a background in visual art, Kirsten has worked with theatre and art since 1970, receiving many prizes amongst which the Kjeld Abel Prize, Eckersberg Medal, Wilhelm Hansen Fund Prize and Nykredits Architecture Prize. Hotel Pro Forma has created performances for museums, town halls and public buildings of particular architectural interest, as well as for traditional theatre venues, and has toured Europe, USA, Mexico, Japan, Australia and Singapore.