

Lene Thiesen

One Servant and Four Masters

A PRODUCER'S CONFESSIONS

At the start of the eighties I decided to leave my French teaching profession and my research into women's studies and devote my time to theatre.

Having completed my theatre studies at Censier University of Paris and at the Copenhagen University as well as practical experience at a large, well established theatre in Copenhagen, I assumed that I knew what I was getting into when I offered my services to the local international theatre festival *Festival of Fools* in 1983.

I literally walked into a creative chaos. Eight people were occupying thirty square metres of office space. I adeptly avoided the job as ticket controller and managed to obtain an office function. After securing one third of a desk, with access to one of the few phones (all phones were on the same line), I was offered a wage well under one third of the union minimum. After a couple of days the occupants of the office realised there was a newcomer amongst them. The atmosphere was hearty but quite tough.

On the first working day, I was asked to produce press kits for the participating companies (female academics are obviously suited for such a function), and it was to be ready the following day. After thirteen hours at the office we went out for something to eat. No-one even mentioned the long working hours so I concluded that I ought to go home and rethink the whole situation. However, I was even too tired to do that and the press kits had to be sent out the next morning. And so I turned up the next day ... and soon I was meeting the director after hours as well. This carried on for some fourteen years at KIT - Københavns Internationale Teater - with a marriage to boot.

I advanced from press secretary to press and marketing secretary, to press, marketing and programme secretary etc. Once you got a function it was very difficult to get rid of it again! In 1986 I became assistant director, and from 1993 I became director, a post I held until I chose to withdraw earlier this year.

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ONE SERVANT AND FOUR MASTERS

I had become an organiser - a producer. In the first years I had three masters: the artists, the public, the media and later on a fourth - the public authorities.

Festival of Fools was the artists' and the public's festival. The aim was obvious: new ground was to be found, new forms of the performing arts were to be moulded, barriers were there to be broken - geographical, gender and genre. I served them humbly - as both the public and the artists were all heading in the same direction. To be a producer was apparently to work for the sake of a greater cause!

Euphoria and happiness were certainly there, as was the intuition that we were actually reaching new horizons. Everyone threw themselves into it - artists, technicians, ticket sellers and also the public who took chances every evening as they were confronted by work they had never dreamt about. There was a feeling of trust between us all. Trust, stress and overwork were the condition of the time.

THIRD DEGREE CONTACT

On the artists

Relationship to the artists was hearty but also - with a few notable exceptions - quite distant. There was simply no time for discussion. I often envied the technicians who at least could establish a relationship on stage.

When I began working with the programming I had more contact with the artists, but towards the end of the eighties one didn't any longer talk with the artistic director of a company, but instead with a recently employed administrator or tour manager. In the nineties it was in particular the leading dance choreographers and directors in the U.S.A. and France who were sanctified. Their companies had become revenue machines touring Europe (the revenue wasn't overwhelming, I must

add), but without any relationship with us the organisers or the public. Again there were exceptions, and I remember the generous Royal Shakespeare Company, the sublime and friendly pair of John Cage and Merce Cunningham, Ariane Mnouchkine and lastly, Pina Bausch who made her visit in 1996, unforgettable for everyone she came into contact with.

The world of the eighties was full of interesting theatre and dance companies and therefore we had the principle of never inviting groups back a second time. With hindsight, this was a principle which was more aimed at satisfying the public than satisfying the organisers, for whom the lack of continuity and logic in the work was becoming more and more apparent. Luckily, there were exceptions. Odin Teatret was one of them. They were able to create a feeling of belonging and a sense of common purpose which made me look forward to their regular visits.

FROM ANARCHY TO CONTROL

On the public

With the Fools Festivals (1980-85) came an optimistic, bubbling, trusting and adventurous public, which makes any organiser of the nineties feel rather insecure. The public had certainly been disappointed on some occasions, but it always seemed to sense when something sensational was on its way. This boundless enthusiasm was again present at the turn of the decade and into the nineties with the off beat poetic and humorist French "new circus" (Zingaro and Archaos amongst others) and afterwards with the three *Images of Africa* festivals (1991, 1993 and 1996).

At the same time grew another - smaller - public, who reacted in a more introvert and thoughtful way after having witnessed evenings with Carbone 14, Ariadone, Odin Teatret, Théâtre de Complicité, DV 8 -

only to mention a few.

The happiness and the euphoria was certainly there, and this was almost enough on its own to satisfy the needs of a devoted producer like myself. However, the performing arts changed as did the public.

ONE CAN'T CONTROL A PARTY

On the performing arts

KIT's productions reflected to a large degree the current social-political context by presenting artists who were aiming at a radical consciousness - whether this be political, esthetical or sexual. KIT's public was therefore not well defined. The public often changed - as did the locations for many of the productions, as we used many non traditional sites for the performances such as old factories, churches, community centres, streets and backyards, wastelands, often neglected by others.

This bubbling anarchy together with their very unusual settings set the stage for the producer to play a creative role. However, the need for more and more control was clear, and theatre became less a "bearer of meanings". Only a few theatre ensembles from this period managed to consolidate their name and develop their individual theatre form (Els Comediants, Odin Teatret, Théâtre du Soleil amongst others), but as the dance explosion spread and as dance became the most radical of the stage arts, aesthetics came to the forefront and took over from the content, and the need to perform on regular stages became the rule rather than the exception.

The party was - in many ways - over, and from then on things became rather serious. The only thing which managed to extend the party was the wave of "new circus" from France, who completely captured both the public and the organisers.

So, on the one hand, we the organisers were in danger of becoming invisible, and

on the other, we were being forced to secure larger and larger budgets in order to carry out our mission which was to extend the boundaries of theatre and dance. Not surprisingly, it was a very welcoming and joyful breathing-hole to work with the new circuses at that time.

In general the artists demanded higher fees, the choreographers and directors demanded bigger spaces (which Copenhagen couldn't provide), the technicians wanted to be paid by the hour, fewer and fewer volunteers seemed to turn up and the only ones who seemed to be outside this spiral economy were ourselves - the organisers.

THE ORGANISERS STICK TOGETHER

On the organisers

The organisers were pressured from many sides. And it was the increased pressure and demands from the artists, the media, the agents and the public authorities that forced them to establish their own club - or network. The Informal European Theatre Meeting (I.E.T.M.) was established and provided steady ground amid shifting sands for many organisers in Europe.

The power base shifted radically from the ensemble theatres to the networks and only a few companies kept their autonomy in this period. For many companies though, the creation of this intermediary between themselves and their public was actually quite positive and also quite needed.

AN EXPENSIVE GO-BETWEEN

On the public authorities

The fourth master - public authorities - became gradually both more necessary and more visible in Europe for the performing arts. However, as the Danish cultural support system was aimed at supporting the artists directly plus the established institutions, independent producers, organisers of festivals and others were regarded as

rather expensive and not very relevant go-betweeners.

I felt uneasy after my first meetings with the official administrators - all, almost without exception, lawyers whose main concern was to adhere to a rather restrictive theatre law (read "support system"). Since then I have come to understand the cultural bureaucracy's very stringent rules, but it still haunts me to think of the overriding heartless apathy as well as of the lack of insight they possessed. There were fortunately single exceptions.

Political lobbying became vital. Eventually, we managed to secure an annual budget for KIT thanks to one supportive politician. To me the political lobbying was not a natural challenge. I found it somewhat humiliating to have to convince people of something which seemed so evidently necessary, and which we had proven every year with ample documentation. One of our obvious weaknesses was the fact that while our festivals and projects were well known, our organisation KIT was anonymous. With no theatre, no constant profile and with ever changing programmes we were lightweight in the public arena.

It also became clear that there was not much prestige connected with the culture I represented. This surprised many foreigners who saw Denmark as a model society in many respects, whilst regressive and chauvinistic in international cultural matters.

The international world, which we represented, was for more than a decade, looked upon as a threat. Not only were we exponents for new, maybe dangerous, ideas, we also consequently had to be against what was Danish. The inability of the official cultural structures in the Nordic countries in the eighties to take in new blood marked forever the status of KIT as it marked other similar organisations in Scandinavia.

FRONT PAGE AND CULTURAL POLITICS

On the media

As part of this picture of the bubbling eighties - the press was also bubbling. "Fools" was translated into "idiots" - and then anyone can relate to it! Nevertheless, the message got through despite the fact that every press meeting seemed to start with newly recruited journalists whose knowledge of the arts, aesthetics, international cultural policy matters, was, to put it politely, somewhat lacking.

However, during these years, we were lucky to be followed by a couple of conscientious journalists and critics and this was of utmost importance for KIT.

During the nineties, the media extended its coverage of the arts as part of the cultural boom for the public - the customers. With the large projects such as *Images of Africa* and *Dancin' City*, the press was definitely there. However, cultural voids appeared on a massive scale when confronted with African arts and culture - and this has continued to this day. The third world's culture was not something which appeared to be of vital relevance for the Danish media. However, the generally supportive role of the media contributed to ensure that an event such as *Images of Africa* became an overwhelming success.

However, the fact that art - and culture - journalism moved from the cultural section to the front page also meant a change in the writing style. Serious critics were, to some extent, replaced by more opportunistic and ever changing journalists to whom theatre, dance, music was more a question of a frame for a "good story". This new way of approaching artistic endeavours gave rise to a great deal of paranoia within artistic circles - often well founded. The arts were not to be handled any more leniently than politics or sports. It was a question of personal angles, scandals and confrontations.

TWO TRACKS: DANCE AND AFRICA

During the years in which I was director, two major events were developed: *Images of Africa* (1991, 1993, 1996) and *Dancin' City* (1990, 1992, 1994, 1996).

A dance festival in order to give modern/post-modern dance its own platform for the first time in Denmark so as to strengthen and develop a "new" art form which was certainly breaking through everywhere. An African festival, which was more about covering new territory - an unknown continent with regards to its contemporary and its historical culture.

I shied away from the second initiative (*Images of Africa*), which was taken on by Trevor Davies, in fear of being completely engulfed once again. I was particularly hesitant as we had just welcomed our adopted daughter, Anna. Apparently, to no avail. I can't actually remember how it happened, but anyway, I ended up as the artistic director of *Images*. I still do recollect thinking, however, that this was a necessary initiative.

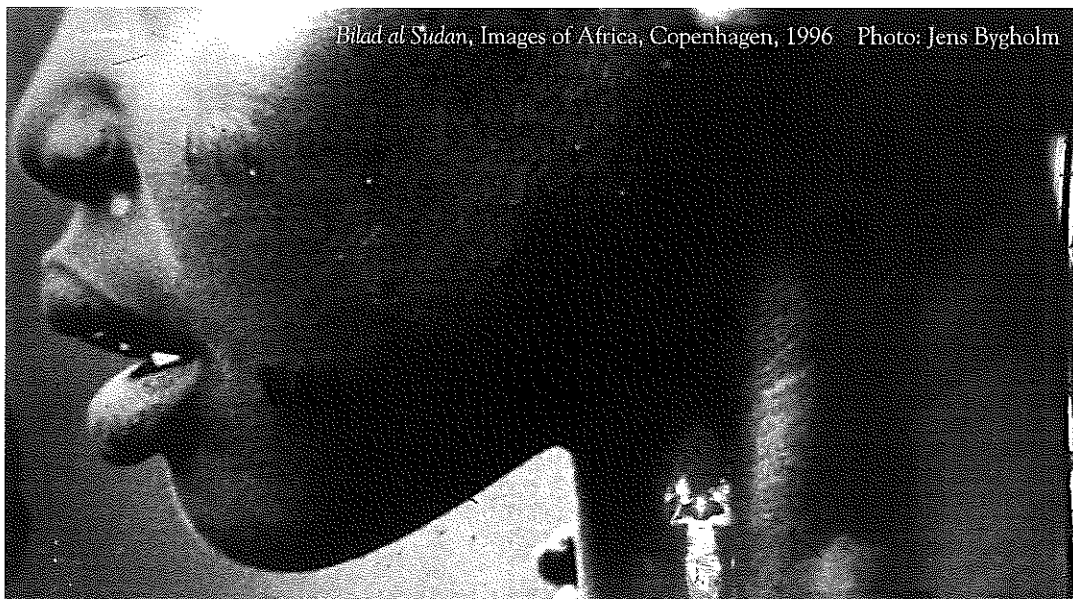
"WHAT DO YOU DO IN WINTER?"

"What do you actually do in the winter?" - an annoying question many people put to me. Even throughout the long winter months, it was more than just lively at

KIT's and Images' office: a handful of employees, others in job creation schemes, plus the drifting volunteers. We wrote our annual applications, finalised reports, discussed future plans, structured press strategies, visited artists and discussed venues, made budgets and formulated contracts. We published pre-programmes, booked hotels and flights and held hundreds of meetings - seemingly constantly.

The telephones were constantly jammed, all whilst a stream of uninvited guests, artists, former employees and friends dropped by. The noise approached a critical level whilst frustrations with our general feeble means alternated with euphoric moments when the impossible was achieved. Whatever it was - it wasn't boring.

In this chaos, we trained a new bunch of inexperienced project secretaries and assistants who were lent "without charge" to us by the employment office. With minimum wages for only three persons, it was necessary to work with "the available resources". I think that KIT has employed (not necessarily paid though) more than five hundred people in its little office during the past fifteen years. The turnover of staff approaches absurd rates, whilst the office provided good training ground for many -



Bilad al Sudan, Images of Africa, Copenhagen, 1996 Photo: Jens Bygholm

and more of an asylum for some.

THREE FIRES

The tempo accelerated through the nineties. I was constantly dancing around three fires (Anna - my daughter, Africa and dance) and also flying off on weekend trips to European dance and theatre capitals. But I stuck to my daily "intermission" between 3 p.m. and 8 p.m. Those hours were for Anna. And then I continued working at the home office until the early hours. Longer travels to Africa also appeared in the calendar more frequently. A ten day trip to a voodoo festival in Benin was one of the absolute groundbreaking experiences for me.

Decisions were taken faster and faster, maybe too fast sometimes. I came to rely, more and more, on my "intuition" which had indeed developed tremendously during these years.

I began to understand that I was quite alone in Denmark, where so few are actually working internationally within culture, and even these people were becoming increasingly competitive and opportunistic. The sudden and unexpected death of my closest colleague seemed to further underline the situation. Women within this field were few and far between and it wasn't until *Images of Africa* that I got to work with committed female colleagues.

Self imposed standards and external demands increased whilst international initiatives were suddenly *à la mode* and one was aware of being an object of envy. The environment was becoming decidedly unhealthy.

I survived at this triple tempo for a further five years. I made enormous demands upon myself and also upon others. At times, at too high a price. At the same time I was more and more conscious of having the role as a "leader" - something I never actually aspired to and something which seemed to

further isolate me from the actual raw material I wanted to work with, and also seemed to isolate me at times from the rest of the staff. My relationship to power was a very traditional feminine one: I didn't want it, so I didn't fight for it. But I think I still wanted things done in my way.

THE NECESSITY IS SOMEWHERE ELSE

As I reached the year's end in the marathon year of Copenhagen '96, I was exhausted. I didn't therefore have any regrets when keeping to my promise of quitting KIT, having not only survived the years but having "succeeded" - if one uses the normal criteria for success.

I wasn't only tired, I had also lost the will to fight - at least to fight on the given terms. I simply didn't feel "available" any longer. Necessity seemed somewhere else. With Anna and with those I hadn't seen for years and with new approaches to what life should be.

Today, I am co-ordinating a cultural exchange project between Denmark/Scandinavia and South Africa. I've just returned to Africa, which I still regard as challenging and vital. However, I am working as a project co-ordinator and not as a director. I'm back with the raw material. But my desk is within the official frame.

Translated from Danish by Trevor Davies

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