

Barbro Rønning

Body Text - Theatre Language

Towards a “corporal” dramaturgy

The “globalists” soon won the argument and the main discussion was then defined by questions of how to avoid intentionality and interpretation, but still retain theatricality. I was there to present my own work on popular traditions. Suddenly I felt very anti-intellectual, very old, very feminine, very populist and very political. I fell into my own thoughts and felt a bit sad. I thought that I probably represented the last generation of Norwegians who have been playing in the barn, jumping in the hay, milking cows ...

My project is based upon my experience as a director and dramaturg, where, among other things, I have worked with biographical material and personal stories as impulses for performance work.

This work started many years ago with theatre in rural communities, where the important issue was to discover common roots in local history so as to develop a common identity and pride. We heard the bells of the medieval fools and jesters ringing, and dreamed about finding stories and storytellers who could unmask and reveal the lies of the powerful. There is an important democratic aspect to this. We wished to give voice to those who were never heard. We found fantastic material. We discovered that theatre was a language with which you can express resistance. We experienced a strong communication between the stage and the audience when performing these stories.

My first large production in 1986 told the story of a paper factory, that was shut down, although it was the centre of the whole economic and social life of the community. We went out with a tape recorder and interviewed the workers at home. Instead of using this as raw material to write a new play, we processed the interviews dramaturgically by, amongst other things, presenting them in the factory among cobwebs and abandoned tools and machinery.

Later, doing similar projects, I discovered that what moved me most and triggered my imagination during interviews, was not what the person said, but the story the body told. What the body told, the sweat, the flush, the uneasiness, was another story which contradicted the spoken words. I started to use my own physical experience of the body's alternative story as the key to go beyond the person's own official version of his/her life. In this way I created a third story. With the help of artistic tools, I wanted to work with the resistance which lies in the demands of form, in order to force an expression based on experience at a physical level.

My experience is that the body tells what the mind has rationalised. I find there is always a “hidden” story which I call “body text”, that contradicts the participant’s own official personal story.

My main purpose is to find out in what way these hidden stories are experienced and expressed in the body, and to explore their adaptability to performance. What will the “body text” as theatre text do with our ways of staging stories and what will happen to the theatre language?

Elisabeth Gorz in her book *Volatile Bodies* is fascinated by the body’s ability to “seep beyond the domains of control” that break down the models of dualism between mind and body, thereby generating what is new, surprising and unpredictable. This is a point of view that corresponds with my own body-experience and has, of course, a major impact both on my intuitive and theoretical understanding of the body.

Since artistic research as discourse is quite a new phenomenon, I claim that it is utterly important to be conscious of the scientific tradition one chooses to work within, because every tradition has its own paradigmatic presuppositions. The central condition for my project is the current cross disciplinary theoretical work within feminist research, which has as its goal the development of a new content for the concept of the body.

The Norwegian physiotherapist, Gunn Engelstad, has conducted research called *Women in motion between longing and desire*. She has examined the way in which academic women experience themselves at the level of the physical, how they express this experience through words and other means, and what kind of validity they give to these bodily experiences. She concludes that experiences on the physical level first become understandable and valid when they are connected to the subject’s pre-conscious

life-story.

I was happy reading her report, because it confirms that the pre or subconscious life-story in the body can be accessed and explored. I suddenly saw the potential for systematising and analysing my own work. It gives me a theoretical framework for systematizing my own intuitive understanding and maybe also to develop a working method for creating performances. Having had trouble in recording the work done before and figuring out what I actually did and why I have thought a lot about what is the difference between experimental artistic work and scientific research. How could I design a project that uses the intuitive knowledge from an artistic process as raw material for scientific work? I am searching for a framework where my own Archimedes Cry can come through.

In scientific research you have to formulate a clear problematic with operational research questions that are explicit, practical and detailed. You must work systematically. In this way you can record the whole process, with all its side-tracks. Parallel to this scientific work I want to develop experimental working methods connected to the physical text and its application to performance work. The data will then be the object of systematic research in order to keep these two different processes separate thus protecting them from each other and getting the best out of them. This means finding a research pattern, which I have not found yet, that allows an organic rhythmical flow between the two processes.

Here is a brief description of the method I have developed on the basis of my earlier experiences, which I call *Body as the Dramaturg*.

IN PRACTICE

In this method the actors are in charge of the whole process. They choose the person

to interview, they write everything down word for word, they process the dramaturgical material with me, and finally they present the character or the third story on stage. One aspect of this work, which I really love, is that it allows the actors to use their tremendous amount of human knowledge in a new way.

The first task the actors have is to find someone to whom they want to give a voice. When starting this work some years ago in a local theatre, the actors' choice of interview subjects was often quite casual and idealistic, or even political.

Gradually, to release the actors' creative impulses, I have started to emphasise the importance of desire and the irrational nature of choice making in this process.

The person to whom they want to give a voice does not have to be someone they know, on the contrary, it can be someone who has intuitively moved them at some level, and presented them with an image. The person could be the pale girl in the bakery, the neighbour who was crying in an entrance, the old lady who always lets her cat out when you unlock the door, etc.

What happens to people who never had a strong voice when you give them a microphone and ask them to talk about their lives? They discover they have something to say and their voices get stronger. A few key words and some questions from the actor are enough to start the conversation. These key words prompt associations, stories, feelings and thoughts, even about life in general, where longing, dreams and fantasies have their own place: thoughts many people rarely get close to in their daily lives, which are easier to share with a stranger, than with close friends.

The tape-recorder takes care of the words. The actor must be aware when the conversation falters, when the interviewees' forehead gets sweaty, when their body gets



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restless, when their eyes fill with tears, when they have to clear their throat, when they blush, when they make their characteristic gestures and pauses, when pain intervenes. The actors must experience the story which is not spoken, to have a basis on which to create the third story or the body text.

In this material you find a particular voice in its own poetic universe, with its own point of view and its own language. Some people talk a lot with a surplus of imagination, involvement and humour. Others talk slowly and sparsely. Some are very personal and private, and generously share their inner thoughts. Others try to keep a distance and to be ironic. Some have shallow thoughts and some deep thoughts. Some are congenital liars and some try to create new truths about their life. Some keep repeating themselves, never seeming to dry up. They all show an unbelievable creativity in finding verbal strategies to avoid feeling pain.

When transcribing the interview from the tape, the actors have to listen with their whole selves, writing down what the person

says without their own questions, without punctuation and capital letters, but with clear indications of the pauses, sounds, physical reactions, variations in tempo and intensity. This process will be integrated with the actors' memory and own physical reaction.

At this point we start the dramaturgical adaptation of this substantial material. Often there is as much as thirty to forty pages which have to be brutally cut to a playable time by marking important words and phrases or different topics.

The actor's experience of the person's physical reactions is the key to unlocking the raw material and to finding the contradictions or conflicts which may help to structure the new text. What sort of story is the person trying to keep secret and what kind of story does the actor wish to tell?

At first we tried to find a linear story-line, and then to side track, using these digressions to enrich the story. The actors worked with two or three characteristic gestures which they had noticed and we performed the stories to the people who had given us the material. Later we placed our character in a situation which made it possible to develop scenic actions in the intersection between the spoken text, the conflict of the character and the situation. We continued to work with montage techniques to place several stories into a larger frame. In this way many voices would meet to tell different stories, but possibly also a common story, at a chosen spot, like a bus stop, in the street or in a pub.

There was a tendency to seek *one* conflict, *one* voice and *one* overall story. My practice was stirred by my belief in the Freudian onion: if you only peel off enough layers you will find "the truth" about the person. When I worked with the raw text I therefore used my notion of "the truth" as an engine to create a conflict and thereby move

the story forward. Today this does not feel right any more. I'd like to stop saying: "There is someone out there (the audience), I'm in here - shall we meet?" And start saying: "There are many out there and there are many in here too - do you want to meet one of them?"

We must take care of the fact that there are many different voices, instead of seeking to harmonise them into a psychological character that performs a monologue or a story with a beginning a middle and an end. In the monologue, we find two narrative elements - the character and the actor; in the story, we find the storyteller, the actor and the character. What I now want to explore, in a more open-minded way I hope, is what kind of theatrical narrative elements these body-texts demand.

STORYTELLING

I attended an international theatre festival arranged by a small regional theatre in Norway entitled *Experiment and Tradition in Avant Garde and Popular Theatre*. We saw many experimental performances and we discussed strategies of narration in post-modern society.

The Nordic groups that took part soon divided into two: those for whom theatre's aim today is to create identity and look at the missing links in our lives, seeking inspiration and ideals in history and in popular and folkloric traditions; and those who, together with the masters of deconstruction, say that politics is dead, social life is over and we must forget the past and history. The latter's approach is - metaphorically speaking - to seek on the Internet for impulses and ideas for today's global theatre expression.

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I had forgotten this for many years until one day suddenly I started to remember, and today I regard this as my very first theatre experience - one which, I can see now, has had a real impact on my life.

My rebellion against the bourgeois theatre - through experimental work in local community theatre, women's theatre and political theatre - had been governed by my subconscious need to find or recreate in theatre the very same sensuality, pleasure and closeness I experienced listening to storytelling in my childhood.

Lyotard told us in his characterisation of

postmodern society that all the great stories are dead. I say that the body can tell some small, new and very important stories, because I think that human bodies and their interaction form the basis of theatre, in the same sense that the body is the foundation of human life and human consciousness. You will find these stories or bodytexts if you listen internally. Maybe these stories can provide us with tools to create new art forms, to create new thinking and form our lives in a new way at the end of this cruel and chaotic century of rationalism.

BARBRO RØNNING (Norway) is a dramaturg, director and pedagogue with a special interest in popular theatre traditions. She is now Assistant Professor at the Department of Art and Media Studies at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology. She is founder and artistic leader of Bakklands Dramaten, a community theatre in Trondheim.