

Eva Maria Gauss

More Questions than Answers

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"I realise", said Lucette at the end of the two working months we had together, "that you do not rely on any notion of character within your work, which is weird because your figures are so clear." Within our collaboration, many different ideas for characters or stage figures had come up, whereas previously I had no idea that I even had any notions about this matter. For example, when I asked: "What should the costumes look like?" Lucette answered, "Well, just as the character requires them to be". To me, this reply seemed strange. Why should I fit in with someone who does not yet exist? What's more, for me it is possible to begin to define a character by creating the costume, since a figure has no inner or outer being. For me, a character breathes and lives through his or her costume - s/he has no psyche, no biography, just a little logic, or at least that is what I think most of the time.

In my own work, I make a distinction between the process of constructing and that of uncovering characters; my feeling about the latter is one of deep and conscious closeness. These characters were completely present at once. They tell stories directly to the audience. These figures - now I am using "figure" and "character" synonymously - are closely related to myself as a person, and I feel responsible for them. The process of construction is also an uncovering, but what is revealed is not a figure but a direct physical presence - my physical presence.

A more recent discovery adds to this. When I asked, "As an actress what is my relationship to the stage figure?" I found that I use two methods to find an answer. If I work without any preconceptions towards the character, I gather personal material, which is then - primarily for the benefit of the audience - arranged to create a "figure". However, on my modest path through the theatre world, I have observed some independent characters. For example, I am thinking of a friend of mine who has a fixed character, a clown, who belongs only to her. Within this way of working my priority is not to construct something of general validity, but rather to release the figure, to let her or him out.

I once asked Iben Nagel Rasmussen at Odin Teatret's

Open Week whether it was a restriction for an actress to return again and again to certain characters instead of allowing the work to move into more and more new figures. Her reply indicated that these figures had just developed in this way and were kinds of archetypes.

Now I can give credit to the autonomous life of my - fortuitously discovered - stage figures, and I see myself more as a servant than someone who has power over the situation. On the other hand, I want to tackle a subject when I create an hour of theatre instead of being led on haphazardly by any strolling character (or the accidental moods and abilities of the producer).¹

My experience is too limited. I am unable to say what connection exists between me as the creator and the stage figure that emerges. I cannot even say truly that I possess a certain way of establishing or of building a character. In the main, these are issues which matter only to artists among themselves. I cannot see myself as a worker or a craftswoman. Completely different questions preoccupy me; questions that are so broad they make me dizzy. Why bother to make theatre at all? Is there any reason to make theatre apart from my personal need, which might turn out to be nothing more than cheap vanity?

I have the vague idea that, for me, the making of theatre indicates a certain attitude towards the world, that it expresses a certain attitude towards being human. And finally, that I want to experience "being human" through theatre and be able to talk about it. Perhaps the relationship between the actress and the figure should not be the sole topic for research; perhaps I also need to include this other larger dimension.

But why am I philosophising about my own experiments?

Firstly, I would like to have an answer. When I'm working I do not know exactly how to proceed. What do I do with the two contrasting methods that I have discovered? Do I have to reconcile them? This is a serious dilemma that cannot be solved easily and certainly not on a sheet of paper.

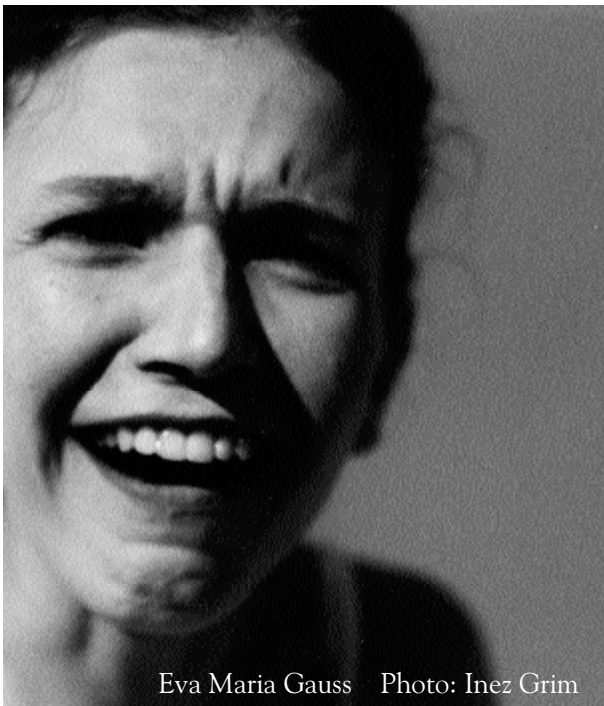
Secondly, I want to understand what it is that I do when I make theatre. I want to analyse and make sense of the link I make, with this kind of art, between myself and the rest of society. Perhaps it would be better if I invested my energy and working powers in Amnesty International? Even this analytical question has a practical orientation because it deals with the ethics of practising theatre.

In attempting to answer these big questions, an examination of the relationship between actor and figure provides a way in. If I want to understand why I practise this useless activity and how it relates to the rest of the world, I am able to compare myself with other performers. Theatre people from other eras, other cultures and other traditions provide me with an opportunity to understand intellectually what I do when I stand on stage as a performer. I can ask how the figures are structured, what s/he is talking about and what relationship the actor and the human being have with each other.

Luckily other people have dealt with these questions previously and focused on this particular form of communication. What is the cultural sense of theatre? The University of Leipzig has a theatre science department that researches theatre anthropology within Europe and it is not by chance that I live in Leipzig. Here I have made myself a picture of different styles of acting.² Perhaps, despite my helplessness in the big picture (Why theatre?) and in the small

1. Maybe I should note here that I have not yet had the opportunity to interpret a role, be it a set one or a character of fiction.

2. In the main, I follow Gerda Baumbach's lecture *Theateranthropologie 1* (2000) and would like to promote the recently published work *Theaterkunst & Heilkunst*.



Eva Maria Gauss Photo: Inez Grim

(How should I work then?), I do know how to proceed.

I recognise historically three different acting styles (naturalism, rhetoric and comedy) that vary according to the way in which communication with the audience functions. They all differ in their depiction of the human being and in what they tell us. I find this distinction more useful than the one between Stanislavski and Brecht, partly because I think it emphasises the historical and cultural context.

No explanation is needed for the naturalistic style because it seems to be the most wide spread. The Stanislavski tradition could be also classified within this. The actor portrays another person who is a stranger to the personality of the actor her/himself. This is a success when the actor her/himself - preferably via empathy - dissolves completely into her/his role. The audience forgets that there is even an actor on stage. Thus, this style indicates the dominance of the play and the constructed character. The figure on stage represents someone from the real social

world. The ideal of a completely psychologically credible character relates to a picture of a complete individual. Within the course of the play, the character and the role are a stable unit. The process of creating the character is kept hidden because in this society it is deemed reprehensible that people wear masks in their social life. "Mask" is used as a negative term because it is understood as something that disguises the true inner self. This view is completely contrary to that of the ritual use of masks, which allows the possibility of the appearance of a god.

For me, within the naturalistic style, the character seems to be dominant. The aim of this type of theatre is to show human beings as they are. A human being is portrayed and her/his inner self is explained. I suggest naming the product of this style "character". It is interesting to note that within this, the actor's paradox can occur: who is on stage now, the actor or the character? And is not the actor lying in trying to pretend to be the character? In the two other styles this is not a problem because they openly show the process of creating a character/figure.

The rhetorical style belongs to the "theatre of representation". The focus here is not on the illusion of a closed character. The actor - easily recognised as such - rather performs and emphasises (eventually with the aid of a fixed set of gestures) for the spectators what s/he wants to communicate. The representation can be clearly recognised as such and the actor can switch between the narrating figure and the narrated role. I would describe and understand many forms of Asian theatre as theatre of representation and I would say that Brecht used this kind of communication. His theatre confronts the audience with a clear rhetorical statement and he uses the figures to formulate this statement.

The comic style seems to me to be structurally different from these other two styles.

It does not try to imitate nature or reality. For example, when studying *Commedia dell'Arte* I note a capacity to switch between figure and actor as a main element in performance. These switches are abrupt and strongly physically visible and the figure itself can become a different figure or move to another location. The figures themselves are not normal, average people. They are clearly "artificial figures". They also have more abilities than a normal human being - for example the Harlequin-figure dies and gets up again, goes to hell and returns. He is more of an ambassador or a messenger from another world than a caricature of someone from the real world. The performer (who is the actor and the figure all at once) has to take up different habits and drop them again. This style plays with the possibility that truth is ambivalent.

It seems that in the comic style it becomes possible and deliberate to work with being human as a topic in itself. One could call this an anthropological reflection, which only has laughter as a response because we cannot understand anyway.³ The audience enjoys watching this kind of acting because there are no morals here to be saved and restored.

Returning to my questions, I only wanted to reflect on why Lucette and I had different opinions on character. I really do prefer the term "figure" because to me it is not important to portray a real personality with a psyche, which occurs in "character". It is just so much easier to state what one does not want instead of what one is demanding. However, what do I make of feedback from the audience like, "Oh I recognise this char-

acter from real life"? Did I fail in my goal of uncovering something that cannot find space in the real world? What do I want to talk about when I choose to speak through this kind of performance? Do I want to point out, tell, show, portray, ask or simply be?

Then I also wanted to clarify why I have such different feelings about my stage productions and how I should work as a director next time. And here I can use my historical analysis to clarify for myself what possibilities exist: to hide the actress, to mix her with the figure or to clearly draw a line between figure and actress. The question is whether these different approaches towards portraying the human being still hold in today's practice. The styles naturally can mix or be practised next to each other, and I am sure that there are variants that could be added today. The decisive question remains: "What kind of communication is most valuable?" This is defined by the "how". And all the other questions, such as "How on earth shall I proceed?" There is at least the certainty of letting the brain rest at times and listening to what the recognised archetypes have to say...

Translated from German by Christine Richter and Melanie Schwitzer

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3. To understand this ambiguity of the human being, the approach of the philosophical anthropologist Helmuth Plessner and within this, the keyword "excentric positioning" might be of help.