



War Sum Up 2011 (Gunars Janaitis)

Hotel Pro Forma in a European context

By Theresa Bener

The 2005 edition of the International Avignon Festival was particularly memorable for its diversity of contemporary stage expressions – and the subsequent disputes they provoked. “This is not theater!” was an affirmation often heard in the fierce public debates that not only involved critics and the 110,000 spectators, but even took place among political editors and columnists of the French national media. The festival’s artistic profile that year was outlined by the invited Flemish artist, playwright and stage auteur Jan Fabre. It had a clear penchant towards post-dramatic and so-called visual theater, including performance art, dance and audio-visual, multimedia installations. This line was represented by artists such as Romeo Castellucci, Wim Vandekeybus, Marina Abramovic, Jan Lauwers, Gisèle Vienne, Pascal Rambert and, of course, Jan Fabre himself. Although the performances, many of which had been devised in situ, were recognised for having elaborated a specific “text” based on the elements of stage, it was often claimed that written text, taken as a primordial constituent of theater, was absent or treated with neglect. A great deal of the heated polemics seemed to evoke a gap between “conservative” defenders of staged plays (or adapted literature) and the “avant-garde”, who would consider theater as a laboratory for explorations of the human presence in relation to audio-visual aesthetic forms. Jan Fabre, one of the key figures of the 1980s “Flemish wave” in postmodern contemporary dance, described the human body as a manifesto for sexual and social messages and wished to define himself as a “warrior of beauty”.

Kirsten Dehlholm and Hotel Pro Forma were not part of the 2005 Avignon Festival. But their work would most probably have been entangled in the artistic arguments. At the time Hotel Pro Forma was touring international festivals with two new theater productions, *I only Appear to be Dead* (*Jeg er kun skindød*) and *Theremin. I only Appear to be Dead* was based on legendary storyteller Hans Christian Andersen’s diaries from his journeys in Europe. It was presented on a long, extremely narrow stage in front of designer Maja Ravn’s painted tableaux, depicting landscapes, like illustrations from a book. There was no spoken dialogue, but a new musical piece for 14 voices and electronica, composed by Manos Tsangaris, explored themes from Andersen’s notebooks, performed by The Danish Radio Choir. A female dancer shaped a slightly grotesque portrait of Hans Christian Andersen, simultaneously as a boy and an old man. *Theremin*, conceived by Kirsten Dehlholm and Willie Flindt, was an electro-acoustic performance about Russian physicist Leon Theremin (1896-1933), who invented the first electro-acoustic music instrument, the theremin. A poetic homage to an original researcher, the piece featured harrowing soundscapes and electronically distorted voices, so that the form itself conveyed how Theremin’s discoveries changed our perception of sound, voice and music. These two productions were consistent links in Hotel Pro Forma’s impressive oeuvre, which at the time comprised 23 major pieces, devised for theaters, art institutions, and public spaces.

Historically there was strictly speaking nothing new or controversial about these theatrical modes. Already in the roaring post-war and post-revolutionary 1920s new forms were sparked off in the performing arts. Contemporary with above mentioned Theremin was the Russian and Soviet pioneering theater director Vsevolod Meyerhold (1874-1940), who established a method of stylized acting based on a system of biomechanics, whereby emotional states would be expressed by precise physical action. Meyerhold has often been quoted for declaring that: “to be a stage director you must cease to be an illustrator”. According to his conception a performance should be based on an audio-visual score in which the actor would perform a fictional aspect rather than a “character”. Even his ideas were not new – as early as in 1897 the poet Stéphane Mallarmé in his *Divagations* described the dancer not as a person but a metaphor of human expressions, whose “bodily scripture” was a “poem disengaged from all writer’s devices”. The Symbolist Mallarmé approached a notion of the performing arts as movement and interaction of poetic signs in a given space. Similar thoughts determined the theater of Gordon Craig (1872-1966), who saw the director as the true creator and the actor as a kind of marionette. Inspired by the Swiss director and designer Adolphe Appia (1862-1928) Craig revolutionized set design with his use of mobile, non-representational screens, striving towards a non-naturalistic style. In the 1910s, Craig also reinvented the technology of stage lighting so that the *mise en scène* could shape dynamic, polyphonic interaction of lights, color, movement and sound. During that same period the Ballets Russes followed by the Ballets Suédois were to create ground-breaking stage productions in Paris, where they initiated fertile artistic collaborations between significant contemporary artists, composers, choreographers, poets, and dancers. The Russians engaged Pablo Picasso, Leon Bakst, André Derain, and others as costume and set designers and composers like Claude Debussy, Igor Stravinsky, and Richard Strauss. Their bold experiments enchanted and challenged the audience – and provoked scandals, most notably Stravinsky’s *Sacre du printemps* in 1913. The Ballets Suédois combined drama, poetry, music, dance, circus, film, and pantomime, featuring artists, writers and composers like Fernand Léger, Giorgio de Chirico, Jean Cocteau, Luigi Pirandello, Francis Poulenc and Darius Milhaud. It is worth remembering their satirical ballet *Relâche* (1924), conceived by Dadaist painter Francis Picabia, choreographed by Jean Börlin to the music of Erik Satie. An original short film, the surreal and hallucinatory *Entr’acte*, by René Clair, was projected as a counterpoint to the imaginative and bizarre dancing. 1924 was also the year when the influential German director Erwin Piscator inserted documentary film footage in his political theater productions in Berlin, far ahead of today’s common use of video projections on stage.

This brief historical detour is aimed at giving some perspective to the 2005 Avignon conflicts, while serving as a background to the work that Kirsten Dehlholm initiated in 1977 with Billedstofteater (devising performances and live installations mainly in visual arts spaces) and expanded within Hotel Pro Forma since 1985. Hotel Pro Forma defines itself as a “laboratory of performance, installations, and opera. /.../ The structure of the performances is strongly anchored in music and visual arts and does not follow traditional theatrical structures.” Investigation of subject matter and trans-disciplinary exploration of technology, forms, and spaces are essential to their projects. It is however curious that this kind of approach to the performing arts could still, in the early 21st century, be pinpointed

by certain audiences (and even by some critics!) as not being “theater”, or, at best, be considered avant-garde. History suggests that the decisive battle was fought a hundred years ago. Yet theater still has to conquer and reaffirm its own specific codes, in order to be appreciated not as illustrated literature but as an independent artistic language. Kirsten Dehlholm and Hotel Pro Forma are protagonists in this continuous struggle – but they are definitely not alone.

The French critic Bruno Tackels has advanced the term *écrivain de plateau*, which he illustrates with excellent examples in a series of six essays on acclaimed international stage auteurs and companies: the Castelluccis/Societas Raffaello Sanzio, the Théâtre du Radeau, Rodrigo García, Anatoli Vassiliev, Pippo Delbono and Ariane Mnouchkine/Théâtre du Soleil (published 2005-2015 at Les Solitaires Intempestifs). Although adopting completely diverse styles they are all “writing” or “sculpting” their pieces out of each particular performance space (*le plateau*), with light, color, voices, sound, movements, objects, bodies and architecture. Words, music, and stories are not primordial, but nor are they excluded from the productions of these artists. Tackels contends that the grammar of stage is in fact quite inclusive of seemingly heterogeneous elements and expressions. This would seem crucial, in order to achieve what Tackels describes as the daunting challenge and paradox of theater: to “depict a world which is not of this world with a language that is not yet spoken in this world”.

The creative strategies of Hotel Pro Forma are totally consistent with the idea of an *écriture de plateau*, and Kirsten Dehlholm’s unexpected combinations of sometimes diverging expressions may very well be in line with her attempt to reach out to new realities or perceptions that are not yet known to us. She has herself explained that her projects are driven by a desire to uncover, learn, and share something that she did not know before. Apart from her structural kinship with the artists and companies mentioned above, Dehlholm has several affinities among key figures touring the international performing arts festivals. It actually seems as if the festival culture, based on co-productions directed towards audiences in different countries, is conducive to projects of multi-faceted, poetic “stage texts”, liberated from the limitations of written plays and language.

In the following I would like to discuss some examples of how the aesthetics of Kirsten Dehlholm and Hotel Pro Forma relate to these tendencies in the European performing arts. All established stage auteurs of course have their unique artistic idiom, so although we can detect certain correspondences and similarities between Dehlholm and other artists, they will only concern specific aspects. While it is true that Robert Wilson’s performances in the early 1970s had a profound impact on Kirsten Dehlholm’s decision to reorient her creative power from textile art to performance and installations, she initially took another direction than Wilson’s. Dehlholm’s early work with Billedstofteater was not produced in theaters, but in galleries and public spaces, where she devised living tableaux and performances with a large number of participants. There were, however, some features in Wilson’s style that she would adopt and develop in her own way. The show that originally affected Kirsten Dehlholm was *The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin*, a twelve-hour silent opera that previewed at Det Ny Teater in Copenhagen in 1973. The term *opera* is

employed by Wilson not in a traditional sense; it is to be understood in Latin, as a piece of work. *The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin* included excerpts of some earlier Wilson works, such as the *Deafman Glance* (1970), famous for its prolonged murder scene, where a Medea-like mother is seen silently stabbing her children in extreme slow-motion, thus stripping the act of its spectacular violence and deconstructing the emotion. Stylized, slow movements are one of the main characteristics of Robert Wilson's productions. Similarly Kirsten Dehlholm's touch can be recognized from the statuary presence and distinctively slow movement of performers, embraced in dynamic moving pictures of light, color and video. In stage pieces like *Operation: Orfeo* (1993), *War Sum Up* (2011), *Cosmos+* (2014) and *NeoArctic* (2016) the performers act with strictly limited gestures within a precise scheme or choreography. Their non-naturalistic action transforms them into archetypes or mythic figures that are both of this world and sheer creations of an abstract, poetic sphere. In *War Sum Up*, a *manga opera* on war sung in Japanese, references to Japanese culture are not only to be found in the striking video imagery based on manga drawings, but also in the lyrics, all extracted by dramaturge Willie Flindt from ancient Noh plays. Furthermore, the costumes designed by Henrik Vibskov bear allusions to historical outfits worn by samurais and warriors in Far Eastern societies. Set in that context, the stylized, slow-paced movements of the twelve performers connect with classical Noh drama, while the music and audio-visual technology are manifestly ultra modern. *War Sum Up* thereby incorporates diverse realities and period styles in a complex but coherent expression.

The theater of French director Claude Régy (b. 1923) comes to mind. According to Régy, one of the essential functions of theater is to re-present (in the sense of making present) death and the invisible dimension of our lives. Theater and acting are about being *and* not being, concurrently. With a clear resemblance to Noh theater his productions often depict the personae as coming out of nowhere, visiting their own lives. Lighting is very sombre, creating a dreamlike atmosphere, while actors move exceedingly slowly and speak quietly as if their voices were but faint echoes of themselves. The boundaries between existence and non-existence are blurred. Although Régy's overall style is minimalist and therefore unlike Kirsten Dehlholm's multi-layered stage compositions, I would suggest they share a view of the performer as an ambiguous figure in between worlds. In Hotel Pro Forma's oeuvre there are also numerous twins and doubles, showing the multiple and complex nature of each human being. The most recent example of this is the Hotel Pro Forma version of Puccini's opera *Madama Butterfly* (2017) at La Monnaie in Brussels, where main character Cio-Cio San is interpreted by a puppet manipulated by three Bunraku puppeteers while a soprano sings her part as an elderly Cio-Cio San looking back at her life. In Wagner's *Parsifal* (2013) at the Teatr Wielki in Poznan, they adopted a similar approach in that Parsifal was doubled by a sign language interpreter, and the sibylline woman Kundry was portrayed synchronically by a singer and a dancer who proposed various figures – all different aspects of the same character. These doubles are reminiscent of the legendary Polish stage auteur Tadeusz Kantor (1915-1990), whose actors often carried around life-size mannequins as images of the interaction between present and past within a protagonist.

Enigmatic figures and themes, *Parsifal*, La Monnaie, performance art, and installations –

these very ingredients are also to be found in the oeuvre of Italian Romeo Castellucci and the Societas Raffaello Sanzio. Founded in the 1980s by two pairs of siblings, Romeo and Claudia Castellucci together with Chiara and Paolo Guidi, the Societas Raffaello Sanzio has the declared intention of recreating the world through art. In their manifesto *Santa Sofia – Khmer Theatre*, outlined in 1985 by Claudia Castellucci, they reject representation and reproduction of the known, while advocating an iconoclastic theater that transcends culture, in search of a “fundamental reality”. Their belief is that “reality” as we know it has reached an impasse of violence, greed, and dishonesty. Art must therefore formulate original images and other languages to enable a non-corrupt understanding of the human condition. In 2006 the four founding members went separate ways, but the platform still exists and the subsequent work of Romeo Castellucci is permeated by the principles laid out within the Societas. For at least two decades their intriguing stage productions and performances have inspired admiration and curiosity but also sparked off controversy and debate. When Romeo Castellucci was invited as artistic advisor to the 2008 Avignon Festival, his adaptation in three instalments of Dante’s *Divina Commedia* was generally considered a masterpiece.

The artistic approaches of Kirsten Dehlholm and Romeo Castellucci have several traits in common. Both directors devise their projects in cross-disciplinary creative processes. Kirsten Dehlholm invites artists and/or experts from different fields to Hotel Pro Forma (hence the name of the laboratory), depending on the nature of her research. Romeo Castellucci has always interacted with artists from various disciplines as well as intellectuals from areas like philosophy, theology, history, and science. Their creations deal with philosophical issues, socio-political challenges, aesthetic and scientific interrogations – any kind of intelligence may serve as a theme for their stage productions, performances or installations. Both Dehlholm and Castellucci are interested in the diversity of human beings and have included non-professional performers acting as a kind of “ready-made” of themselves: in Dehlholm’s work we have seen twins, dwarfs, children, rowers, policemen, women called Ellen etc, while Castellucci has presented anorectic and obese people, as well as individuals marked by physical disabilities or old age. The guiding principle behind this is always to allow the spectator to contemplate diverse human shapes and functions, emancipated from the cultural connotations of “normal” society.

Although the actual expressions of Dehlholm and Castellucci may differ, they are both driven by the idea of creating audio-visual concepts that challenge traditional ways of seeing. While both of them tend to conceive what Erik Exe Christoffersen calls *heterophonic* pieces, combining disparate elements, concepts, or situations, the word “beauty” is often used in accounts of their work. To a certain extent this presumably derives from their shared origins in the visual arts, where they relate to a long pictorial tradition. Powerful images are all about intelligent arrangements of space, gravity, proportions, and energy, which often convey a sense of “beauty”, even when dealing with pain, death, or brutality.

In recent years there has been an increasing number of artists crossing seamlessly between international performing arts festivals and important visual arts manifestations, to the benefit of all genres. Artists like Marina Abramovic, Sophie Calle, Jérôme Bel,

Rabih Mroué and Tim Etchells seem to cross-fertilize their projects from different kinds of exposure. Abramovic was even the heroine of a Robert Wilson stage opera, *The Life and Death of Marina Abramovic* (2011), where the performance artist played her own persona. Kirsten Dehlholm and the Hotel Pro Forma have always alternated between theaters and art spaces (or indeed venues with no artistic purpose), more recently joined in that versatility by South African artist William Kentridge, who actually started (and abandoned) his career as an actor in the early 80s, after training at the famous Jacques Lecoq School in Paris. Today he is regularly in demand as a director in major opera houses, where he also delivers original stage design and animated films. In 2012 he presented a project, *Refuse the Hour*, conjointly at the Documenta in Kassel and the Avignon festival. Conceived as a multi-screen video installation for Kassel and as a musical stage production for Avignon, this bustling, political piece about time gave a vivid reflection of Kentridge's multifaceted artistry. His projected animated film scenes were in close interaction with the live performers who acted as singing and dancing sculptures, while the set design was made up of his mobile machines. In a public meeting Kentridge amusedly recounted that when destined for a theater production his props were packed rather carelessly into a van, while the same objects heading for an art exhibition would be handled with white gloves, each one of them well insured and transported in individual crates. Playhouses still house the hybrid art of fools and buffoons, while museums and galleries are part of an altogether different economy. When stars of the visual arts take to the stage, as performers, designers, directors, or auteurs they inevitably bring along other networks of communication, other ways of seeing art.

In recent years Kirsten Dehlholm has collaborated in a handful of prestigious international productions with hip Danish fashion designer Henrik Vibskov. This is an interesting creative companionship, since Vibskov's imaginative costume designs have a spectacular quality that emphasizes the impression of performers as living sculptures. He also induces some of the energy from the fashion circuit into Hotel Pro Forma's performances. In *Madama Butterfly* for instance, there are certain scenes with the chorus parading in dazzling creations, as if they were models in an exclusive show of haute couture. Again, without any attempt to reach a synthesis, Kirsten Dehlholm in her conception of a dynamic performance texture affirms and yet levels this self-contained element that could form a show in its own right. And Vibskov joins the circle of acclaimed couturiers, like Christian Lacroix, Karl Lagerfeld or Viktor & Rolf, in collaborating with renowned contemporary stage directors.

This somehow connects with the principles of the avant-garde theater in Paris a hundred years ago, where highly creative people from different fields came together in unique team productions, in the service of a scenic poem that was bigger than anything they could have signed individually. The artistic endeavour of Hotel Pro Forma is in many ways a modern version of the Ballets Russes and the Ballets Suédois. Eclectic, bold, idiosyncratic, ever open to all conceivable possibilities of the stage.