

**Edit Kaldor**

**To Pieces, a structural and practical analysis of contemporary performance**

Art Practice and Development research group 2005-07

The research I'm conducting at the research group for Art Practice and Development at the Amsterdam School for the Arts (AHK) is based on questions that arise from my own practice and from my past and ongoing 'education' as a theatre-maker. The aim of the research is to develop a specific method and to compile the content for a proposal for a way to teach contemporary theatre and performance to student theatre-makers in a manner that directly informs their own practices.

The method, in short, consists of analysing a number of works, treating them as case-studies in order to expose the underlying dramaturgical structures, as well as dissecting them and examining in a pragmatic way how the component elements (lights, sound, performer, spatial arrangement, image, text, etc.) are used. It is my intention that the dissection and re-assembly of these pieces together with the students is done from the perspective of the practitioner: simply and practically, focusing more on the creative process, and less on context, or possible meanings as a theoretical analysis would be. It gives the students the opportunity to try to imagine the making process, and thus to learn from experience (similar to the Guessing Strategies that French choreographer Boris Charmatz applied as an artistic method with the participants of his initiative Bocal).

The artists whose work I focus on are all presently active on the international podium, make work with a strong individual vision, personal in tone and self-authored. They tend to reflect upon, take into account the particularities of their medium in a conscious and transparent manner. I've chosen the pieces for the case-studies in a way that they would include a variety in scope, form and spirit. So far the selection consists of *Tragedia Endogonia BR.#04* by Societas Raffaello Sanzio, *Bloody Mess* by Forced Entertainment, *Dead Cat Bounce* by Chris Kondek, *0 tâche(s) sur 1 ont été effectuée correctement* by Grand Magasin, *The Loudest Mumbling is over* by Walid Raad / The Atlas Group, and *Fade-out* by David Weber-Krebs.

The database of materials that I am putting together for each case-study

includes, in addition to the video registration of the work, as detailed as possible 'scores' or 'schemes' of the various aspects of the performance (stage-plan, lighting design, sound design, text, technical rider, etc.), documentation material (photos, reviews, articles, promotion texts, studies, transcription of the text of meetings with audience, etc.), as well as writings by and interviews with the makers of the piece. Especially important is all material that relates to, reflects upon the making process, such as videos or notes from rehearsals, the text, sound, video, sketches, etc. in different phases of their evolution (to see how they're transformed during the process). In most cases I also make an in depth interview with the artists, where I am tracing how the piece came into being, and deals with the working process in detail.

### **Background and motivation**

In my experience of making my own theatre works, a great deal of the creative process (dramaturgical, aesthetic decisions) occurs on a complex, I would say intuitive level of thinking. For me the most useful part of my education in theatre has been that which has informed this intuition. Thus, I think that much more than from my formal studies of drama, I've learned what I know about theatre from the years of working with director Peter Halasz (Squat Theater / Love Theater, New York). In retrospect I realize that during the seven years I've collaborated with him I've gone through a pretty much classical case of apprenticeship of learning 'the trade'. By participating in the creative process from working out the concept to the writing, to the visual design and down to the last detail of the directing in many performances, I have acquired experience and skills that I apply constantly while making my own work.

This learning process has been completed more than six years ago, but another kind of dialogue has taken its place in my continual education about the practice of theatre. It is the conversations with other theatre-makers, discussing concepts, watching and commenting on each other's rehearsals and performances, or talking about performances by others. And although the work is heterogeneous, my experience in these encounters reconfirmed that there is a common frame of references, a common language, common knowledge that applies. This is what makes the communication about work possible.

Each piece has its own needs, and these needs are far from random. There are rules, though due to the great variety of forms used and the subjectivity in the vision and tone of many performances, these rules may be difficult to pin down,

or to formulate exactly. They are best accessed by what I would call a sort of 'dramaturgical intuition', and the research *To Pieces* suggests, that examining performances as case-studies can prove to be a good way to develop and sharpen this instinct. I regard this method of learning about contemporary performance as resembling a concentrated, short-cut version of doing an apprenticeship.

### **Furthermore**

In addition to compiling the case-studies, I also organise events in order to test various aspects of the educational model I am developing. The first of these events, which took place in September 2005, was an informal excursion with a limited group of students to witness two performances during the Internationale Keuze at the Rotterdamse Schouwburg (*Tragedia Endogonidia BR.#04* by Societas Raffaello Sanzio and *Who's Afraid of Representation* by Rabih Mroue), which was then followed by a focussed discussion. A total of ten students coming from various departments of the Amsterdam School for the Arts and the University of Amsterdam (SNDO, Mimeschool, Dance Unlimited, Dasarts and MA Dramaturgy) were participating, as well as dramaturge Maaïke Bleeker. Prior to each performance the participants were given a few suggestions in terms of which to observe the piece, and themselves, while watching. (When are they 'in' and when are they 'out' of the performance as spectators? What kind of responses does the performance evoke? Etc.) Immediately after the performance they were asked to quickly jot down notes on any thoughts, observations and inspirations they have found to be useful for their own work. In the meeting a couple days later the point of departure was a communal attempt to recount as accurately as possible 'what happened' during the performances we'd seen. As well as the request to give feedback to the makers of the piece, imagining that what the students have seen was a run-through, and that they had been asked to comment as an 'outside eye' on what they thought could be improved, but accepting the basic premises of the work.

A third aspect of the research will result in an extensive archive of contemporary works of theatre and performance that will support the final course set-up and can serve as general reference to consult for students at the AHK. The archive will include dvd's of performances, descriptions and press material, as well as existing interviews with the makers. In addition to the makers whose work are used as case-studies, the collection will include works of Rodrigo García, Richard

Maxwell, Gob Squad, Lone Twin, Rabih Mroué, Antonia Baehr, William Yang, Claudia Triozzi, Kris Verdonck, Goat Island, Elevator Repair Service, Kinkaleri, Jerome Bel, Big Art Group, Wayn Traub, Blast Theory, Frankfurter Küche, Radiohole, Sanne van Rijn, Benjamin Verdonck, Rimini Protokoll, Jacob Wren, etc.

The archive material should challenge the students to extend the resources that inform their work beyond the borders of The Netherlands and to engage with innovative international artists and practices that are unfortunately too rarely presented in Amsterdam.

## Workshop - To Pieces

Theatre maker and dramaturge Edit Kaldor conducted a workshop at the Theaterschool in the fall of 2007 - 22 October until 2 November - for students and young makers of theatre and performance.

During the workshop the participants explored in a practice-oriented manner the various steps and aspects involved in the process of making a self-authored piece for theatre. The work of the British theatre group Forced Entertainment, and in particular their performance from 2004, *Bloody Mess*, is used as the main frame of reference. The material for the workshop is prepared together with Tim Etchells, writer-director of Forced Entertainment, who came to Amsterdam for two days to work with the participants, and also gave his feedback on the work developed by them during the session.

Forced Entertainment is one of the most influential experimental theatre companies in Europe today. They have been working as a collective for some 20 years and have through the years developed a particular style and working method. The participants were introduced to their work and ways of working and has been examined more in depth *Bloody Mess*, a group piece by Forced Entertainment for 10 performers.

The structure, the composition in *Bloody Mess* is based on, as Etchells puts it, "making one big shape by using lots of smaller shapes or fragments of material. These shapes are 'characters', sequences of action, pop songs and even narrative worlds. Each of these items used in the composition has its own integrity, its own limits, its own development. None of them is linked in any direct way. The act of using them in a piece respects this... Allowing each thing to be what it is, at the same time taking its place in the whole." (T. Etchells: *Notes on Bloody Mess*)

"Things in the piece are 'disconnected' from each other. So that rather than one 'world', or one shared understanding of the performance situation we might have many... So that people/events/images might co-exist in the space without reference to each other.

So you have all these little 'private' pieces of foolishness, messing around - all these individual decisions that don't connect but do occupy the same time and space and work cumulatively." (from interview by S. Hussen)

The participants took a close look at the piece in order to gain a thorough understanding of how this dramaturgical organizing principle works in *Bloody Mess*. They also got an insight into how the piece was developed, of the various approaches and strategies that were used during the making process.

Then they worked for five days, part of the time with Etchells and Kaldor, but also individually and as a group, on creating a new piece of work, using the dramaturgical principles in *Bloody Mess* as a frame of reference. The resulting performance was presented to a group of invited guests. On the last day the participants were asked to evaluate and think further the work they've created during the workshop. They reflected upon the experience of the short, intensive making process and related it to their own work, ideas and questions about making theatre.

In order to give the discussion a broader context, in addition to the personal reflections of the participants, thoughts about the working process by contemporary theatre makers and theoreticians has also been introduced.