

"What matter who's speaking?"

Authorship, the collective creative process, and power relations in the theatre, using the example of performers with learning disabilities

Symposium during the NO LIMITS – International Theatre Festival, November 8 - 9, 2013, Berlin

"What matter who's speaking?" – the question of artistic authorship is being re-negotiated on today's theatre stages, where performers act as autonomous subjects, staging their own selves. Instead of still being fixed on the individual artist, the focus has shifted to the search for a collective virtuosity or the theatre as a collective art form. Through the staging of the rehearsal process in performance theatre, power relations inside the theatre are deliberated directly on stage. Performance artist collectives like She She Pop, Gob Squad, Showcase Beat le Mot and Monster Truck work largely without any directorial figure, and instead rely on a collective form of (self-) direction. As a result of these tendencies, not only the actor's role, but also that of the director seems to be at stake.

Despite the fact that both the division of roles inside the theatre and the question of the autonomy of the actor are currently on trial, it seems that with regards to the specific case of theatre with performers with learning disabilities, the question "what matter who's speaking?" acquires even greater importance. In light of the discourse on the democratisation of art as a possible means for the disabled to obtain a voice and become more visible in the public sphere, disabled artists are currently also appearing on "mainstream" theatre and festival stages outside the "inclusive theatre scene", for example in *Disabled Theater* by Jérôme Bel & Theater HORA, in *Dschingis Khan* by Theater Thikwa & Monster Truck, or in the productions of the Australian Back to Back company. However – both in the inclusive context and outside it – how these people appear and what parts they are supposed to play in is still unquestioningly decided by non-disabled directors. And even though disabled actors are increasingly assigned non-fictional parts and allowed to use their own first person narrative, the question remains who's acting as a mouthpiece for whom here, and whether their words aren't ultimately instrumentalised for "higher" purposes. In this context, the sweeping claim that every performer with a learning disability is automatically an artist quite often turns out to be nothing more than empty rhetoric.

After all, using people with disabilities predominantly as metaphors for the world views of non-disabled people has a long tradition in theatre history. In dramatic literature, people's disabilities have been employed to portray divine justice, depict superhuman powers (like the blindness of the prophet Tiresias in Sophocles' *Antigone*) or as a manifestation of moral vices (like Richard III's severe limp in Shakespeare), while the actors themselves are often used to portray the outsider par excellence. As an aberration from normalcy, disability mostly serves as a *crutch* on which literary *narratives* lean for their representational power, as a "narrative prosthesis" which restricts the disabled actor to referring to *another* instead of to themselves (Snyder/ Mitchell).

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Additionally, in conventional theatre characters with disabilities are generally not portrayed by actually disabled actors. However, as long as non-disabled actors are the ones that play "disabled characters" – supposedly as authentically as possible – (and win awards for these portrayals) the question arises what the motives that might employ actors with real learning disabilities are, and which roles directors intend for *them*?

So in view of the current acting discourse, performers with physical or cognitive disabilities are not taken into consideration. Acting has been always associated with certain body image standards and concepts of people prevalent at a given time, and these notions are then passed on to the actors during their training. If the aim of acting lessons is optimisation and perfection attained through physical training and drills, then on the coin's flipside, disability as a construct, according to Butler, forms "the abject", evading what Foucault terms "docile bodies". Despite the fact that post dramatic theatre increasingly tries to accommodate disabled actors – not least because the greatest obstacle, namely the dramatic (spoken) text that lends structure to most theatrical elements is irrelevant here – the urgent question remains as to who in the relationship between the disabled and the non-disabled has the power to deprive the other of, or concede the right to self-expression; in short: How is power distributed and who are the decision-makers in the rehearsal process?

The query "What matter who's speaking", a quote by the playwright Samuel Beckett, as well as the central issue addressed in a famous talk by Michel Foucault titled "What is an author" (1969), consequently also constitutes the central idea behind this symposium on authorship, the collective creative process and power relations in the theatre using the example of collaborating with performers with learning disabilities. The scholarly talks, practical artistic examples and panel discussions presented here will primarily focus on the question to what extent and in what way current reconsideration of the hierarchies in the rehearsal process, as well as the trend towards joint authorship via collective theatre is also reflected in theatre work produced by and with performers with learning disabilities.

Our focal point will be centred around the following aspects:

- **Authorship:** What does authorship mean when working with artists with learning disabilities?
- **The collective creative process:** What share in the creation of theatrical work does each of the participants have? To what extent will the questioning of hierarchies in the rehearsal process enable disabled artists to obtain a more clearly defined co-authorship? How can disabled and non-disabled artists find a common language when working together?
- **Power relations:** Who decides what during the rehearsal process? Who has a voice on stage? To what degree are actors with learning disabilities capable of speaking for themselves?

On day one, the tension-filled realm between authorship and power in contemporary theatre will be critically examined from the perspectives of different academic disciplines such as Sociology, Theatre Studies, Law, and Rehabilitation Studies. While in this context the performers' "disability" predominantly emerges as a gap or impediment and an (im)possibility to achieve communication of a certain form, on day two artists with and without disabilities from other artistic disciplines

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(Literature, Dance and Visual Art) are going to present their view on professional relationships and different forms of joint authorship. The focus will be on artistic collaborations from Belgium, Germany and Wales; additionally, workshops will discuss various approaches and put them to the test. Oral summaries provided by the Thikwa performer Peter Pankow will serve as a framework for this encounter between theory and artistic practice.

Languages: Festival events will be conducted in German and English

Simultaneous translation will be provided for talks in English into German and vice versa, and all text will additionally be translated into simpler language.

Chair: Marcel Bugiel, Yvonne Schmidt

Registration: Registration is required. Please register via e-mail to info@no-limits-festival.de

Attendance fee: EUR 30/ Concession EUR 15 (for students, trainees, disabled persons and job-seekers). Lunch is available for EUR 8 (including drinks).

Venue: Theater Thikwa / F40, Fidicinstr. 40, 10965 Berlin-Kreuzberg

NO LIMITS
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Programme

FRIDAY, 8 NOVEMBER 2013

Noon Registration **13.00** Marcel Bugiel and Yvonne Schmidt: Welcome & Introduction

Basics: Power Relations – Authorship – Disability

15.00 Denis Hänzi (TU Darmstadt): Structured Dissolution of Boundaries. The Order of Theater **15.45** Mathilde Pavis (University of Exeter): Intellectual Property Law, Disability and Performance **17.00** Frederik Poppe (Universität Leipzig): Artists in Need of Assistance **17.45** Daily summary by Peter Pankow (Theater Thikwa, Berlin)

SATURDAY, 9 NOVEMBER 2013

9.00 Warm up with Hans Harald Janke (Theater RambaZamba)

Change of Perspective: Practices of Collective Authorship

09.15 Katja de Bragança (OHRENKUSS-Magazin, Bonn): Why it is not easy - but always worth it – to look at things and discuss together **10.00** Anne-Françoise Rouche & Thierry Van Hasselt (CEC La "S", Vielsalm (B) / Frémok, Brüssel (B)): Knock Outsider (... vers un troisième langage) **11.15** Margret Ames & Adrian Jones (Aberystwyth University/ Cyrff Ystwyth Dance Company, Wales): Narrating the precise and the personal: Dancing rural Wales through learning disability **12.00** Summary by Peter Pankow (Theater Thikwa, Berlin)

14.00 Workshops and Round Tables with Margret Ames & Adrian Jones, Saša Asentic, Katja de Bragança, Anne-Françoise Rouche & Thierry Van Hasselt

Perspectives: Artistic Potentials of Performers with Disabilities

16.00 Podium Discussion: Disabled performers as Artists? with Dominik Bender (Theater Thikwa), Hans Harald Janke (Theater RambaZamba), Thomas Thieme (Schauspieler), and others. Chair: Georg Kasch **17.00** Closing Discussion, Moderation: Yvonne Schmidt & Marcel Bugiel

17.45 Overall Summary by Peter Pankow (Theater Thikwa, Berlin)