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Dancing in the middle

Ritual – Improvisation – Community

I am sitting in the sand in an African village. It is night, but instead of romantic fires it is ordinary electric light that lights the open space in between the houses where tonight, the village celebrates the Sabar. A party, one could say, but then a West-African one where the whole village is involved and your role is defined clearly: You are either a dancer or a member of the cheering, clapping, commenting and laughing audience. Moving in and out of either role is easy enough: You simply step into the circle and dance or you walk (but more often stagger and fall) out of it and become audience again. But in my case, ‘simply’ is slightly understated. In front of my eyes, men and women throw their legs threateningly high into the air. Drums are beating loud and provokingly fast and my stomach is just not sure yet, whether he will be able to convince my legs to put a foot into this circle.

In spring 2003, DasArts and Jant-Bi/l’Ecole des Sables, a centre for contemporary African dance in Toubab Dialaw, Senegal ventured into a collaboration that, in a lot of ways, was the wet dream of any intercultural minded arts official: Twelve DasArts students, coming from eight different countries of the Northern hemisphere, lived and worked with twelve students of l’Ecole des Sables; sharing for 2 ½ months the same bedrooms, meals, dance spaces and media tools with young dancers/choreographers from all over the African continent. The humanists’ credo of the arts as the vehicle to bring humanity together was an ever present cliché, and I was slightly cringing every time it would be yet again solemnly exclaimed by another guest-teacher or visiting funding officer. My trouble with that cliché was in a strange way the same as my initial trouble with African rituals. I was concerned about the suggestive and ‘fake’ component in both the naïve multicultural dreamspeak as well as in the joyful African ritual practice. Ritual, in my mind, needed a certain amount of sincerity and mysticism, no people making jokes all through, making me feel that I am part of some birthday party... What could I take as authentic? What was simply fake? Does it amount to anything to exclaim that we are one big family of human beings or shouldn’t we look much more critical into it before exclaiming anything? These things governed my thoughts and probably that is the reason why, for a European like me, it is simply very hard to just get into the middle and dance.

In the first week of the program, I experienced two rituals. Germaine Acogny, artistic director of l’Ecole des Sables, did a silent, welcoming ritual with a bowl of water. And Olu Oguibe, one of our lecturers, did another one where we put on simple costumes and went singing, walking in a line down to the beach, greeted the water of the Atlantic and went back. Germaines ritual ended unexpectedly when one of us spilled by accident all the water, letting slip the calabash that was handed from person to person. I was worried because the ritual could not be completed ‘properly’, but all the African students I talked to later said that it had been a good sign and were rather cheerful about it. “It is what it is” Germaine said after the water was spilled. At that moment, I heard that as a remark to soften the damage – only later I considered that it could also have been a cheerful, honest exclamation of satisfaction.

With the ritual of Olu Oguibe, I even had trouble joining in. It all looked so improvised, while I
expected some degree of holiness and sincerity in the preparations. All sorts of stories went through my head, one of them being that Olu and the other African students only did this to give us a ritual experience in a tourist attraction sort of way. Oh I felt uncomfortable! Then we did it and it was actually a lot of fun, and while afterwards not many words were spent on talking about the experience, I started understanding something about the paradox of being sincere and joking, improvising and fully immersed, not seeing any problem in laughing about the way things were going and still honouring what was happening and by no means doing it away as meaningless.

I account my troubles to my Western upbringing that taught me that things are either one thing, or the other. There is no in-between in the way we have learned to reason. I have the idea that maybe my problem with believing in ghosts and magic, so undoubtedly part of existence for most Africans, is that I still want to find out, once and for all, whether magic does exist or does not exist.

In Africa, I started understanding that if magic either does exist or does not exist (i.e. if these are considered the only acceptable possibilities), then magic is indeed impossible. Magic can only exist in a world where things are not so clearly decided. Magic gains life from ambiguity. The fact that life is ambiguous and human beings are ambiguous and therefore magic exists and is affecting us is something that I could never have learned in Europe, because here we try to hide and do away with ambiguity.

+++ The program we followed in Toubab Dialaw were essentially 10 weeks of dancing. We would start the day with Germaine Acogny, who would lead us through astonishing 1 ½ hours of improvisation. She would be standing in front of us and we would follow her movements. She on her part would follow her intuition, thus leading us on a journey from ever so small movements, through standing, sitting, running and the wildest outbursts of energy to dancing, dancing, dancing. Moving from straight lines facing her to moving in a circle, then dancing in a block towards the musicians who followed our every movement like we were following Germaine’s, swirling heaps of sand in the air with our feet, standing and feeling the wind pass through our clothes.

Later in the day we would have more dance classes and African guest-teachers of various disciplines visiting and teaching us, but what still remains with me, even a year later, were those mornings with Germaine.

Improvisation, even if unstructured, never means doing any old thing. Whether you do jazz, stand-up comedy or dance, you have to take the audience with you. Which means that whatever you are doing needs to be ‘in tune’ with the energies of the people present. This does not mean that you are limited in the scope of your actions, but it means that the order of things to happen will be dictated by tuning in with what is at hand. For Germaine, this meant that she would not start dancing wildly just out of her own whim. We obviously would have followed anything she did, but it was very clear that for Germaine this was not so much a dance exercise that she happened to lead than it was a collective exercise in coming together. I remember the day when we heard at breakfast that the war had started in Iraq. There was an intangible weight on the group that whole morning. In the class with Germaine it was clear that she searched for a way to release that leaden energy from the group, but like a good lover, she did not impose her will on us, but kept looking – through the body – for an opening that would manifest itself. It took much longer than usual, but finally we were ‘there’: The tension expressed itself in an outburst that felt like wild, but playful predators attacking each other at will...

As a rule, you never know how much time and what it will take to come together.

+++ Neither the dance classes with Germaine, nor the Sabar dancing that I gave a glimpse of in the beginning of this text are what we usually consider ritual. The popular understanding of ritual is that there is a fixed set of actions that is done in devotional spirit. But although Germaine’s morning
classes were improvisational by nature, the format was a fixed one, repeated every morning.

‘Devotional’ means, without needing to get into esoteric debate, that your actions are intended for, and inspired by something bigger than yourself. Like moving together without a leader. Like going beyond the apparent separation between you and me. Like following the invisible.

Ritual is probably one of the most problematically used terms in our language. There are, of course, secularised rituals that we know ourselves (shaking hands, giving presents, MTV-awards, etc.), but as we have a rather dispassionate relationship with all of these actions, they have left the category ‘done in devotional spirit’ a long time ago and are not really what comes to people’s minds when you say ‘ritual’.

In secularised Europe, African rituals are either considered a complete scam and make-believe, or it has the sound of mystery, adored from the outside but not to be touched by us uninitiated. To say it bluntly: We don’t know how to relate to it. With the growing frictions between our secularised world and those societies accustomed to and proficient in living with other realities than the commonly visible, we are, however, in dire need of a new approach towards rituals, to bring it on a human scale back into our midst.

I think that theatre can play an important role here. Not only because theatre has remained one of the few places where we still gather for something other than ourselves, but also because in the empty space of the theatre lies the potentiality of contact.

Rituals connect this world and ‘the other world(s)’. But to get started at all, we need to understand that this ‘other world’ isn’t a mystery, but a simple, daily experience. It starts (for example) when your eyes meet mine – before we have decided who we will be for each other and which game we are going to play. Any moment of contact brings us into a border-zone where, potentially, everything is possible. And that is exactly the reason why, usually, we immediately swim back to a safe shore. The dispassionate, but safe rituals we perform with each other keep the strong currents of that border-zone effectively out of our sight. And that, while, as Jan Ritsema puts it, actually 95% of our reality consists of this space in-between.

Rituals operate inside and in relation to that border-zone - a zone that we are passing hundreds of times a day, without even noticing. It is time that we seriously start paying attention to this.

Rituals are less holy, but also more important for us than we trained ourselves to believe.

+++ Where I grew up, it is normal to dance for your individual enjoyment. In discos or on parties we dance alone or we dance together – but with ‘together’ we mean that everybody dances, almost never: You dance and I watch.

In Senegal, the opposite is true: As soon as you start dancing, an audience will form and they will start clapping or give comments to accompany your dance. You are looked at and you better enjoy being looked at and create a relationship with your audience or you will not be appreciated. It is much less about your skill as a dancer as it is about your intention towards the audience. Failing – falling, not-delivering – is possible and appreciated heartily as long as it is failing in your attempt to give yourself fully – to the other, to the audience

Community is created in this seamless handling of the performance situation. You can move in and out of being audience or performer at any time. Being looked at is so much a part of social interaction here that it is at the same time less important in itself and more meaningful in relating to each other compassionately than I experience it in the West.

In Western Europe, where the position of being looked at is delegated to actors, politicians and TV-stars (who can’t hope for much compassion if they fail to deliver), the act of looking at each other in public is generally seen as a breach of privacy. Privacy is a holy grail for modern world people and to ‘do your own thing’ and have the space to deploy your individuality has slowly become our single most important virtue.
This also means that always and everywhere, you have to be able to present *yourself*. Who are you? What are you doing? You better have an answer ready. Failing is not an option. Moments of contact have become an exchange of your identity against mine. In this world, no one would ever voluntarily start dancing. Inspiration, passion and empathy are not only rare but almost by default kept out of our interactions. The emphasis on identity/individuality keeps us – very effectively – at a safe distance.

Also in the art world it has become exceedingly important to position yourself identifiable against the rest of the scene. Who are you? What is your special contribution? Your artistic signature?

But with nowadays even cigarette ads on big billboards asking “Who are you?”, the emphasis on identity/individuality has become popular culture and we have to ask ourselves why we are still so much spellbound by the same paradigm. Even Sasha Waltz, who recently with “Insideout”, created yet another performance about “identity” and the “effects of individualisation and globalisation”, gives individuality all the focus without actually putting the finger on the wound: In today’s world, the question of identity is by far not our most pressing issue. To *find yourself* might have been a worthy struggle for the most part of the passed century, but today no mobile phone is being sold without a “be yourself” slogan – and for us, a change in strategy is long due.

Or do we really want to live in a society that values finding *yourself* so much higher than finding the other?

In Senegal, I got used to people asking whether everything is all right with me whenever I declared that I will take a walk ‘on my own’. Being solitary is almost seen as pathological, which at times made me as a European feel rather uncomfortable. “Where is my own space?!”, I would think panic-stricken, which is probably one of the reasons why we Europeans have become so bad in living communally and compassionately together.

*Your own space can be the space in the middle of the circle* – Before going to Africa, this was an incomprehensible concept for me. Because taking the focus is seen as indulgent and arrogant where I am coming from.

In the Sabar, to step into the middle is indeed a moment of celebrating your individuality. And the more beautiful you find yourself the more beautiful you will dance. Especially the men are making a big moment out of it, showing off their feathers like peacocks. But the women laugh about it and love them just the same, which is exactly the right reaction. Producing yourself as ‘someone’, an identity, should always be seen as what it is: a grand play of vanity. In Africa or in Europe, in the art world or in other parts of society, it is always a game, and therefore it should never be taken too seriously. Unfortunately, we Europeans lack the social tools to daily, in all those common situations, expose this game to each other and – with each other – laugh about it. In the Sabar, the desire to put yourself into the centre of attention is not hidden, it is out there in the open which makes it simply very endearing. And whether you have a moment of excellence or you fail dramatically in the attempt: it is all *human* and therefore it will be appreciated heartily.

What tends to go wrong with improvisation is not being clear about your intention as a performer. Do you have to be yourself? Or do you have to entertain the audience? Even if not seen as a question of theatre, but for any discipline or even for life in general, the correct answer can’t be given if these are considered the only acceptable possibilities. The truth can only be found in the middle, in between these questions. It will be sought and found, obscured, lost, recovered and revealed on the moment that you step into the middle.

Going into the middle of the Sabar is about timing, courage and enjoyment: Claiming the attention, making yourself the focus of what is happening and enjoying that, shamelessly. At the same time it is important to remember that what you are doing is not about you; nor is it exclusively about the
audience. It is about you and the audience: the border-zone where two worlds are allowed to exist without excluding each other. The job of both performers and on-lookers, whether in stand-up comedy or dance, in jazz or in the Senegalese Sabar dancing, is to come together in this border-zone.

Being part of the Sabar made me realise that really nothing would happen, would there not be the audience. For a performer, this is a very healthy experience. It makes you realise profoundly that you are creating a moment for the audience as much as the audience is creating this moment for you. There is no sense in separating the one from the other. You are together. Dancing in Senegal taught me that there is just one thing that an audience will not accept: If you deny the powerful bond that you have with them on the moment that you step into the middle.

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