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Christel Stalpaert

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A Dramaturgy of the Body

CHRISTEL STALPAERT

In her essay 'Looking Without Pencil in the Hand', Flemish dramaturg Marianne van Kerkhoven suggested that there are no fixed laws of behaviour or tasks that can be wholly defined in advance, not even for the dramaturg. 'Every production forms its own method of work' (1994a: 140). But, she continues, there is one thing that goes without saying: a dramaturg always deals with 'the conversion of feeling into knowledge, and vice versa' (1994a: 140). Heidi Gilpin, who worked as a dramaturg with William Forsythe, similarly felt that she helped 'translate ideas', trying 'to create a ground with the choreographer where ... mutual obsessions can interact' (in deLahunta, 2000: 22). In his plea for a critical re-appraisal of dramaturgy, Peter Hay speaks of dramaturgy as 'a process of making sense both for the production and the audience' (1983: 7). Dramaturgy is seen as the twilight zone between art and science, but it is still associated primarily with the cognitive function of the brain, with understanding, with common sense and perception, so it seems.

THEORY VERSUS PRACTICE

Despite the dramaturg's bridging function between theory and practice, a twofold structure remains the basis of this dramaturgical model. Theory and practice lie next to one another, and they should not be confused with one another; they should remain clearly distinct. But why keep on dividing theory and practice in a dramaturgical context when contemporary

performances testify to the fact that a dramaturg is not necessarily the theoretical 'outsider'? He might as well be called just another member of the 'artistic family'. In Needcompany's *Isabella's Room* (Belgium, 2004), for example, dramaturg Elke Janssens simply shares the stage. Like the other performers, she remains onstage during the performance, in which there is hardly any 'entering' and 'exiting'. She sits there behind a computer, providing the supertitles to the action and occasionally picks up her violin to accompany the open and inviting singing of the performers. 'Entrepreneurs in entertainment' is how Jan Lauwers once described his group, and this means all members of Needcompany, dramaturgs included. That is why Needcompany can be compared to Andy Warhol's Factory, a sort of family unit where the process of artistic creation is collective rather than individual. 'The people in Needcompany don't hang around me, it's me that hangs around them,' Lauwers significantly quotes Warhol.

In *Auf den Tisch!* (Belgium, 2006)¹, Meg Stuart invited the audience and performers to sit around a huge table, as if at a conference. The table is the platform for presentations and improvisations by artists, dancers and musicians, in a format that links action to reflection. There is absolutely no resemblance to the classical theatre arrangement. Dancers and performers do not confine themselves to the performing area. They also take their seats around the table in anticipation of the performance that awaits them. Among them is

¹ On 6 February 2006, the improvisation *Auf den Tisch!* by Damaged Goods, Meg Stuart's dance company, was premiered at the Ghent Vooruit, Belgium. This was the first improvisation project Meg Stuart curated since the *Crash Landing* series in 1996-9.

Myriam van Imschoot, the company's production dramaturg. She performs her way through the improvisation and thus moves beyond the practice-versus-theory divide. In the brochure she is not labelled as 'the figure of the dramaturg'. She is called a performer, next to Boris Charmatz, Eavesdropper, Emil Hvratin, Vera Mantero, Martin Nachbar, Erna Omarsdottir, Chrysa Parkinson, Hahn Rowe, Hooman Sharifi, Bo Wiget and Meg Stuart.

Besides, why should not actors, dancers and performers belong to a dramaturgical context? Jan Lauwers calls his *Needlab* an open laboratory, a rendering public of his and his company's mental workroom. This suggests that the particular creative process, 'defined as a number of individuals who congregate around material introduced by Jan Lauwers', entails a shared intellectual responsibility (Bousset 2007: 298). A diversity of knowledge is put at stake during the creative process. The division of labour changes constantly because - as in Warhol's *Factory* - 'the relationship between group and individual is in constant motion' (298).

And Jan Lauwers is not the only one to work in this way. Jan Joris Lamers, the Dutch theatre maker of *Maatschappij Discordia*, called his performers 'scientists in 'a certain kind of workshop structure' (1994: 284, 296). He sees dramaturgy as a theatrical context, not as a figure, and therefore calls it 'a continuum', 'a continuing dialogue' (280, 286-8) among the artists. Hildegard de Vuyst, dramaturg of Alain Platel and *Les Ballets C de la B*, says that 'the intellectual responsibility of a piece is shared with the whole group. It is not singled out into my position and my function' as a dramaturg (in deLahunta 2000: 24).

I share Myriam van Imschoot's observation that throughout history 'the dramaturgical has been separated from the body of the artist to turn into an "outside eye"' (2003: 63). In *Auf den Tisch!* the border between the 'outside' and the 'inside' of the performance / creative process is blurred. Performers dialogue on the creative process and share this dialogue with the audience. Members

of the audience interact with the performers and co-create the performance. Answering questions or remaining silent, they share the dramaturgical context, rendered public. We have a dramaturgical context that cannot be exclusively pinpointed in the figure of the dramaturg. Myriam van Imschoot calls it a 'dramaturgy in the moment of performing, there being no time to step out and erase, ask for advice or get a second opinion' (2003: 64). The outside eye - traditionally attributed to the figure of the dramaturg - bifurcates and shift-shapes among performers, choreographer, dramaturgs, and members of the audience. As a consequence, their function is also blurred. Particularly interesting are the so-called 'transgressive reversals'; the moment one leaves one's particular skill or field of competence to 'meet halfway between disciplines' (65). I particularly enjoyed Martin Nachbar's imitation of a dance by Loie Fuller in Meg Stuart's *Auf den Tisch!*, in which he provided his footsteps with theoretical footnotes. This meeting, this encounter in wonder, and these occasional transgressive reversals very much indicate the position of the contemporary dramaturg. In the 1980s there was the blurring of the disciplines; in the twenty-first century there is the blurring of the functions.

THE GAZE AND THE BODY

The opposition between practitioners and theorists in fact installs the metaphysical distinction between body and mind, between doing and thinking, between the head - with its privileged sense-organ, the eye - and other sensorial intensities. It is true that, as the status of the pre-written text as the primary source of theatre has given way to improvisation and other means of theatrical composition and creation, the job of the dramaturg has changed. But this does not necessarily mean that the privileged status of the eye - partner in crime of cognitive thinking - has diminished. Knut Ove Arntzen coined the phrase 'visual dramaturgy' to denote the changing function of the figure of the dramaturg, as 'a rich diversity of visual ways of

working with text that has evolved' (in deLahunta 2000: 22). This visual dramaturgy is still paradigmatic. The denotation of the figure of the dramaturg as 'the outside eye' is clear enough in this respect. I would like to argue beyond this Cartesian paradigm, which separates the mind from the body and equates the mind with the optical.

Let me illustrate this with an example. In *Maria Dolores* (Belgium, 2003), a film-opera and contemporary miracle play, Wayn Traub significantly calls his actors poet-dancers. They do not dance to the rhythm of the music, but they have a very specific way of acting and moving, particularly stylized and sometimes in slow-motion. Incited by the music and the musicality of the words and by the intensities of their voice, the movements are in fact disconnected from the sensory-motor scheme of meaningful action. The actors no longer perceive in order to move and to act properly, towards a particular goal, a narrative end or result. The actor as poet-dancer no longer assimilates what he sees (opponents), hears (dialogues) or feels as a function of the linear passage of the character he impersonates. The actors in fact do 'injustice' to the traditional essence of bodily movement; i.e., meaningful action. The slow-motion and the symbolically overloaded gestures in Traub's *Maria Dolores* disrupt the naturalistic and mimetic Aristotelian principle. The spectator is incited to move away from the conceptual appropriation of movements and acts. A new kind of seeing is required, capable of dealing with zones of indistinction between stimulus and response, between action and reaction. The spectator's body and mind is challenged. He has to deal with what Deleuze calls 'the strange unjointed sense of continuity and time' (Rajchman 2000: 137) that comes from the movements of the actors.

Taking into account the changing appeal to the spectator in this performance, the dramaturg's external eye should give way to an embodied mind, where body and mind are connected, operating on an equal level. The dramaturg's 'external gaze' should in this case be expanded to

an external body, to a corporeal 'try out' of the spectator's bodily capacity to read and make sense of an aesthetic of intensities. In each case one must be open to new procedures that free affect from personal feeling, percept from common perception, thinking from common sense.

In the workshop 'Dramaturgies of the Body' at the conference on European Dramaturgy in the 21st Century², freelance dramaturg Christine Fentz, said that in trying to put feeling into knowledge, in trying to communicate with dancers and choreographers, in trying to interfere with the movement text of a choreography, words just failed. Words were inadequate. She had to talk in metaphorical ways, in colours, in landscape structures. Carmen Mehnert, dance dramaturg for Constanza Macras and others, said that she dialogues on an energy level. Maybe this is a way of becoming this 'outside body', which is admitting that you, as a dramaturg, don't have the language, that you cannot perceive, grasp and understand completely. Why cling to the status of the dramaturg as the expert, as the vessel of knowledge? As a dramaturg, dare to stutter, dare to stammer, create a poetic language in stammering. In a postdramatic context, this kind of failure can be very productive.

A NEW POLITICAL DRAMATURGY?

In her essay 'Anxious Dramaturgy', Myriam van Imschoot wrote that a shared intellectual responsibility - such as for the dramaturgical context and the improvisational format in *Artistes en Alpage*, a performance event initiated by Boris Charmatz - creates 'a particular breathing space, a more relaxed and shared common ground on which the artists could meet' (2003: 64). Dramaturg Hildegard de Vuyst similarly stated that in this shared intellectual responsibility, she is not the embodiment of something that is missing. 'Because it feels like if I'm not necessary, in fact, then I have a sort of freedom and a playground to stand on' (in deLahunta 2000: 23). These words remind me of

² The conference European Dramaturgy in the 21st Century was organized by Hans-Thies Lehmann and Patrick Primavesi at the Johann Wolfgang Goethe Universität at Frankfurt am Main and took place from 26-30 September 2007. The workshop was chaired by Gerald Siegmund and Bettina Milz.

what Marianne van Kerkhoven in her keynote speech at the conference on European Dramaturgy in the 21st Century demanded for the contemporary dramaturg, that is time and rest to work, as a kind of antidote against the devastating deadlines, the demands for speed, adaptability and short-term visions that haunt the theatre in neo-liberal times.

Does this need of time and rest mean that contemporary dramaturgical contexts are characterized by a sort of 'easy come, easy go' attitude, a certain indifference or a working without engagement? On the contrary. Dramaturg Marianne van Kerkhoven aptly remarked that 'the micro dramaturgy in the rehearsal should communicate with a macro dramaturgy of the social' (1999: 67, translation mine). For, 'the theatre dwells in the city and the city dwells in the world and the walls are made of skin. We cannot escape what penetrates the pores' (1994b: 7, translation mine). As Erving Goffman wrote, 'All the world is not, of course, a stage, but the crucial ways in which it isn't are not easy to specify' (1959: 72). But how do we approach this contemporary 'political' dramaturgy and - taking Rancière's writings into account - can contemporary dramaturgy be political at all?

Jacques Rancière examines politics from the perspective of 'the distribution of the sensible'. 'Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time' (2004: 13). Artistic practices are political in the sense that they entail a certain recasting of the distribution of the sensible. They 'are "ways of doing and making" that intervene in the general distribution of ways of doing and making as well as in the relationships they maintain to modes of being and forms of visibility ... (to) the indetermination of identities, the delegitimation of positions of speech, the deregulation of partitions of space and time' (2004: 13-14).

An embodied dramaturgy is political, as it moves away from a cognitively based

dramaturgical method. Political dramaturgy does not operate on the level of the message. It is a conceptual deterritorialization, resulting from an encounter with new bodily space. A political dramaturgy does not seek guidelines to follow. It does not seek to tell us how we should think or feel but only what our brain must be for it to be possible for us to think and feel in other new ways.

A dramaturgy of failure is political, as it moves from solid ground to the edge of our thinking. In *L'opéra-bègue* (Belgium, 2004) excellence in speaking *à la* Quintilian is dismantled as the imaginary attribute of the supreme power. The main character, Isis, stutters throughout the opera. The night before her marriage, she discovers a tree growing from her mouth. This music-theatre by Pieter De Buysser and Muziek Lod is a tragi-comic observation of the way in which her family and her fiancé deal with this odd situation. *L'opéra-bègue* comments on who has the ability to see and the talent to speak in society. It deals with the history of rhetoric and the model of the 'good orator' and its contradictory political paradigms. Following Quintilian's *De Institutione Oratoria*, to stutter is 'not done'. For, 'unless the voice is free of defect, it cannot produce the best Delivery' (Quintilian 2001: XI 3.13, p. 91). A 'good' style entails correctness, lucidity, elegance and appropriateness (Quintilian 1958: I 5.1, p. 79). Deleuze, on the other hand, stated that being well-spoken has never been the distinctive feature or the concern of great writers. They 'make the language take flight, they send it racing along a witch's line, ceaselessly placing it in a state of disequilibrium, making it bifurcate and vary in each of its terms, following an incessant modulation' (Deleuze 1997: 109). Failure in speaking and creative stuttering are considered as a poetic speech that actualizes powers of bifurcation and variation, of heterogenesis and modulation that are proper to language.

A political dramaturgy, then, should attain the level at which a work testifies to multiplicity,

when it makes vision or language stutter, as if speaking a foreign tongue and saying ‘and, and, and’ rather than ‘or’, but without losing itself in isolated incomprehensibility. In contemporary theatre the function of the dramaturg has blurred. Dramaturgs have become performers or ‘entrepreneurs in entertainment’; performers have become ‘scientists’, participating in a mental workroom or open laboratory; spectators have to think creatively, hence joining the dramaturgical context, rendered public. In these so-called ‘transgressive reversals’, dramaturgy moves from solid ground and cognitive thinking to a dramaturgy of the body that is political, in a sense that the people involved in the dramaturgical context of the performance share a responsibility in a recasting of the distribution of the sensible. To move beyond the Cartesian paradigm is to move from solid ground, to stumble and stutter at the edge of our thinking, revealing new and unforeseen ways of thinking and feeling.

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