

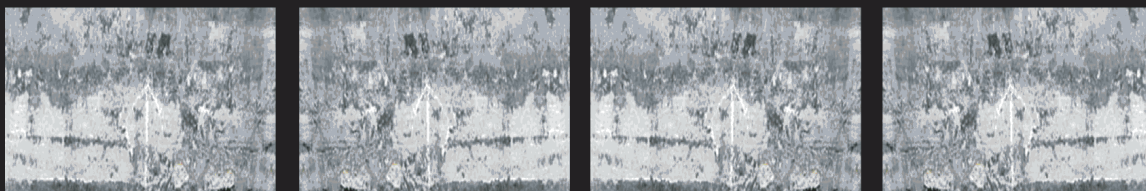
LABORATORIET



Report from Teater Polen

by Jacob Brønnum

Experiment 2: Facts, Fiction and Text



Part of a series of experiments by The Laboratory
Script Development Methods 2005-2007



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Just now I am sitting with the well done first performance of last night still fresh in my memory. Later today I'll go down to the newsstand to pick up what will hopefully be good reviews. Tremble! Because the product of our stay at The Laboratory has just reached its climax, the time seems right to commit to writing what this intensive working week brought with it.

When we turned up Monday in Grønnegade, we were quite certain as to how the week would progress. First a quick reading of the play and then on with it: out on the floor and test the viability of the drama! However things were not to go as we had planned and hoped for – on the other hand we got something else, something better...

Going Through the Week

When dramatist and actor Troels Larsen, actress Pil Engholm and dramaturg Jacob Brønnum met with Barbara Simonsen of The Laboratory, we were quite aware that Troels had written a play which in many ways made some rather exaggerated demands. We were not aware however that the dramatist in his mind had a fundamental doubt that left some of the most basic elements in the structure of the play open to discussion. The play itself works in several different levels of fiction, which apparently had not been clarified in the dramatist's own mind.

This meant that already after reading through the play for the first time we could sense distinct flaws or perhaps just "areas of doubt" within the text. Already at first glance we could see that they might destroy the original intent of the text. There were several opinions as to where these areas of doubt might stem from, but it has probably played a part that the dramatist has worked with the play for almost a year, meaning that certain "old ideas" might stand in the way of ideas of a more recent date.

Thus we used the first day making various suggestions on how to solve the problems of the text. Basically the text lacked a clarification of exactly what story it was trying to tell. The text has many breaks in fiction, which are part of the original idea, but by reading through the text it became unclear what purpose these breaks served. Did we break with each other on stage? Did we break with the audience? Was the audience even there in the room?

Fundamentally this doubt evolved around us not knowing the story of the characters properly. Or rather... We probably did, but it did not show in the text. So it was concluded that day that the text was not "finished" enough, enabling us to take it to the floor and experiment with the breaks, because what were we supposed to break with? Therefore it was decided that Troels should try to flesh out the characters and their situation before Tuesday.

Tuesday however presented more doubt and more problems in the text. This was made painfully clear after an initial reading. There were many areas of the text that were still not clarified. So Barbara proposed that the dramatist and she work in private to locate precisely where in the text these areas of doubt lay. For instance which questions did the text not answer?

After this the two of them worked in private for the remainder of the day to locate these problems. The characters were more closely defined, their story was determined and movement on and of stage was slightly adjusted, after which the dramatist attempted to write these elements into the text. However seeing as this can be rather extensive; the decision was made that the dramatist should work alone all Wednesday as well.

All Wednesday the dramatist sat in the hall rewriting, while Barbara worked as critical reader and sparring partner. In this process the breaks started to have a new and improved function in the text, in the sense that they were now clearly part of story of the play. They were not just “breaks for the sake of breaking”, but had suddenly become important elements in the behaviour of the characters and the progression of story.

Thursday morning we began by reading through the “new” manuscript. This morning we had thrown an extra joker into the room, in the sense that the future director and producer of the play Anders Lundorff was also present. Conversation was certainly marked by that fact, because directors do like to talk... None the less it was nice to get a second opinion on things. Then we went on define more closely the three time based layers of fiction in the text, which had become a little unclear due to the large scale rewriting of the play (more information regarding these layers in the section about the distribution of roles).

Unfortunately we did not get onto the floor this day either, but under the order: “it really is better that it’ll be a good play”, we pushed on. The conclusion of Thursday’s efforts was that the dramatist should try to make the final adjustments so that the text would “look more finished” Friday morning.

Friday morning we started with a more intimate reading than the previous ones. After which it was clear that the textual mission had been accomplished. The text seemed whole. Thus the layers of fiction, perhaps not least in the mind of the dramatist, had been clarified and suddenly served the purpose of the text. Likewise it was clear that what we had previously referred to as breaks in fiction had now taken on the character of supportive elements in the text, enabling us to tell the audience more about the two characters on stage. So it had become a play where the actual characters were revealed by jumps in fiction rather than actual breaks in fiction.

Unfortunately we were quite the chatty group, and this day, like the other days, ended without our getting to the floor. Partly because the dramatist, who was himself one of the actors, was knackered but also because what the text had been needing, since we turned up Monday, was not to be tried on the floor, but rather to sort itself out. So we ended Friday without having been on the floor, but on the other hand with an incredible gut feeling – the play had been improved.

About the Dramatist

Going through the week above I have slid rather lightly over the fact that this production is dealing with a fairly new dramatist. Troels is a passionate, moving and fantastic actor who wants to say something as an artist. Thus it seemed right that he should write this play. But Troels is also quite “green” as a dramatist. He has only written one play prior to this one: the monolog “Sover godt om natten” (Theatre Poland, Plan B, 2004). So he has not received any official schooling, giving him the tools to work with the text, given that it is his own.

Therefore the purpose, the artistic expression and playing with the words had a way of taking over when writing down the ideas. During our stay at The Laboratory Troels would frequently ask: “What do I mean here?” or “Does this work?”. In my work with other dramatists, these questions are not exactly the ones asked the most; on the contrary. Many are too busy thinking something all the time, and thus forget to leave room in the text to be filled up by the actors, the director and not least the audience. Troels’ problem is the opposite. Han is afraid to dominate the text and so he leaves several things unaddressed.

The problem occurs when in a situation much like the one he experienced at The Laboratory. Here he was immediately confronted with his own text, as he and Pil performed readings of it. The distance and unwillingness to act as a dictator towards the text that Troels has as a dramatist, he in no way suffers from as an actor. Like most actors, Troels has a great need to understand the role he is playing. The empty spaces he left in the text became his own worry, because he was unable to decode the thoughts of the dramatist; strange as it may seem since he was the dramatist. But this is also simply a question of being human.



About the Distribution of Roles

The fact that Pil was also in The Laboratory had an additional effect in provoking Troels to doubt in his own text, seeing that she asked the questions that she would normally ask: "What does she mean here?" and "Why does she do that?". Troels' problem was that he was unable to answer. So a great deal of questions were directed at me, although my primary job in The Laboratory was to document how the work progressed. This meant that I often had the role of the one who would try to get Troels back to the thoughts he had had, while wearing his "dramatists hat", when we left Copenhagen. But Troels, perhaps understandably, shifted between one hat instead of the other and that made the discussions rather futile from time to time.

Thus it seemed only natural that Barbara stepped in and ordered a rewriting of the play and a basic choice. Actually the choice had already been made, but doubt came creeping up, when Troels was forced onto the floor with the text. Furthermore this doubt would prove to be our biggest problem in this production.

Barbara's role was as such obvious. The text, I think, as she saw it, was "ill". The dramatist was unable to argue the choices he had made and was furthermore the one who questioned the text. So something had to be done. Barbara's strategy was to try to sort out these breaks.

Conversation in this phase evolved around sorting out the breaks that were in the text. In short the story is about a man and a woman that meet in an airport, fall in love with each other and experience many funny stories and situations. However she rejects him, perhaps because she has a husband and a daughter, or maybe just because she is unable to risk everything and invest in an all-embracing relationship. That is the basic story.

From the beginning however we had been working with this here-and-now experience that you normally expect in a theatre, in that it was to be broken, by way of introducing different breaks in the text and play. So we agreed to break the here-and-now by having the roles comment on what they had just played. Thus the story was that the two characters on stage had experienced what they had played a minute ago, but that they, due to the woman's unwillingness to start an actual relationship, were now merely re-enacting the course of their falling in love, so that they could at least hold on to that. Actually the basic idea was that when we meet

the characters in the text they already know the play and the text so well that they could perform it in their sleep. The story of their falling in love has become the skeleton of the real reason why they have come back: to see each other and confront each other.

Our problem was, that a kind of doubt had slipped into Troels' and Pil's minds with regard to these here-and-now situations. They are both schooled in the arts of the "traditional" theatre (Theatrical School at Århus Theatre) and have as such been raised on the dogma that "theatre is here and now". Through this the closeness and the total identification becomes the ultimate yet fleeting goal. But when you introduce breaks into a text that aims towards breaking with this closeness, doubting it becomes very easy indeed.

Furthermore we worked with two different kinds of breaks: old and new. Old refers to the two characters on stage playing through their falling in love and their stepping out of that closeness to comment on the situation. New refers to the only total closeness we have in the text; namely that the characters while playing through their story step out of the story and realize new things. For instance the male character in the play suddenly finds out that the female character maybe does not have a husband after all, and that she might not have a terminal illness either, which she has told him to keep him at a distance. This playing with the closeness was a big problem for us already during our stay.

When the director of the play Anders Lundorff stopped by it was this problem in the text that he first noticed. "What is the situation here and now?", "What is the conflict here and now?" are just some of the questions he asked. In this situation Anders probably addressed Troels as a dramatist, but unfortunately Troels was mostly wearing his "actor's hat" and was unable to answer, which meant that others had to step in. Sadly we did not explain the basic situation properly to Anders, who focused a great deal on "the broken closeness" which became a fundamental problem for us in the production phase, which I will comment on in the following passage.



Crisis in the Production Phase

This “refusal of closeness” that we had introduced into the text as a basic element, became our Achilles’ heel in the actual production phase. The director and the actors took to the rehearsal floor in December and rehearsed the play until mid January, where a veritable breakdown occurred.

I was called up one night by Troels who said that it had been decided to rewrite the play. My first reaction was anger, since I as a dramaturge had not been consulted in this matter or in the rehearsal process at all. Following this was a great disappointment in this new product that they wished to write. The goal of this rewriting was to create a here-and-now situation that was less complicated and more easily understood. They had simply given up on the material. The actors could not make the acting work and the director did not know the text well enough to explain to them the three different layers of time in it. Therefore Troels was often the one at whom questions were directed, and as I have already touched upon, that is not a very fruitful situation in which to put an actor. Anders had become the worst director imaginable, seeing that Troels is the ultimate sceptic. He and Pil needed a director who had no doubts, but got the opposite.

The new text that despite my protests was chosen as the final text was different from the old one in that there was now only one break to worry about. The story is once more that we see two people perform the story of how they fall in love, but unlike previously they are now doing it for the first time. Although this makes the text more easily seen through, much of the pain and the layer of tragedy that was present in the original text has been lost, leaving the situation not nearly as desperate and grotesque as the original. Thus the performance has lost the fundamental tragedy it had.

On the other hand the end product had a more fluent feel to it. All in all as a theatre we were satisfied with the product, although we certainly do not agree on how to get there.

Conclusion

Looking at the week in general, I think it is safe to say that the operation failed, but the patient survived. By this I mean that we came in with a play that we had been looking forward to experimenting with on the floor, but unfortunately it became very clear after the first reading that the text was not at all ready for this yet. So we changed lanes and worked in a more concentrated fashion with the text.

Obviously you could have tried the new textual elements on the floor at the same time as they were written. But here our project had the downside that our dramatist was also one of the actors. So he would probably have a hard time hiding his own doubts as a dramatist in a potential attempt as an actor.

As a theatre we are extremely pleased with having been given the opportunity to dedicate an entire week to a project that was very dear to us. The Laboratory gave us that opportunity and for that we are deeply grateful. Our product was improved considerably during the week we spent at Entré Scenen, and that is what we came for.

On behalf of Theatre Poland I would thus like to thank The Laboratory and especially Barbara Simonsen for the splendid cooperation and for giving us the opportunity.