

Report by Orit Nahmias and Isabelle Reynaud

## **MOTHERS and DAUGHTERS MEMORIES**

Documentary Theater Experiment

LABORATORIET at BoraBora Dance and Visual Theatre  
4 – 13 October 2012, Aarhus, Denmark

**WHAT:** “Mothers and Daughters Memories” is a Danish - Israeli performing arts experiment exploring whether documentary theatre is more 'trustworthy' because it is based on memories, and whether the claim "memories are objective truth" is reliable. We wanted to test the credibility and the 'validity of truth" of memories in different experimental setups where mothers and daughters separately recalls/remembers joint significant episodes. Afterwards the joint memories were studied in order to identify their credibility regarding time, place, gallery of characters and emotions.

Another purpose of the experiment was to explore what happens to a memory when it's being told again and again or by someone else. Why do we need to tell our memories and what part do memories have in our relationships with our mother/daughters?

**WHY:** We wanted to investigate documentary theatre, and thought that mothers and daughter´s relationship and shared memory would be a perfect ground to examine the topic. The starting point of the project was that a mother daughter relationship is based on a shared past, memories, by bringing up memories and share them with other people we wanted to understand the base of this relationship.

**HOW:** For 10 days actresses and there real mother are sharing real life memories. The participants was asked to tell a memory where both were present. Afterwards we would discuss the memory we choose to tell and how we tell it, then we would hear the story from the mother/daughter point of view and then we would focus on the differences between the narratives. We would then repeat the memories we heard and would try to learn more of how we tell a story, somebody else's memory, we were curious of what happens to a story when it's being told again and again.

### **THE PARTICIPANTS:**

The participants are Danish and Israelis mothers and daughters, a fact that in the first days proved to have a mutual positive effect on one another. The important part of casting the participants was to look for actresses and mostly mothers that are willing to take part in a theatrical experiment, something that is not part of their life. Also to look for couples who are willing to share personal private family memories.

<i>ISABELLE REYNAUD</i>	Stage director and project manager
<i>GITTE SKYTTE</i>	Dramaturg
<i>GITTE KIELBERG</i>	Danish actress and her mother <i>MARGOT KIELBERG</i>
<i>AYELET ROBINSON</i>	Israeli actress and her mother <i>ESTER ROBINSON</i>
<i>ORIT NAHMIA</i>	Israeli actress and her mother <i>GALIA NAHMIA</i>
<i>DANA RUTHENBERG</i>	Israeli dancer, her mother <i>JUDITH</i> passed away in 2001
<i>STEFFEN JOST PEDERSEN</i>	video documentation

The first thing was to cast a group of mothers and daughters that were willing to share their personal memories as honest as possible without it being a therapy session, where a very thin line separate between the two.

Artists by nature are story tellers, artist uses their real life experiences to make their art, and therefor in this experiment it was crucial to have non-actor participants. The fact that our group is build by Israelis and Danish was almost a coincidence, but a blessing one.

At an early stage of the experiment we all realized that the cultural differences had a positive influence on the process: The Israeli direct way of saying things out in the open was a good an essential for the progress of the experiment and the Israeli participants were very impressed and influenced by the Danish gentle ways of saying things, with a lot of respect to one another.

**WORK PROCESS:** every day the participants got a mission for the next day, the missions were to tell a memory that both mother and daughter were present, but don't discuss it with your mother/daughter, that shade a new light on the other person, or a memory that was very funny or embarrassing or a memory of a quarrel. We would tell the story to everyone but the mother/ daughter would wait outside and come in to the room only when the mother/daughter finish, then Isabelle, that conducted the experiment would help the participant remember the memory without giving too many details. The experiment was all filmed by two cameras, the cameras and the other participants were serving as witness to one another.

### **DEAD BIRD** *memory of Galia and Orit Nahmias*

#### **Galia's version of the memory:**

Galia told the memory about the birds that Orit had when she was a child. Orit really loved those birds. She would even call her father to ask him about them, when she was not at home. Then one day one of the birds dies. And Galia and the father decided to get another bird that looks exactly the same, before Orit comes home, in order to hide the fact that the bird died. Galia pointed out, that the idea was of the father and she only agreed. When Orit came home, she immediately sees that it is not her bird and she gets very angry. She asks what has happened to her bird and they have to tell her, that it died and they had buried it in the garden. She then for a long period of time puts flowers on the grave every day.

#### **Orit's version of the memory:**

Orit remembers this situation very well and blames her mother for the Idea even to think of hiding the fact of the death for her. She remembers clearly coming home and finding that this was not her bird, asking her parents: This is not my bird! What happened to my bird? But she totally don't remember putting flowers on the grave, she thinks Galia made this detail up.

#### **What we have noticed and learned:**

Although this story happened many years ago, when telling the story Orit gets emotional.

When telling a memory Orit talks about her mother in a third person, on the theatrical situation it can be very power full.

They both told their memory from the point of view as they experienced it, and not from today perspective.

Memories seem more truthful to the observer if the person telling the memory is emotional when telling the memory and can tell the memory in details. but can you trust the details?

In this memory there were no big differences in details, so for us spectators there was no question: who do we believe, and why? But Orit and Galia did negotiate on the details.

Even when the details are similar the point of view and the motivation are deferent, then what we think. Our personal interpretation in integrated in the memory.

a memory feels like a property, it's part of our identity, part of our history and the person telling the memory may feel the need to protect the memory, to save it from distinction, to hold on to details.

How do you make an audience care so much about the truth? How do we convince the audience that something really happened?

There is a reoccurring theme of power struggle in the memories, it happens when one feels his memory is being questioned, when being confronted with another version of the memory. When we start to doubt our own memory, when we can't trust our own memory the observer tend to doubt the memory teller. In theater this is extremely important to have the audience on your side, to convince the spectators of your point of view.

On stage, the person telling the memory represents different objectives for the people watching and observing the memory. For example A mother is "a mother" on stage and the mother often identified with the "mother" role.

There are different ways of telling a memory, using your physic, emotions, humor etc.

### **QUESTIONS** *that were brought up:*

- Can a memory be a fiction stemming from the unspoken issues in a family?
- Do we make up memories that fit our family narrative?
- What do we choose to remember?
- Do we remember things that fit our images of ourselves, of our family relationships?
- Is it possible we make memories up that have a symbolic value for us?

### **YOU GOT SO SMALL, memory of Gitte and Margot Kielberg**

#### **Gitte's version of the memory:**

Gitte was telling the story when her mother Margot came to visit her and her husband (which she had strong opinion on him) in France. Gitte had a new baby and she was very skinny. When Margot came in, after months they didn't see each other, she said to Gitte, "You got so small". Although they emphasize on different details while telling the memory they both understood that Margot didn't mean that Gitte is small only physically.

**In Margot's version of the memory** she was emphasizing on the weather, the nature, the mushrooms she saw on the way, the view, while Gitte was telling more about the relations with her husband.

**QUESTIONS** *that were brought up:*

- Do we remember by smell, by sound, by the feeling of fabric or by imagining the pictures in our mind?
- How do we tell a memory?
- What do we want our audience to hear, to feel?
- How differently we tell one story?

**RETELLING**

*All the participants are retelling the same memory. What did we noticed and what did we learned:*

We tell a story according to the way we look at the world, each person according to its own point of view, importance and character.

When retelling to story we tend to interpret meanings of words of somebody else. We make some changes, not only because we remember different things, if some details don't seem reasonable to us we change them so they will make sense to us.

We retell the story and emphasizing on the things that we identify with, we choose which side are we on, the moment we start to tell a story we define a narrative.

We usually color the story with our own mother/daughter roles and personal feelings and relations we experienced.

When repeating someone else's memory we often retell the story with respect and at the same time we interoperate or judge the situation and commented on the motives, trying to explain why somebody acted as he did.

The significant thing was that we all remember the catch line of the story, what was said and what was felt. We mix the details but we never forget the emotions in the story or the phrases that were hurtful, or the deeds that were done. We remember the dramatic move.

By telling the same story over and over again, told by different people with different elements/ aspects / intensions we get closer to the truth.

Documentary theater is maybe a junction point of reality and fiction.

Documentary is the search of finding out the reality of the story.

**QUESTIONS** *that were brought up:*

- What happens to a story when it's being told again and again?
- What does it feels like to hear your own memory being told by someone else?
- What is the role of the witness listening to a story?
- And what do we want from a witness when we share a private memory?
- Is the truth really that interesting?

- And how do we stay truthful to the memory and at the same time tell a good story?
- Where do we draw a line between fiction and real life memory?
- How do we define documentary?

## **RESULT**

For ten days the LABORATORIET has researched on the question; are memories objective truth and reflect reality?

We have established the fact that memories are often nothing more than fiction. We adapt our memories to fit into our biography. ERGO Documentary Theatre based on personal memories is no more "real" and "true" than fiction.

## **FUTURE PRODUCTION**

Due to the fascinating experience we all had in "Mothers and Daughters Memories" project, we have decided to create a Documentary Theater performance based on the memories we heard and the experienced we had. Mothers and Daughters witnessing the life of one another, remembering parts the other seemed to have forgotten.