

Drama in Social Experimentation

by BENT BLINDBAEK

Aarhus Theater Academy was started in the fall of 1979. According to the statutes, its purpose reads as follows, "The work of Aarhus Theater Academy shall include initiatives for alternative theater and other cultural activity, through educational and theatrical endeavours. The ATA shall work to make theater and culture a comprehensive part of the reality of the individual and thus make it not just a descriptive art, but also an active creative factor in the further development of society."

When, in the following, I avoid the use of the word "drama", employing instead the word "theater", it is due to the fact that in Danish the term "drama" is used about theatrical activities focusing exclusively on the process. We do not wish to work solely with the process, we do not wish to use the art as a therapy, we want to use it to create results, to create theater, to create art.

We go many thousand years back in history, to a cave somewhere in France. After the hunt, and after having devoured the prey, the hunters jump to their feet. One takes the hide of the animal over him and mimes the great oxen. The others take sticks and bones, and using them as spears they enact the entire hunt with a dramatic emphasis on the dangerous climaxes. For the audience, it is an expansion of story telling. Actually, the theater may have existed long before language came into being. An immediate technique of story telling through mime and action. Here, theater is a familiar part of daily life. The traditions of the hunt is passed on and expanded for the benefit of the entire tribe.

The same form of original theatrical development is witnessed every day through the plays of children. Through role-playing, where they adopt the roles of father, mother, brothers and sisters, teachers etc., they act through the happenings and the problems of everyday life. It becomes a form of coping with problems and passing of experience. For some, it becomes a means for the development of methods of survival in the face of the oppression they are subjected to by each other, by parents, by the school. Thus, the

theater is a fundamental part of our lives – and at the same time, this is not so any longer.

During the middle ages we meet around Europe several *Commedia del'arte* troupes with a large popular audience. The sympathies of the troupes are for their audiences, and they become spokesmen for the criticism of the ruling classes. The criticism becomes so strong that those in power forbid them to speak when they give their performances. But being artists they develop their mimic aptitudes, and soon through their bodies and actions they express the same criticism, and with even greater appeal to the audiences.

In 1769 in England, Philip Astley starts the first circus, as we understand the term today. It soon becomes so popular that the public prefers it to the existing theater. The authorities react with a ban on all other acting than that which takes place on horseback. Then Astley built a stage placed on top of the backs of 16 horses, and having fulfilled the demands of the authorities, he could again show clown acts and circus artists.

In Denmark, too, we had black spots regarding the free artistic expression inside theatrical life. From 1892 right up to 1954 there was official censorship of theaters in Denmark. Although clearly inconsistent with the constitution, lines or even whole plays were forbidden because the content did not correspond to what the authorities wished to see presented. Until the mid 60's everybody wanting to perform in public had to have a license from the state. In that way there could be a pleasant control as to who were sufficiently "artistic" to be allowed to perform for the public.

About twenty years ago, a "Ministry of Culture" was established in Denmark, and by adopting the support policy of the patrons of earlier days, the Ministry can be run for ridiculously small expenses. The state spends less than 1% of its budget on art and culture. Since on top of that, the Ministry generally does not employ artistic criteria for the distribution of support, but rather empirical measurements such as percentage of houses sold or numerical magics like budget tricks, then artistic performance has become confined to fixed and square boxes, offering bad conditions for creativity, imagination, attitudes, and novel forms of expression. Theaters depending on state support (and most are) subject themselves out of sheer distress. Like other producers, they try to sell their products using advertisements, paint-boxes, emptiness, smart designs, discounts, and special offers. All tricks are tried to reach the high box office figures. Quality is sacrificed on the altar of quantity. "Theater as an active factor in the further development of society" or "theater as an active participant in the solution of the problems of society" – those are sentences which might as well be Chinese. Through high box office percentages the desired economic means are secured to carry the daily

operations, and the yielders of support have reached almost full control of the artistic expression. In that situation, one may rejoice in the fact that only 16-17% of the adult population are theater goers.

Reality is completely different. Given the unemployment and a future decrease of working hours we have all opportunities to have not only experts or professionals perform the arts. We have the opportunity of all becoming artists, and it is necessary to awaken and liberate the artistic possibilities inside each of us.

“Of the people” means speaking the language of the people and enriching it, expressing the emotions and dreams of the people and giving form and consciousness to them, demonstrating the reality of the people and working on the improvement of it.

In Aarhus Theater Academy, we have tried to create a structure which offers suggestions for the solution of these problems. Since we started in 1979, the development has been much more rapid than we would have believed then. We are now in the midst of a process, and I shall try to extract a few conclusions. One of the reasons for our success is, I believe, the fact that with strict consequence we mix such forms as could be termed popular theater – buffoonery, clowning, circus, commedia etc. – with experimental forms, e.g. body theater based on Grotowski and the principles of the Odin Theater. We mix these four elements, and in the crossroads between these poles the new things happen, as each individual part inspires the others with its particular attitude and method of work. There is no tradition in Denmark for a genuine co-operation between amateurs and professionals, so the major part of our instructors are brought in from abroad. Each of these is an expert in one particular field, and thus much new inspiration is brought to bear on the artistic development in Denmark.

Our tools in the daily work are, work-shops and seminars, performances (own or guests), advisory activity, and information. Our work can be described by the image of a line where we start by the impulses. They are seminars, work-shops, and performances. Our seminars vary between courses of 20 lessons distributed over several weeks to intensive projects with instructions 8 hours a day for up to 8 months. The performances are in the first place our guest performances in which we primarily introduce visiting theatrical groups – often in connection with work-shops given by the groups. Until now we have arranged more than 100 guest plays at Aarhus – something which has made itself felt in the local theater environment.

These impulses lead to the activities, work-shops and performances which in their turn lead to the results, productions, establishment of new theater groups, projects etc. Information about these things – books, films, theater

newspaper, video – and the advisory activity continue on into new impulses, and thus the effect is spread in larger circles.

At the present moment there are more than 50 theater groups at Aarhus, and app. 10 of them have grown directly out of the work of ATA. These groups engage several hundred people. Many of them are unemployed, and through the theater groups they have structured their daily life and are using their resources in a constructive way instead of just sitting around inactive waiting for a job which does not come. The major part of the group are working 8 hours a day – indeed they spend a whole working day on the creation of performances that all the rest of us can enjoy. Let us give to all the unemployed the opportunity to “make fools of themselves” in the positive sense of those words; let them develop as artistic individuals instead of becoming dull through drilling them in mindless mechanical working processes. This could become a beautiful society in which, among others, the theater could flourish everywhere. We just have to make up the accounts with attitudes and ideas of the theater as something which can only happen at a theater hall where you have to pay to get in. Let the theater become an active and creative factor in the further development of society.

“... the task of art is to create new values. I contend and I shall maintain that the stage should not so much borrow from life as life from the stage ...”

Oscar Wilde

The work of ATA is directed towards unemployed people such as described, but beyond that we want to give examples of the ability of the theater for expanding the possibilities for expression, as well as how the theater may become part of the social reality.

Many people participating actively in our democracy through parties, movements, and grassroot work tend to use very traditional and sometimes old fashioned forms of activity and methods of information. This often gives the impression of being poor in expressive power, and so the use of art – pictures, theater, music etc. – might create a different dimension in the work. It has always been the task of art to participate in the development of society – critically and as a source of innovation. A picture such as Picasso’s “Guer-nica”, I believe, expressed and described more than many written reports the horrors and inhumanity of war and made people understand the insanity which has to be stopped.

In 1982 we made the project, “Theater for Peace” for which we invited 50 people from 20 different cities of Denmark. Each of them was to represent a

theater group or a peace action group of their home town to whom they could return and pass on their experiences. The project lasted for 2 weeks during which they created, together with the theater group “Earth Circus” from Sweden and 30 students of the academy, a great street theater performance with app. 100 actors. After the performance at Aarhus they returned to their groups, and in the course of 2 months this performance – adapted to local conditions – was created in those 20 cities so that it could be played simultaneously on the same day at the same hour over most of Denmark. Beyond giving an immediate impulse to the peace groups to use the art in their work, it meant the foundation of peace theater groups in several cities, existing still today. The performance of 82 was attended, by the way, by somewhere between 12000 and 15000 people. This was a way of organising the theater’s recovery of its roots.

In 1983 we made a project which we called “the theater in the society.” The project lasted for 5 weeks and was carried out once again in co-operation with “Earth Circus”. 65 social and cultural workers from all over Denmark were participants of the project. Through this composition of participants we wanted to create a dialogue and a co-operation between social workers and cultural workers. We wanted the artists to go out and work together with their audiences; share their experiences, give up the one way communication, and get a direct reaction on their work from the audience. We wanted the artists to get, thereby, a social dimension into their work.

We wanted the social workers to achieve through cultural activities, a different type of contact with their “audiences”, to learn common action towards the solution of problems instead of just treatments through supervised distribution of money. The use of the theater in its broadest meaning as a basic popular form incorporates a very strong social effect. When one is going to make theater, one has to be several people together. Thereby one is breaking out of the isolation, and together with others, one can start solving the problems one cannot solve alone. We did not want to create a new social therapy – unfortunately, a sufficient number of those exist in advance – but we wanted to show some goal-directed activities which might in their turn make other people use the art and the culture in an active way. The project started with a two week seminar during which the participants learned basic theater activities and at the same time began planning the following period together with inhabitants of 3 different housing developments in Aarhus. The following 2 weeks’ work took place in groups inside these 3 housing developments, and together with the local inhabitants, workshops were created for big and small, parades, café-evenings, performances, courtyard parties etc. etc. – A very active and inspiring period encompassing a total of 65 activities inside the 3 housing developments. The last week was spent evaluating the

experiences. In the areas, local groups were started to spread ideas of the use of culture in the local community.

Through the project, the idea was born of taking over an empty theater hall in one of the areas. A perfect theater with a maximum of 400 seats, used during late years only for rehearsals for the local opera and symphony orchestra. After a year's negotiations with the local authorities, this theater has now, since the summer of 1984, been placed at our disposal for a 3 year experimental period and with an annual support of 1 mill. kr.

As mentioned earlier, the theater has been unknown country for the local population for many years, and our aim is to make the theater function locally as a house of culture. This housing area is traditionally known as poor in culture. But that is according to the bourgeois measurement stick for what is culture and art. There is a tremendous amount of activities all around, many new beginnings, and in co-operation with them it is our task to try and show new roads for culture and art in such a local community. First of all, we shall try to make people use the theater – dare to come. We want to assist in the use of the theater as a local house of culture with all kinds of different arrangements for all age groups. We are going to arrange guest performances of theater groups and bands – indeed our aim is that the theater be used every day.

Moreover, we shall let the theater circulate in the area and participate in local activities in different ways. Actors as well as the concept of theatre must be demystified, and a co-operation must be created. Our performances will be predominantly created in close co-operation with local groups, around problems which they feel are important. We shall try to place the local problems in a broader context, thereby giving the performances a broader range than the confinement to the local outlook.

Our first performance will be a play about the problems of young Turkish immigrants in their relationship with young Danes, the cultural confrontations, and the problems of being, as an immigrant, divided between two countries. The actors will be young local immigrants and Danes to whom we attach professional instructors, so they learn elementary acting skills. Furthermore, we employ a Turkish and a Danish playwright and a professional director. In this production, we shall try to develop the experiences of our first five years to be used in a goal-directed production.

“Imagination is more important than knowledge.”

Einstein

“Try something new – think for yourself.”

Grafitti

What are the prerequisites for creating an artistic society, based on the people?

We must have more time for artistic activity in our educations, and must not just concentrate on adaptive training and intellectual skills. The artistic level of our schools is very low and is growing constantly lower. Artistic activities will help people to react inside society in new ways, participating not only intellectually but creatively in the democratic process. That will give us new and unknown opportunities for the future. Besides, people will be in the best position to fight commercial entertainment. I do not believe that people are so stupid that they will spend time on soap operas when they are artistically active themselves. They will achieve identity.

We must break the barriers inside popular conceptions of the role of amateurs and professionals in art. Such barriers serve only commercial interests, and not art in the broad sense. Cultural support is in many ways rather a support for professional employment than for artistic activity and might as such be better placed in the hands of the Ministry of Industry.

We must demand more money for art and culture. Let us begin by doubling, and let those who receive support now keep it. When they see what can be done with a different kind of cultural activity, they will start spending the money in a better way. But in order for added means for art and culture to be rightly used, other principles of distribution must be employed. The administration of cultural support must have an artistic format. Legislation limiting support for artistic activity is contrary to fundamental aspects of the artistic process. "Square" legislation transforms the Ministry of Culture into an office of administration of fixed budget allocations. A passive administration will give too favourable conditions for commercial entertainment to dull the population. Politicians must understand that they are actively contributing to the dullness by strictly ruling cultural support as they have done until now. With a free artistic expression, it may become more difficult to be a professional politician, but conditions for democracy will improve.

Without the arts we shall have no people. What is the use of the war machinery of all nations when people die from lack of art and culture. If art is not supported, we shall soon reach a situation of not having anything to defend.