

WHAT DOES IT HAVE TO DO WITH ME?

Interview with René Pollesch

Mariana Simoni

How do you think it would be possible to talk about your work without reproducing the same structures or hierarchies that you criticize? That is to say, without denying your basic premises? I thought perhaps an interview would be a good point of departure because it is in line with the idea of talking *with* somebody and not *in the name of* somebody, an idea that you always refer to as being very important in your work. So could we start by approaching how your way of working deals with these hierarchies?

There isn't a Pollesch style or method. We try to use "big" content that says something to the audience and we try to develop a form that is a vehicle for theatre. Normally, I say that we don't produce "literature", since it's not the way we think about the texts we use on stage. Because normally, theatre in Germany is very literature orientated. But that isn't how we do things. Our plays or evenings are full of texts but not in the form of literature, not in the form of a *partitura*. They are not texts that enslave us all to them. Texts are normally at the top of the pyramid of hierarchy and actors are chosen because of the *partitura*: three men, two women, and the actor, like the director, is also a slave to the *partitura*. We try to move away from this, so I don't write texts that say "three men, two women". We just try to find a group of people who want to do the next evening with me and then I write a text for them. So we develop some strategies to subvert the term "literature". I don't write because I want to fit in to the concept of literature. When I write I'm not a slave to the concept of literature, I talk to the people I work with and try to have theories that I apply to my day-to-day life, not just because of theatre. I use Giorgio Agamben in my life, I use Boris Groys in my life. The hope is that my texts, which are generated by these theories, mean something to the actors. If they don't, if they have no meaning for the actors, they aren't used. So my idea isn't to force the actors to say a line but rather to give them the choice of saying a line that evening or not. If the actor does decide to say the line, then he or she should know *how* to say it and if not, we reject the sentence because it's not about adhering to some kind of discipline. The text should not restrict those who have to work with it. This is how we try to produce texts.

Are the texts fixed?

The text is not fixed until the end of rehearsals. When my publisher and someone else suggested publishing the texts, at first I was against the idea because I felt it could lead people to regard them as literature once again. However, so many people wanted to read the texts after seeing a show that I agreed to publish the book.

By publishing your texts, they become accessible to everyone who is interested in your work. At the same time we know that they are very deeply connected with the way they are produced, that is to say, with the rehearsals, with the actors and so on. Besides being read and discussed, do you see another possibility for them? What do you think could be done with them?

Nothing. Nobody can do anything with the texts. It is forbidden to...

Apart from the legal aspect, do you believe in a “performatic” use of them in the same sense that you use theory on the stage?

What do you mean by “performatic”? On the stage?

Yes.

If you read the text, you use it. The actors in our shows and performances use it. But there are a lot of misunderstandings about drama and my texts, so I don't want other people to perform them on stage because most of time there are misunderstandings, I guess. Theories exist that can be used by every single one of us. People think about something and they can use theories to think further, to see clearly. We use Donna Haraway's theories to see clearly and people should use her work and Giorgio Agamben's. My texts have no use to people because they were intended to be used by specific actors for our shows.

The way you bring theories onto the stage without renouncing verbal language, the way you compose those theoretical fragments, piece them together, the place you select for them in your texts all point to a particular viewpoint or perspective. So, what if someone takes *your* perspective in order to see clearly?

Yes, then they can use them. But not in the theatre.

So, where?

I don't know, wherever they like, but not in the theatre. Because creating theatre is a job, people earn a living from it. In German theatre, the actors are used to bringing to the stage texts that have nothing to do with them. For us, however, our texts mean a lot because when we create a text we try to say something. I have nothing to do with repertoire theatre that is used to produce theatre like a factory... I don't understand the methods of other types of theatre. They are used to a method where the text comes first, then the director and then the actors. So, I don't consider the normal theatre methods to be very serious. I don't like them and I don't want to be a part of them.

Can you explain more specifically how your texts are produced?

I'm always producing texts, all the time. Anything can generate a text, when I read something, see something, live something... My whole life generates texts. And if we plan to perform a show with a group of people, I bring to rehearsal the texts I have written up to then and try to find out if anyone is interested in them. Then we talk about the theory in them, the sentences, the parts of the texts and then I see clearly what is interesting to the actors, what we should do together. Then I write again, eliminating and replacing fragments. This is the process used during rehearsals and the result is a text that everyone involved wants to say. I don't force anyone to say anything. They decide, “This is what I want to say on stage”. They don't have to be actors anymore who have to find something to say about a text that has nothing to do with them. Normally actors have a text and they ask, “How do I perform it?”, “Maybe I'll do this, maybe I'll do that”. But this isn't how we work. In the end we have a text and no one asks “Why should I say it?”, “What is it?” “How should I do it?”, because the actors just want to say it. And this is what we try to do, what we bring to the stage. In *Ein Chorr irrt sich gewaltig* we try to discover something about theatre from a hundred years ago, the French comedies are a good vehicle for theatre but then actors don't ask themselves: “How do I perform my sentence?”. We often see films and if the group likes the film then we'll try to work with it on stage and develop the text from there.

First we try to find out what we want to say and the aesthetics are a luxury. What you see on stage is fun for us to do, we do things we like, things that entertain people and bring theatre to them. On stage you can't just sit there and talk and talk, it's not very interesting, you have to move around, do something. We try to do things that are very theatrical, bringing it together with the text.

Do you think that your plays can be understood on a bodily level?

Some people have an intellectual experience, others have a theatrical experience and are entertained. I don't know what percentage have an intellectual experience as opposed to an entertainment experience. I don't know, we try to do both. We try to create theatre that people are not bored by, and we try to do theatre that is not two hundred years old, as is normally the case in German theatre. There is a vast repertoire of two-hundred year old plays filled with philosophy. We should introduce new philosophers like Giorgio Agamben or Donna Haraway into theatre. That's our aim.

To what extent do you consider your education in Giessen as an important factor in the construction of this frame for your process of working? What would you say would distinguish Giessen from other schools of theatre in Germany?

It's a very important factor. My training has taught me that the text does not come first in theatre. Normally, when you study theatre science, you study Germanics and you study literature. My studies focused more on directors and on set design. Our Institute was here, and over there was the University where you could study German, Romance and Slavic languages and literature. In our Institute the most important paradigm is not a text orientated theatre. I was very much influenced by the Institute because it's not normal to study theatre without text, without literature, and my teachers were like that. When we studied, we read philosophers and not plays. We read Foucault, we read Derrida and Deleuze, not Goethe, Schiller and so on.

As far as other groups that also came from Giessen, such as Rimini Protokoll, She She Pop, Gob Squad, Showcase Beat Le Mot, And Company, do you feel yourself in synch with them?

Yes, much more than with the others. We come from the same school. We don't have the same way of thinking about theatre but a similar one, they are closer to me, I guess. I'm not as close to directors who do a text orientated *mise-en-scène*. I don't know what it is and I don't get it.

Finally, in many interviews you have stressed that in your plays there are no characters, in the sense that the actors don't differentiate themselves from each other by crystallizing a fixed identity in any way connected with their lives. But at the same time you admit that your plays are not explicitly autobiographical to you or the actors. So who are those subjectivities on stage, who the public would argue are very good actors?

Our plays are about subjectivity, this is one of the themes, the content of our theatre is subjectivity. Like Foucault asked: "What is the subject?". Is the subject a slave that doesn't know its place? We don't do texts that state clearly: "This is a female subjectivity, this is a male subjectivity. You play the female, I play the male subjectivity". We ask ourselves what it is within us that makes us think, "This is me". This is what Foucault asks: "What makes us think that what we think about ourselves is the truth?". The subjectivity in which we think is maybe so old that we can't use it anymore in our present. We try to form and find new forms of subjectivity, we try to throw away the subjectivity that says: "This is me, I'm a man, I'm this, I'm gay and you're a woman and you're that". It's too old for us, we don't use it anymore, we no longer think that it's a good method because the term "character" is very bourgeois and close to the bourgeois term "subject". For instance, an actor comes on stage and it's not the body of the actor who comes on stage it's Hedda Gabler or it's Hamlet. The subject that is transcendent has more worth than the body of the actor. That is what we have talked about now in the play we have just rehearsed. So we can say that it is the subjectivity of the actor that is more important for us. Sophie Rois is not Sophie Rois on stage, she is an actress who can say something to us. You just try to reflect what is normally divided between the body of the actor and the subject of the character.

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