

# LABORATORIET



## What's the difference?

by Isabelle Reynaud  
and Jens Christian Lauenstein Led

Experiment 3:  
Political Drama in a European Perspective



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

**June 2006**

**What**

- *The purpose of the experiment was to examine and compare the political theatre of France, Germany and Denmark*
- *Focus was directed at political theatre initiated by an auteur; being either a director who writes dramatic texts, or a dramatist who stages his own texts*
- *A secondary goal of the experiment was to create the possibility for politically committed stage artist to exchange ideas, and to invite a selection of Danish stage artists for a discussion of political theatre and to make them aware of, and allow them to benefit from, the work of the Laboratory*

**Why**

- *To examine the differences and similarities of the way in which these three countries produce political theatre*
- *To examine methods of text production where the author is up close with the practical work of theatre; in as much as he (she) does so himself (herself)*
- *To qualify and inspire politically committed theatre in Denmark, based on the assumption that political theatre in France and Germany has different functions and aesthetics, and that exchanging ideas would be beneficial to all three parties.*

**How**

- *A six day experiment. Three groups consisting of one auteur and three actors each work separately and simultaneously for five days. On day six the work is presented to all the participants and an invited audience of Danish stage artists. The presentation is followed by a wider discussion of contemporary political Theatre*

**Participants in Experiment 3:**

- *The French group:  
Auteur: **Eugène Durif**. French actress: **Karelle Prugnaud**. Danish actors: **Emmanuel Limal** and **Helle Bach**.*
- *The German group:  
Auteur: **Clemens Bechtel**. German actress: **Katarina Schröter**. Danish actors: **Samy Andersen** and **Dorthe Hansen Carlsen**.*
- *The Danish group:  
Auteur: **Nina Larissa Bassett**. Actors: **Nanna Bøtcher**, **Lene Hummelshøj** and **Julie Riis***
- *Experiment Leaders: **Isabelle Reynaud** and **Jens Christian Lauenstein Led***
- *Video Documentation: **Cecilie Schmidt***

## **1. Introduction and Basis for the Experiment**

In the following passage we will describe the experiment in three subsections. The first part will describe the idea, design and purpose of the experiment, the second part will deal with how the experiment was carried out, while the third part evaluates the experiment with respect to the initial ideas, and tries to give answers as to what can be said about the theme of the experiment.

The basic idea of the experiment was to compare contemporary politically committed theatre in France, Germany and Denmark. We had already done a great deal of research, before we discovered a certain tendency for politically committed theatre to be initiated by an auteur; meaning either a director who writes dramatic texts, or a dramatist who stages his own texts. Thus we decided to narrow down the experiment and make it more concrete, by forming three groups consisting of one auteur and three actors, who would work simultaneously based on the concept proposed by the auteur. With regard to the contents of the work and the angle taken on the phenomenon political theatre, this was left entirely to the auteur to define, just as we did not wish to ask them to represent the traditions of their countries or live up to any possible associations and/or prejudices regarding the concept auteur by way of a more or less dictatorial style of directing. Instead we wanted the auteurs to work for five days with three actors in the same way they would usually do that.

With respect to our intention of comparing the three groups, it would be ideal that the three groups were comprised of the same respective nationality, meaning that the French group would be French, the German group German etc. However we decided to soften up this ideal composition, and instead we created the groups so that the French auteur would have one French actor and two Danish actors, whereas the German auteur would have one German actor and two Danish actors and the Danish auteur would have three Danish actors. The idea was then that the French and the German auteur would have a say in which actor, French and German respectively, was chosen; giving them the opportunity to “bring their own player”. There are two reasons for this decision. Firstly the budget did not allow us to pay for transport of eight participants back and forth between Denmark and France and Germany respectively, but four people was okay. Secondly, a secondary objective of the experiment was to allow for the exchange of ideas between Danish, French and German stage artist, and with strictly French, German and Danish groups that would not be possible. But with the model we chose at least four Danish actors would be given the opportunity to work with a non-Danish auteur.

With respect to the length of the experiment we decided on one week; once again primarily due to financial considerations. Furthermore the planning phase also posed the question of how to present the results, and to what extent the work and results of the three groups should be made available to people not involved in the project. It is a fundamental principle for The Laboratory that experiments are not product-oriented, they are meant to give participants exactly the opportunity to experiment with an aspect of stage art without the distracting stress factor of an upcoming premier. Seeing that we at the same time would like to give the theatre milieu in Denmark the opportunity to take part in a discussion about political theatre in a European perspective – and at the same time creating awareness of the existence of The Laboratory – we decided on a six day model for the experiment: five days in which the three groups could work individually and undisturbed, and one day, on which the results would be presented to the other groups and a limited select audience of Danish theatre artists, dramaturges, theatre directors and so on. From the very beginning we stressed the fact that it would be a presentation of the groups work and in no way a finished show. With regards to our intention of creating the opportunity for the artists to exchange ideas with each other, we decided to accommodate all of the artists in the same house to the extent possible, so as to thus provide the participants with the best platform for exchanging ideas and creating networks; namely through normal social interaction. The compromise between our dreams and what could be done financially resulted in an agreement with *Teater*

*Katapult*, which we rented for a week and where the majority of the participants lived and ate during the experiment, whilst working took place at *Entré Scenen*.

Based on this design we started to look for participants for the experiment by first looking for three auteurs. We made use of our different contacts in the two countries. Reynaud was in Paris, where she met with dramatist Eugène Durif. Led was in Berlin to do research on possible subjects there and when we found Clemens Bechtel, we made an arrangement with him, and subsequently when we were both in Berlin, we met with him. Back in Denmark we were in contact with several different subjects and decided on an arrangement with Nina Larissa Bassett. As we had now secured the three auteurs, the quest for the nine actors began; among these four French- and German-speaking Danish Actors.

In order to later share the experiences of the experiment and in order to document it, we secured two video cameras so that we could record the ongoing work in the groups. Here we received skilled and necessary aid from Cecilie Schmidt who participated as the video documentarian. The following description of the experiment group by group was made on the basis of this video footage, ongoing notes, sound recordings from the experiment and memory.

## **2. Work within the Three Groups of the Experiment**

In the following section we will describe the work process of the three groups separately. We will in each group look at two aspects; namely a) *the concept and the group*, what aesthetics and what sort of work form did the auteur propose and who were the artists in the group, and b) *the process*, how did the work actually progress.

### **2.1 The French Group**

#### **a) The Concept and the Group**

Eugène durif (born 1950) was the auteur of the French group. He is a French poet, dramatist, philosopher and director. Since 1986 he has furthermore been a culture and literature writer. Since 1990 he has been experimenting with small, intimate, political shows. He has written a vast number of dramatic works and is currently one of the most played French dramatists; often at the *Théâtre Ouvert* in Paris. We asked Durif prior to beginning of the project to write a few lines on his view of political theatre:

I am less and less sure what is to be understood by 'political theatre'. So in failing to understand it, I try to speak about the world, to approach the real, but in a paradoxical, even ambiguous way. With the blackness of humour (and sometimes the grotesque) and the violence of the poetic. Without being too concerned with whether or not one is on the side of the good ideas. That's it. But these are only intentions, distant wishes. In the meantime I do what I can!

Under no circumstances would Durif define political theatre; among other things because he is afraid of falling into the socialist realist trap. Rather he wants to rouse the audience and surprise them. Since Durif's texts are very poetic and of high literary standards and suggest many different ways of understanding and interpreting them, the staging of them must "work against the mind" using bright colours, masks, singing and dancing that excites the senses of the audience. The audience must be involved. They must feel, preferably be chocked, but they the must also be cared for.

For the experiment Eugène Durif had written the text *Deux Temps, Trois Mouvements*; a political, dramatic text consisting of dialogs and monologs for three actors. The theme was the political situation in France, more precisely the problems in France concerning the integration of citizens from the former French colonies;

among others Morocco and Algeria. Certain French are ashamed of their presence. He describes the inner voices of the bourgeoisie sitting in their car at the traffic lights, where they are attacked by window cleaners (usually people belonging to ethnic minorities rooted in the former colonies) who offer their services. Immigrants are portrayed as dogs (actors wearing dog masks), because the French would rather share their cities with dogs instead of “blacks” from former French colonies. Facts such as the immigrants’ frozen, cold and blue hands when they wash the windshields in the winter, becomes the poetic, beautiful, but also brutal poem *Blue Hands* by Durif. Eugène wants to take up the taboos and create a new universe around them linguistically and figuratively, allowing the audience to look at the problem in a whole new perspective. Although Durif’s guess at what defines political theatre has its roots in French social policy and society, it can easily be transferred to one of the western world’s most considerable problems: integration.

The French actress who participated had been chosen by Durif himself, which was his partner professionally and in private, Karelle Prugnaud. She is a dancer, performer, actress and stage director and has already worked with Durif many times. He wanted her to be there, because he did not feel he had quite enough experience as a director, and as he had begun to take an interest in acting, he might want to be on stage himself. With respect to the Danish actors he wanted actors who had a physical approach to working or dancers with acting experience. Thus we chose Helle Bech who is foremost a dancer and educated in Paris. And we chose Emmanuel Limal who is French and educated at the drama school in Odense. The actors had received the text prior to work commencing, Durif had already distributed the three roles in the text and all three actors had been asked to learn the play, so that they knew it when work would commence in Århus.



### **b) The Process**

Quite quickly the auteur and the actors began to work closely together: things were read, discussed, explained and questioned. Prugnaud along with Durif presented their shared ideas on how to direct, which were then discussed, but very quickly they went onto the floor to try out some of the physical images. Everything was photographed and looked over, at which point it was almost democratically decided whether they would use the scenes or not. All members of the French group had ideas as to staging the play, and everyone had their say. During day two Durif decided to remove one of the tree scenes in the text and replace it with a smaller scene, where he would recite a poem he had written earlier, that formed the basis of the scene removed. The poem was to be recited by him wearing a clown mask, while the other actors were to portray the activities of the bourgeoisie, the citizens and humanity wearing suits and dog masks. Already on day three Durif mainly

worked as a dramatist and actor, while Prugnaud had taken over directing completely, still working as an actress as well.

Since Durif's texts are very literary and poetic, they can and must be played directly, straight forward and naturally. However this requires in depth work on the rhythm of the language, so as to avoid taking to a singing "artificial" theatre language, this again of course requires complete mastery of the French language. Prugnaud and Durif quickly understood that the group did not have time to lose itself in the linguistic difficulties – difficulties that would have been present even if the group was made up solely of French actors – so they chose to focus on physical precision. Helle Bach who is used to working on her own projects, performance, dancing and furthermore used to working in collegial collaboration with the director and the other members of the ensemble, she was delighted to couple this very physical work with the poetic and powerful language of Durif which consists of many layers. Being able to translate these hidden layers into physical images gave her great pleasure as an artist. Emmanuel Limahl however was very happy to be able to use his native language, and would probably have liked to use more time on linguistic precision, but he enjoyed the physical and playful take on things, the good spirit and the great joy in acting that the group shared.

As mentioned earlier it was very much Prugnaud who had taken over the role of group director; though still consulting Durif on all matters. Her style of directing could be described as aiming for the energetic level during rehearsal situations. Most rehearsal days began with loud music through the speakers; the group had requested microphones and a sound system, which was put to ample use. The group rehearsed scenes and text together along with scores on their own; all of it in a mixture of loud energy and a touch of the chaotic. Later in the day the chaotic however changed into an incredibly narrow focus, concentrating on one single scene which was taken again and again and again, until Prugnaud and the actors were satisfied. Along with this is Prugnaud's preference for the consciously vulgar, kitschy, sexually challenging and the playful. For instance she had brought a 30 cm tall doll from France that stood in a compromising position and when a button was pressed it would jiggle its hips and sing "I wanna be loved by you..." The doll was to serve as an inspiration. Among other things to the small bit of choreography that Helle Bach rehearsed and performed at the presentation.

Even though we had assured all three groups that in no way did we want a finished show, the French group almost from the very start, in this sometimes chaotic way, worked quite focused and quite comprehensibly towards a product. In the rehearsal rooms was a random selection of costumes, which the French immediately put to use along with their dog masks, microphones and music. They spent quite a lot of energy on rehearsing text, gesture, choreography etc., and their rehearsal days usually went from 9:30 to 17:00 or 18:00. As such the French group clearly worked towards a product.

### **c) The Presentation**

On the sixth day the French group presented their work in what we might call a well prepared and comprehensively studied reading of Durif's text. The presentation starts by Durif reciting his poem *Blue Hands*. He is wearing a clown mask, talking through a microphone. He uses gestures and diction resembling that of a ringmaster. He is interrupted by music and after a small pantomime, where the three actors wearing suits and dog masks portray (and parody) the everyday life of the petit bourgeoisie, the scene with the couple being approached by the immigrant wanting to wash the windshield of their car follows. The couple ignores the foreigner and instead begins a larger than life argument with one another. The scene is played by Limal and Bach, where Limal lays his soul bare to music by Meat Loaf, whilst Bach begins a vulgar choreography inspired by the doll that Prugnaud brought. The presentation ends in the "dogs" singing a song about decay and mortality; a beautiful and actually quite warm song spreading joy. The invited audience and the other

participants seemed to think the presentation both entertaining, warm and surprising and characterised by that precise mix of strongly poetic language and an acting style that was consciously vulgar, blown up, humoristic and containing a certain element of madness.

## 2.2. The German Group

### a) *The Concept and the Group*

The auteur of the German group was Clemens Bechtel (born 1964) who is a director and was educated at Institut für Angewandte Theaterwissenschaft in Gießen. Bechtel has worked in all of Germany on the established stages, but also in the public sphere; such as for instance county city hall in Tübingen in 2006. Whereas Durif is a dramatist, who often stages his own texts, Bechtel is a director who often writes / assembles the text for his shows. As for his views on political theatre Bechtel said the following:

Our place is occupied. In it stands today mediocre acting politicians in high polished set designs declaring to the dictators of the world: "Sire, give freedom of thought!" They pretend to be defenders of those deprived of rights, they turn the parliaments in to what appears to be moral institutions, and reciting their memorized text they fight for the same things for which playwrights were thrown in prison 200 years ago (and in some countries they still are).

In a world this enlightened, where lies the function of the political theatre? Without any sense of orientation we theatre-makers stumble through the world literature endlessly repeating the neverchanging formulas of equality and tolerance. But maybe the theatre must change and become an institution of immorality. At least an

institution radically questioning our (apparent-) morality, and opening to other perspectives. The one who believes the Western idea of civilisation is the only one capable of prevailing in a globalized world is a fool. To me political theatre means a change of perspective. Maybe we need to learn to see the world through the eyes of the Islamic terrorist, through the eyes of women circumcising.

To Bechtel political theatre is to surprise the audience and show them that which is forbidden; for instance by way of being fascinated by Islamic fundamentalism rather than condemning it. In keeping with this his intention for the work of the experiment was to examine how by way of theatre to make the audience identify with what westerners would otherwise consider to be the foreign and terrifying views of Islamic terrorism. His intention was to go beyond this denouncement of Islamic terrorism that we all agree upon, and get there by way of a relatively classical approach, using theatrical and aesthetic strategies such as the audience and the actors' identification with the character, classical, dramaturgic processes of development and psychological familiarization.

We met with Bechtel in Berlin, where he had originally wanted to do something about generations using the personal histories of the actors as a starting point. Shortly after however he decided to make a collage of texts both of and about Osama Bin Laden and other so-called Islamic fundamentalist and terrorists<sup>1</sup>. The montage was compiled in the text *Dschihad* which is a dramatization of these texts, where we follow the leader of the movement, a long time member, and a new member, who at the end of the text sacrifices himself in a suicide bombing. The text works as a torso, in as much as it was – and is – Bechtel's intention to compile and stage a longer montage based on the same principle. The dramaturgy of the larger project is to consist of a process of development starting with the romantic and idealistic "camp fire feeling", which is predominant (the Islamists' own version) among the very first mujahideen in Afghanistan during the 1980s. Then going through the

---

<sup>1</sup> These text are mainly taken from Kepel, Gilles: *Texte des Terrors oder das schwarze Buch des Dschihads*

evolution of the movement's becoming a global network of terror and ideology, and ending in the internal decay and brutalisation of commercialised criminal and violent groups in Iraq following the Second Gulf War.

Out of the three actors in the German group Bechtel had himself chosen the German one; Katarina Schröter (educated in Dresden, where she was permanently employed in the ensemble for a longer period of time). Whereas we supplied the two Danish actors, namely Samy Andersen who was born in Germany and educated in Denmark, and finally Dorthe Hansen Carlsen, a permanent part of the ensemble at Århus Theatre. Bechtel had retained his interest in the personal histories of the actors as part of the experiment, and therefore wanted to interview the actors prior to the experiment; due to logistical reasons only Dorthe Hansen Carlsen was able to do it. Bechtel also distributed the roles in advance and asked the actors to learn the text.



### **b) The Process**

Even though Bechtel like Durif had a finished text prior to the work beginning, he did not start with it. He had asked us to set up an internet connection in the rehearsal room and he used it to show the three actors background information on fundamentalism and terror. Particularly these were small videos showing authentic suicide bombings, the proud mothers of suicide bombers, instructions as to how terrorist action should be done and glorification and elaboration on the ideology of Islamic fundamentalism. The material provoked intense and long discussion on the subject, and Bechtel continued like this, returning to the internet material of the Islamic sites to make the discussion progress. The personal histories of the actors were also involved, in that they were asked one after the other to talk about their families and times where they had felt and experienced hatred. Here it seemed there was a difference with regards to nationality. Bechtel and Schröter were, as many Germans of their generation were, very preoccupied with their parents not to mention grand parents; both their past and who they were. Carlsen and Andersen were not quite that concerned with their own families and were unable to account for the lives of their grand parents. The group itself defined this difference as being a product of Germany's history, and the need it brought to investigate whether there were Nazis in one's own family and who repressed what and why. Finally all the members of the group referred to Rote Armé Fraktion as a crucial difference between Germany and Denmark, but also as a possible way to approach the ideology of Islamic terrorism. And as Bechtel pointed out several times: "Terrorism is a language. They are trying to tell us something, but we either can't or won't understand it. Maybe they are trying to tell us that our democratic society, which we are forcing upon them, is unacceptable to them; but wouldn't that be unacceptable to us?"

The discussions on Islamism and the personal histories of the actors were not explicitly incorporated into Bechtel's montage, *Dschihad*, but to a great extent formed the basis of the work with it. In agreement with his starting point being relatively classical theatre aesthetics Bechtel worked with the text in ways resembling the staging of any other dramatic text. They started with readings, Bechtel tried different kinds of stress and



pauses in the actors' lines and monologs, they went to the floor and Bechtel proposed an arrangement based on which work continued. The actor began work with great earnestness, composure and an atmosphere of sympathy towards the material, which it would be more than tempting to accredit to the absorptions in the subject that started the day by way of video and conversation. However it was not only this special kind of personal absorption in the subject material that made Bechtel's way of working different from typical Danish theatre. Bechtel worked with choreographic tableaux, where every part had a defined relationship with the other actors. These relations change in line with the change of the tableaux. It was a collective examination, in which everybody took part, but where Bechtel took on the role of organizer completely. The intensity of the relations and linguistic expressions of the actors were rehearsed again and again, and one scene was tried in numerous variants. Carlsen defined the difference as follows: "In a Danish production with a similar time frame a scene would have been rehearsed three times and the remaining time would have been used discussing characters and ways of staging it. With Bechtel the scene is rehearsed seven times and there is less talk. With Bechtel we try it to see if it works and if it doesn't work we discard it, but it is not open to debate whether or not to do so". She thought the difference promoted concentration and focus while rehearsing.

### **c) The Presentation**

When compared to the French group the presentation by the German group was much more played down, calm and serious. It was a reading of a work-in-progress, but the portrayed seriousness and depth with respect to the actors' empathy towards the ideology of the Islamists was very clear. The presentation started with an interview of Osama Bin Laden, played by Andersen with Carlsen playing the role of interviewer, and after this focus is directed towards Schröter's character who is fascinated by the Islamic project and ends up giving her life to it. At the final suicide scene Bechtel and the group had come up with a little trick. Carlsen, playing the helper and inciter, steps out to the audience and takes one of the video cameras of the experiment and uses it to document and press Schröter's character into doing it. Thus the reality of the experiment (that we wanted documentation) was "stolen" and used in the fiction of the stage, referring to an entirely different reality (the reality of Islamic terrorism); where the documentation is part of a strategy that may prove fatal to both the members of the movement and their adversaries. You might say that the combination of a) the trick with the video camera and the deep empathy that the actors reached in five days due to the close relation to the authentic roots of the text, and b) the basically classic theatre aesthetics, points to Bechtel's view of political theatre as being a theatre that uses well-known theatrical techniques to incorporate the political reality and thus has the audience thinking in different ways than what might usually be the case.

## **2.3 The Danish Group**

### **a) The Concept and the Group**

We chose Nina Larissa Bassett (born 1971) as the auteur of the Danish group. Like Bechtel she is first and foremost a director rather than a dramatist. She often selects, finds and assembles texts for her shows. She has a Cand. Mag. degree in Theatre Sciences. She is the leader of the group *Theatre Without Bounds* and is co-founder of *That Theatre Company*. Her debut as a dramatist about the trafficking of women §125a is to be played at The Edinburgh festival in 2006. Bassett was raised partly in England, and so the Danish group did not end up "completely" Danish. Bassett was also asked to consider the concept of political theatre prior to the experiment:

I'm in doubt about the exact meaning of the concept of 'political theatre' in contemporary Denmark. I question whether it is possible to create truly political theatre here. Many artists are producing theatre that often get categorized by others as political theatre (this is great!). Most of these artists, including myself, are cautious of labelling our work as strictly political - possibly because labels quickly become stifling. Is it

really possible to create political theatre in a classic sense in Denmark? In my opinion political theatre is in direct conflict with those in power / the structures of power.

In this country, all legal forms of rebellion are quite quickly integrated, digested and swallowed up by the eternally good and pulsating hyper-democracy – signifying Danish tolerance (or indifference?). In fact this system is very shrewd, as it is able to pacify rebellion and prevents it from gaining any real power. In effect politicians in power can pop down to Nørrebro's Teater after a nice meal and laugh their hearts out at their own dealings in war, lies and sycophantic behaviour towards superpowers – and no one gets hurt in the process.

There is however a movement in Danish theatre that expresses a great need to comment on the structures of society and deal with moral issues. I recognize this movement in myself, and this is why I think, I am attracted to creating performances that deal with a political/ social content. I have the privilege of having a media at my disposal - and for a short period of time, the audiences lend me some of their time – I'd like to create experiences that question the way in which we have structured our lives and the question the structures of power behind these structures. This is a way of showing respect to the time given me – as well as an integrated personal curiosity. Some claim that everything is political, but I think that is too easy.

In conversations we had with Bassett during the experiment she expressed a sympathetic fascination of and felt moved several times by the fact that we still gather frequently together, and in artistic form partake in a certain type of dialogue about the society that we live in. That is not to say that she thinks theatrical community in itself guarantees “political theatre”, but that theatrical community provides the potential for political theatre. Her approach to theatre and political potential thus starts with the personal feeling of community between the director and the actor, and aims towards creating a line of communication between the actor and the audience.

Bassett's starting point was different from the other auteurs in that she did not bring a text that she had written or assembled in advance. Instead she asked us to find actors that honoured the following demands. They had to have a personal connection with Århus and they had to be women. Bassett suggested Nanna Bøttcher. Bøttcher is educated at the acting school at Aarhus Theatre in 2004, and we supplied two newly educated from the same school; being Lene Hummelshøj and Julie Riis. This meant that Bassett was given three relatively young actors to work with, even though she had not asked for it, and even though we had been close to making an arrangement with a somewhat older actor.

### **b) The Process**

It was clear from the first day that Bassett wanted to work in a way that is connected to and inspired by the British model of theatre, called devising<sup>2</sup>, which is characterised by the members of the group having to bring themselves the material that they are to work with, and that everyone contributes to and have – different kinds of – influence on how the project will turn out and what it will result in. In the experiment Bassett started the first day by discussing the frame of the experiment (timeframe, number of participants, political theatre as the overall theme), and it turned into a conversation about among other things feminism as a possible or not possible strategy for a politically engaged contemporary theatre. Hereafter Bassett presented the theme for work in the group; namely stories and how they are told in the public sphere. The first task she gave the actors was to take a walk in Århus, observing the city and the people in it, come back and talk about what they had seen. Each was given a word to focus their observations. The next day Bassett and the three actors continued their search for stories in the public sphere, this time on two fronts. They found newspapers from the day before and went grocery shopping in Føtex to gather the stories of a number of products as they were displayed on the packing.

---

<sup>2</sup> The method is described in Oddey, Alison: *Devising Theatre: A Practical and Theoretical Handbook*, Routledge 1996

The three groupings of stories were then distributed among the three actors, so that Riis' walks supplemented by the walks of the two others were put together to create a monologue. Bøttcher received the role of newsreader, and the group selected stories based on the papers from the day before and put them together in a montage, while Hummelshøj was placed in a shopping cart with all the groceries, the stories of which she read out loud from the packing. Selecting text, the montage of bits of text and the actual staging of the three actors' different types of stories from the public sphere took place in a common searching process. All four members of the group often worked simultaneously with their individual elements, being aware of the work of the others. For instance Bassett might direct Riis in her monologue on walking through Århus, while Hummelshøj searched for choreographic possibilities in the shopping cart and Bøttcher cut and assembled the various news clippings. And while they worked like this, they would observe the others, make comments and suggestions, go back to their own work and consult the others for advice. As the individual parts came together, this searching and more or less "symbiotic simultaneous" way of working moved towards more continuous rehearsals of what would be the results of the group.

The Danish group like the others experienced a little first performance jitters, although we had tried to defuse and tone down the presentation on the last day. During the last days the group worked very focused, fully and detailed towards results, which might be considered a finished show. They found a number of props, they worked out a set design where the whole stage was covered in flour, so that the movements of the actors would leave a concrete trace on stage, they secured a shopping kart for Hummelshøj and found a paper container for Bøttcher, as well as securing and incorporating music.



### ***c) The Presentation***

The Danish presentation was a montage of the three types of stories in the public sphere, being that the three actresses each represented one of the three types of stories. Here the reality of the experiment was incorporated too, in that Julie Riis' first line was: "Hi, my name is Julie. For five days I have been part of an experiment on political theatre, and this Monday I went out in Århus to find stories." The first lines of Hummelshøj and Bøttcher contained the same presentation of their respective names and searches for stories. During the presentation we hear of Riis' walk to a coffee vending machine, a woman that does not like mothers and a man with a handicap. We hear seemingly incoherent bits of news articles from Bøttcher's container. We are told one fantastic tale after the other about some product from Hummelshøj's shopping cart, which is even pushed out to the audience, who are asked to read aloud the stories of the products. There are footprints in the flour and the presentation has come to an end; from a dramaturgic point of view without the classical

curves, but from a theatrical point of view with an unmistakable invitation for the audience to take part in the dialogue that Bassett holds in such high esteem. The tone of the three actors during the presentation was basically ironic. The acting is laconically aimed at describing how pointless the walk, the products and the news are, and there is a clear-cut critique of how stories in the public sphere level and negate one another, so that in the end it becomes impossible for the individuals of society to relate to the stream of information and stories. When the three actors at the same time are solitary (they only communicate with one another vaguely and unwillingly) and isolated (Riis in her walking pattern, Hummelshøj in her cart and Bøttcher in her container) it creates a sense of sadness that is almost borderline depressive. The political potential of the presentation can be seen both in the easily readable exposure of the stories in products and the media, but also in the underlying sadness that the audience can easily and even has to identify with, via the invitation to take part in a dialogue.

### **3. Results**

With respect to the three objectives of the experiment which we mentioned in the introduction, we will now try to sum up and assess the results along three axes. a) *The comparison* - what can be said about politically committed theatre in the three countries? b) *Political theatre, text and auteur* - what traits can be observed with respect to the two frames "auteur" and "political theatre"? And c) *The exchange* - Did any such thing occur? Who did it occur between and how?

#### **a) The Comparison**

In the presentations and work of the three groups there are a number of striking traits, that connect very well to the expectations one might have of these three countries. Traits that should be seen in connection with traditions of the three countries concerning politically committed theatre and production of art in general. If you isolate the question of nationality and observe the group strictly in a national perspective, you might catch sight of the following.

The French worked with a very symbolical and poetical text. It is obvious that Catholicism – despite the confrontation with the Catholic Church during the French Revolution – still plays an important part in how the majority of the French understand themselves and their society. When Durif uses dogs as a general theme and has them represent the French bourgeoisie, he is not just playing on the fact that members of the bourgeoisie and dogs are made as equals, but also the French catholic fables where animals act as role models defining what constitutes good catholic behaviour. When Prugnaud made use of the vulgar and sexually challenging it was an obvious attack on Catholicism in France that still continues to contribute to the repression of sexuality in the public sphere. The many references in the text, both implicit and explicit, to the situation of many immigrant groups are connected to the imperialistic period in French history and its continuous confrontation with that period. With Durif and Prugnaud the aesthetic resistance towards Catholicism and imperialism is expressed through a combination of a highly poetical language and a comedy that is grotesquely oversized, and there is a longstanding tradition in France to use this particular aesthetic trait. As for the way in which the group worked, with its high level of energy and a daily rhythm shifting from chaos to focus, it is easy to view that as an expression of a Latin temper and a will to interchange between highly intellectual debate and practical and physical theatre work.

The work of the Germans was wrapped in German tradition and history in a similar way. When Bechtel refrains from wanting to educate and lecture the audience, asking them to condemn Islamic terrorism, it may be viewed as a reaction to the German post-war theatre, which like Brecht's theatre was designed to re-educate the German people teaching them democracy and tolerance. For most Germans of Bechtel's Generation, this desire to educate has had an unforeseen side effect, and now the focus is on presenting political problems

and then have the audience decide for themselves how to solve them. In accordance with this Bechtel's interest in Islamic terrorism may be seen in light of the Rote Armé Fraktion (RAF) (the members of which were mostly from Heidelberg; like Bechtel himself). To many Germans of Bechtel's generation RAF still today exemplifies the idea that terrorism may be unacceptable, but that you may end up in a situation where terrorism seems to be the only way to change things. Finally the serious air with which the German group went about working with the material and in general can be seen as a typical German phenomenon. There is a long-standing tradition in Germany to consider theatre as an important institution both politically and in society. Therefore it is no wonder that the German group used material gathered in the political reality that they wanted to convert to theatre, and that they were very serious in their approach to the material.

Perhaps it is a little harder to point out what was especially Danish about the Danish group. One might however consider Danish to be something marked by a very long history of being a small state, who has learned to its cost that it is unwise to meddle in international conflicts. It is much better to look inwards and form the democratic welfare state, instead of looking outwards on a world where there is nothing to gain and everything to lose. Looking at it that way the way in which the group chose to work together would seem very Danish. Everyone had a say, and they chose content and material that was very close to them: the personal walks through the streets surrounding the theatre, stories from the local newspaper and the stories on the groceries of the local supermarket. The irony used in the presentation has a similar Danish feel to it; a sort of light and ironic smile when you see what is around you.

These traits were quite clear, when you looked at the work of the three groups and they cannot be dismissed as rigid Euro-stereotypes. That is to say these differences *were* there, and it *is* possible to trace them back to national traditions in the three countries. On the other hand there were quite a lot of traits that point in a different direction, and after the three presentations on the last day all twelve participants very much agreed, when Bechtel started out by rejecting national differences as a reason for why the three groups worked in different ways<sup>3</sup>. As he saw it the differences should be explained in other ways than nationality; especially age and gender. The three auteurs were respectively in their fifties, forties and thirties and it is clear that the traditions of these three generations are different, and that three auteurs of the same age should have been used if the object of the experiment was to compare national differences. With respect to gender it was also an uneven mix. The French group worked with a text written by a man and for the most part directed by a woman, the German group was lead by a man and the Danish group was made up entirely of women, moreover it was the only "pure" group with respect to nationality (not including Bassett's English descent).

And if you look at the presentations once more, you will find traits that contradict and blur these rigid national categories. The wildness and the partiality towards deliberately vulgar sexuality in the French group were similar to the *German* Frank Castorf's use of aesthetics. Bechtel did not experiment with form, *Verfremdung* or distancing. Instead he used identification and psychological familiarity. That is not really what German political theatre is most known for. The Danish way of working was not that Danish at all; rather it was British or related to performance theatre, and the same can be said of the work form inspired by devising and the mixture of approaching the audience, the irony and the sad expression in the presentation. In short: Was it the case that there were national differences? Yes, there was, but there was something else too.

### **b) Political Theatre, Text and Auteurs**

With respect to political theatre produced by auteurs there is a striking common feature among these three very different auteurs. The concept of political theatre posed a problem to all of them, in that they were all

---

<sup>3</sup> Again you might ask, is it just a coincidence that the German proposes the annulment of nationality? At any rate it a trait often seen with Germans in international connections.

reluctant to label what they did as political theatre. And still they are all very explicit in their treatment of political subjects. The people washing cars and the way the dogs were prioritised with Durif, the authentic and very much current Islamic text with Bechtel and Bassett's explicit criticism of how stories are evened out in a consumer society. Furthermore it can be said that the use and incorporation of authenticity of the theatrical situation is very important to Bechtel and Bassett, whereas the audience to a greater extent is left to his own to be disturbed by the grotesque poetry in Durif and Prugnaud's texts. Finally it would seem that the development of text is closely connected to the practical work, when it is done by an auteur; even an inveterate dramatist and "text-geek" such as Durif changes his text during the process as a direct result of the practical work. The close relationship between the production of text and show seems in all three cases to be productive for a politically committed contemporary theatre.

### ***c) The Exchange***

During the experiment nearly all twelve participants expressed the desire to have seen more of how the other groups worked; not so much the results, but rather the concrete work at rehearsals. On day four of the project we decided to use the morning of that day to oblige with that request in the following manner: each group was asked to continue their rehearsals for an hour, but this time the other two groups would watch. This initiative gave the groups a certain insight in the work of the other groups, however given the short time at their disposal, this "seeing what the other groups were up to" came to look too much as though the group and the auteur was performing for an audience, rather than just going on working. However you cannot do everything in five days and if we were to retain the intention of comparing the three national traditions, this exchange would not be possible. On the other hand the exchange within the groups seems to have worked quite well, and has among other things resulted in agreements between Durif and Limal and between Reynaud and Bechtel. Whether the fact that the participants lived together for the six days contributed to the exchange is hard to say, but it did create a good feeling and a strong sense of team spirit during the six days.

With respect to the exchange between the experiment and theatre artists in Denmark, it would have to wait till the presentations and discussion on day six, where the guests showed a great interest in the work of the artists. One dramaturge was very preoccupied by Durif's texts and a director was very interested in Bechtel's use of authentic material; just to name a few. However it should be said that there could have easily been more guests in the hall, and we will take some responsibility as to why that was. We had only invited specific people, and we would probably have had more guests if we had issued a more general invitation to the Danish theatre milieu. But those who were there got a rare and thorough insight into ways of working and use of aesthetics among politically committed auteurs in Europe.