

**Experiment: ÚPS! with Samsteypan at Laboratoriet, Bora Bora, Nov. 2011.  
Closing discussion and reflections.**

**KG: Katrín Gunnarsdóttir (dancer)**

**MM: Melkorka Magnúsdóttir (dancer)**

**RB: Ragnheidur Bjarnarson (dancer)**

**AYS: Arna Ýr Sævarsdóttir (producer)**

**HOA: Hannes Óli Ágústsson (actor)**

**BS: Barbara Simonsen (facilitator)**

**TV: Trine Vinther (assistant)**

RB:

So, to sum up the whole theme....

AYS:

In one word...

RB:

Great!

BS:

I'd really like to know where you are now. What do you remember the clearest from the experiment, what is important for you to carry on with in your project? What has surprised you, etc.?

RB:

This research has made me really interested in the theme. I wasn't that curious about humour, but now... It's so interesting, everything, timing... everything.

HOA:

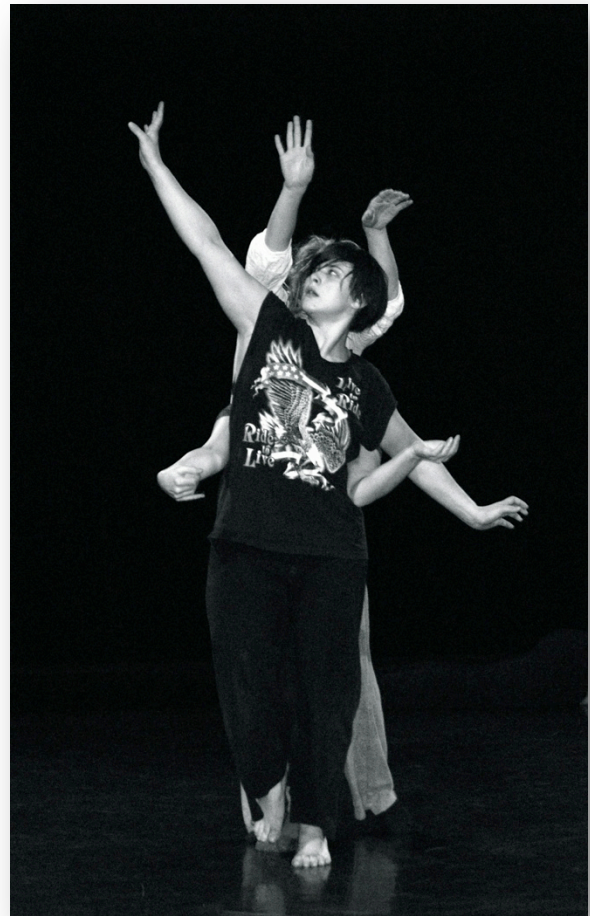
I think we've really attacked it and found out that there are certain things that are essential and should really lead our work.

MM:

For me, a really interesting point is the connection between comedy and tragedy. That what we find very funny can be very sad for the persons on stage, and neither can exist without the other. And that is such an interesting point – when you are laughing your ass off and suddenly feel like crying. Or even the other way round, when you feel like crying and you can turn the moment around and it's just hilariously funny.

KG:

I have all these things in front of me that we have been producing, and I think we need to decide if we want to make something funny or if we want to try to present it in another maybe dry, absurd fashion. It could be very nice is to work with this theme of how horrible it is when people are really trying to be funny and



failing miserably. It becomes very sad! A stand-up comedian with bad jokes and who feels bad about failing. That is a very very sad thing.

MM:

It's like the bad dream of being naked on stage.

KG:

We talked about how the Shakespeare comedies are about love, relationship, the chaos, the magic, the forest – and maybe what we could do was work separately with the bad clown, the lonely comedian.

HOA:

Yeahhh...

KG:

The two things could be juxtaposed. So that the solos are really.... shit.

RB:

A build-up and then release. Then it's funnier. People need to laugh – if there is something really tragic, they need to laugh out loud.

HOA:

There is a fine line – the tragic turns suddenly comic.

BS:

I think that's a really interesting idea. You can have a performance on two levels somehow. One part springs from Shakespeare, Shakespearean themes, universe etc., and then you have a level that is just about comedy. About laughter. And the reason that it's so horrible to be a comedian that nobody laughs at is the whole social situation – that laughter is a kind of love. Love and appreciation and being together. So if you want to be laughed at and people are not laughing, you are the loneliest person in the world.

TV:

It's rejection.

BS:

Yes, that as well.

RB:

Oh, that's so sad. Sad, but true....

MM:

Another thing we talked about was all these systems that you try to make in comedy and also as a form of conversation – that nothing is really interesting unless it is out of order. Unless you find the fault, the mistake. Basically, it's all these misunderstandings. But I think you can also think about it in relation to structure, costume, music. It becomes interesting when the structure breaks.

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BS:

What do you think are the key themes now?

HOA:

Love, order and chaos....  
And the fine line between the tragic and the comic.

MM:

Sense and instinct.

RB:

Misunderstanding.

HOA:

Yes, misunderstanding and confusion, and it's all connected to the chaos. And I like the idea – although it's only in two of the plays – of the forest. The magical forest. Where anything can happen.

KG:

Forest comes up so many times in the plays.

HOA:

And then I can connect it to the fruit!  
It's nature. Nature vs. cities, structure, restrictions, order.

But also the tears of the clown, I like that. For me personally, I've always been fascinated by the idea of how laughter becomes tragic, the tragic comedy, I love that. Absurd comedy like *Waiting for Godot*. And black comedy where people find humour in the darkest of places. I'm a huge *South Park* fan. There's a quote I completely forgot about until now, I think it's Ricky Gervase who said, 'You can basically make fun of everything, but it can come from a good side or a dark side.' Something like that.

KG:

So to make fun of it and still respect it?

HOA:

Yes, but when you make fun in a mocking way, that's the dark side.

MM:

You have to be sincere in the making fun of it.

HOA:

Sincere and aware, and you have to find yourself amusing....

KG:

I think a good exercise – and difficult – would be for us to make a stand-up based on ourselves.

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HOA:

That's an exercise I think we should do. A five-minute stand-up. Trying to be funny. Of course knowing that it's doomed to fail.

KG:

I have an allergy about that...

MM:

Yes, seriously...

RB:

I'm embarrassed now!

TV:

And that's kind of funny too.

HOA:

We did a similar exercise in a show I did once, a competition, where everybody came on stage and had to say a joke, or do something funny, do an impression, and try not to think too much. And it was the most painful thing, but it was so interesting seeing people squirming on stage. You're trying to say something, then you say one wrong word and it falls apart – and you are naked on stage. You have nothing, and the audience is expecting something. There is this huge pressure, and it's so uncomfortable – but fascinating in a way.

TV:

You could make a stand-up about how difficult it is to be funny....

HOA:

Using clown technique, usually what you do is not trying to be funny, that's not interesting. It's interesting when you are failing to follow the restrictions of being a clown. The mistakes are the heart of the work.

BS:

I think for a clown or a comedian to be a good one, he needs to have the opposite quality of the distance we were talking about. When you are laughing you have a distance, but the clown must be in it 100%, otherwise it's not funny.

You know that feeling when you have a really good joke on stage and you present it to the audience for the first time, and they really laugh a lot – and you do it the next night, and get nothing! Because you were expecting a laugh and you were just a little twitch of a second off. You came outside yourself, you were not in it, and you don't get a laugh.

HOA:

Yeah, I've experienced that, it's strange.

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BS:

There is an interesting thing about the comedies – I know them very well, but I've never thought about this until we did this work: I don't think the main thing about the comedies is the being funny, that's not the most important thing. It's kind of a universe where he can write about something that is very sort of... vulnerable. Very fragile. Very beautiful and poetic and very light, but at the same time it goes very deep. So it is somehow a very sensitive universe rather than a ha ha-comical universe where we are laughing all the time. It's much more just a place that is different from the tragedies, which have a certain universe and a certain tone and where you can talk about certain themes – in the comedies there is a different universe. Where for instance there is space for more feminine qualities, more softness, more gentleness, more details.

MM:

And somehow everything is allowed. You can put yourself out there, with these crazy characters.

KG:

What stands out for me also is that there is this idea of nature – that we are admitting that we are this ... instinct, falling in love, wanting something. 'I'm going to go read philosophy for 3 years and not touch a woman!' – and it doesn't work. The comedies are somehow presenting how little we can do about it. That we are just nature as well. And we have all these instincts and all these feelings and questions. It's very very human.

MM:

He is also showing that the line between extremities is very thin. The line between love and hate, between madness and sense, between the real world and the insane.

KG:

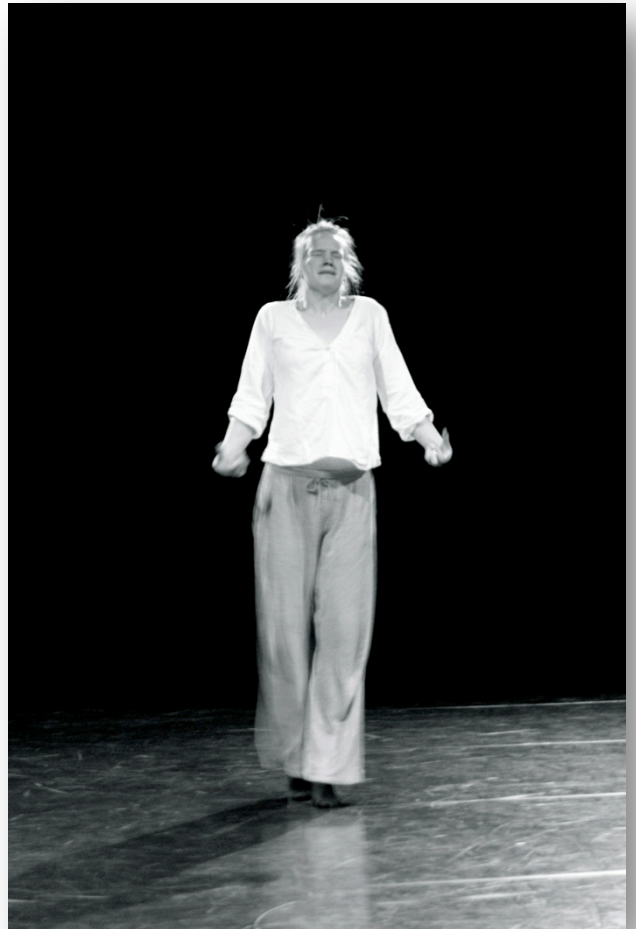
He is showing how we lose control.

HOA:

And that it's a good thing.

KG:

Yeah, it will be okay. It will sort itself out.



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HOA:

And the gap between system and order. How society as the existing rule and order is always fighting against human instinct. It's doomed to fail. It's doomed to not fit. And basically – there are a lot of theories about this – the system of order is a hierarchic, male society, whereas nature is feminine. The male and the female energy. And the societies are created by men and don't really allow space for instinct etc. So there is a struggle between the two.

MM:

I also found it interesting that we found a link between the comedy characters and horror movies! That you can find the clown, the twins, the servant as elements in horror movies.

KG:

And when you mix that with the irrational running away from something, some system, and the ambiguous gender element, you could create a very disturbing universe where something is just very wrong! Where people would say, 'I don't what it is, but this is just very strange...' Of course, then we wouldn't be making anything funny, but it's still a very interesting universe.

TV:

But it's at the same time very right.

HOA:

Yeah, nothing that really scares you.

MM:

You're only nervous.

KG:

That's the relief. You get scared, and then you go, 'Oh, it was just...' And then you laugh.

RB:

It's like the roller coaster. I always go into hysterical laughter when I'm scared in these things. I scream, and then I laugh my head off.

BS:

That's totally basic. When my youngest daughter was a baby, the biggest joke in the world was her and me sitting at the dinner table, and I would be very still, and she would just watch me and when she didn't expect it I would go 'Booh!', and she would gasp and then go into a fit of laughter – and then she would wait again. We could go on and on.

KG:

It's a protective mechanism. You get scared, and then the relief makes you laugh.

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BS:

Then there is the question of method and approach to all this stuff. What do you think...?

HOA:

I think the great thing is that we've been going from very simple things to utter chaos and back again...

MM:

The methods we've used have been improvisations and 'openings'.

HOA:

And from those things I think we've found a lot of the themes that will be essential. But I'm not really sure yet what the approach will be.

MM:

It's the same questions we've had in the previous Shakespeare performances that we've done. Whether to choose some scenes to work on, or essences, characters...

HOA:

My instinct tells me that it should be general themes rather than scenes...

MM:

But the scenes can give us so much structure, for example the *Midsummer Night's Dream* scene, there you have a kind of system that can be used as a tool even though it doesn't have to be visible.

BS:

And you used the readings of the scenes as a tool also. That's a practical thing. Getting up and doing a reading of what is actually in the scene.

MM:

And what you said was that it was very visual when people were just coming in, sleeping, waking up and running out. That's a scene – or a reference to a scene. So I think it's possible to mix.

HOA:

Yes, probably. Most of the scenes that we worked with have at least one or two parallels in other plays. There is such a flow, the same ideas coming in again and again. So it's probably 'themes' with 'scenes' as subgroups that correlate to different themes.



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MM:

Exactly. That would be very nice to categorise.

HOA:

The running-in-and-out-of-the-forest scenes, the gender confusion scenes etc. And we should go more into the other plays as well.

KG:

I think, actually, that the restriction of going into the text is very productive. Also reading them on the floor, just to realise the dynamics or structure within the scene, and to use them. We're not staging the scenes exactly, we're using the dynamics and the tempo. The tempos in the scenes that we've done are very very different. And interesting to use as choreographic tools. Maybe the different tempos in the comedies can be narrowed down to, say five? Five different scene tempos that we could work on.

MM:

But the structure is important, too, I really like that element. How it builds up, goes in a super-chaotic way up to a climax, and then dissolves very quickly.

BS:

Yes, and sometimes it's just the missing person coming in. You can have the build-up and a totally chaotic scene, and then the missing person comes in and everybody goes, 'Aahh....' – so that's why, and everybody goes and forms the right couples, and you can do that in a matter of seconds.

HOA:

It totally changes the context, and everything falls into place.

KG:

Small, not necessarily logical solutions to a VERY complicated problem.

I'm wondering – we didn't really study specific characters. And I'm not sure if it's something we should do. Somehow they are quite far away.

RB:

I agree. I didn't find it relevant.

BS:

I think though that the physicality of a character, as you have mentioned, is important. It doesn't have to be a specific character, but when working with a certain scene also working with the body or the movement of someone, could give you something. I would be curious to see that.

RB:

It might just be the physicality of how that person is feeling.

BS:

I think it's there already in your banana scene with Viola and Olivia. I get the idea of a physicality of Viola and Olivia – so that if you know the characters, it's fun, but also if you don't know the characters you can still see what is going on, physically and emotionally.

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KG:

So it's finding the physical manifestation of for example Bottom and Titania. Yeah, there is something in that.

MM:

But it can also be just the physicality of a structure, without characters as such. Like coming in and falling down etc.

BS:

Yes. I think you are doing it all the time anyway, it's a question of focusing on different aspects. The way that you chose to enter and exit and fall down and sleep and wake up was very much in the atmosphere of the scene. It had a light and poetic and dreamy quality to it that came from that scene and what you knew about it. So that designed your physicality.

And thinking about that method, that way of working, I've really been reminded of the fact that when you do devising, how incredibly important the preparation is. Both the conscious and the unconscious preparation. I mean, the fact that you are working in this space – a big black box dance space with wings – has defined maybe 50% of the visual choices that you have made. And it's not something that you wanted, it's just the space that there is. And also, what we talk about in the morning, and what we find in the text, goes right into the afternoon's work, without anybody noticing. It just happens.

KG:

It's what happened with the gender theme, it just went into the afternoon work totally without us intending it.

BS:

So when there is one director, one person managing the process, of course that person has to be very careful to put up the right framework, but when one is working collectively, as you are, it's not less effective, it's just even more difficult to manage. But the fact that you know each other so well is productive.

And one more thing about the reading as a tool: I think that if you want to, it would probably be useful to you to read the scenes even more thoroughly. Because when you read a Shakespeare scene for the first time, there are a lot of sentences and words that you don't understand. So you miss some of the dynamics, the way that all the little points are made, one thing affecting the other. All the different feelings that are in it.

KG:

One person could go with one scene and really spend a weekend on it. Come up with a proposal to stage it. Also because we are compromising too much in the collective work, sometimes it's nice to just do something for yourself by yourself. Take a scene, read it by myself, spend time on it, prepare, reflect – and then have maybe half a day to put it together...

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BS:

So what else is there?

MM:

I like the idea of the deformed body that we worked with on the first day.

HOA:

Yes, I think we could dwell on that a bit more. I liked the focus on the defects of the body. It can be very comical.

MM:

Yes, or just changing the physical shape, or the two bodies together that become one, very bizarre – the thing with the rope... There are possibilities in different physicalities.

KG:

Talking about that, I'm very happy with the combination of people in the group. We also have one more actor who is not here, who is tall and a 'man man'...

HOA:

The big strong man.

MM:

It is a very nice combination of people.

KG:

Because they are so very different physical body types.

BS:

That fits very well. Because the comic universe is colourful. Lots of different types.

KG:

Exactly. Just that in itself is going to give the right direction. We can make lots of contrasting combination. Every combination is contrasting, in fact!

HOA:

We just need a small, weak male...

KG:

Then we are complete.

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MM:

But that can be solved with the gender stuff. Ragnheidur can analyse it and turn herself into a small, weak male... Or I can do it.

RB:

I actually had this idea the other day: When I was a child I saw this film where a girl taped up her breasts, and I had this image of someone changing gender by taping up the breasts or taping up the penis, and then dressing up, covering it all.

HOA:

There is a scene in the film version of *Twelfth Night* where she transforms herself into a boy.

MM:

And so many American high school films where the girl gets on the football team by pretending to be a boy...

MM:

We also talked about extremities of emotions, very interesting. And how it changes quickly. Drama, love....

KG:

And it's tricky how to go about it. To make them fake, or sincere – because in a way it becomes quite tiring...

MM:

And it's very difficult to do emotions well, out of nothing. To me it can be like a bad stand-up. It has to be really well-prepared and sensitive.

BS:

In the comedies it's almost always sincere. The emotions, no matter how extreme they are, almost always come from the heart. Unless it's a villain, or somebody deceiving – but then, also when they are disguised and trying to deceive, it's always the real emotions that come through, that we connect with.

KG:

It's also very open. It's not people suppressing emotions for fifty years. It's instant, love at first sight. Young, lustful.

BS:

And again, there is room for this kind of thing in the comedies. There is room for innocence and childishness and sensitivity, all these things that are completely mowed over in the tragedies. And the histories.

RB:

Especially in the histories!

BS:

Everybody who is innocent gets crushed. There is Lady Macbeth who is almost a masculine figure of will and murder and so on – but always, if you have an innocent young girl, smack! There is no room for that.

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MM:

It surprised me a little bit how funny the basic things of comedy still are. How funny I still find it to pull down someone's pants or slip in a banana peel, or to exit and enter at the wrong or right moment. That all these stereotypical things still totally work.

BS:

Yeah, you never tire of them. It's like when you are rehearsing a play and you find that if you have a moment that is funny then it's going to be funny in rehearsals *every* time. You don't get tired of it if it's really funny. You can laugh at it for ten rehearsals in a row, and you *know* that the audience is going to laugh at it. I don't know if maybe it has something to do with laughter being a physical reaction, I don't know what it is. But somehow, if the timing is right you will laugh every time.

KG:

It's like with these Shakespeare scenes – most of the time it is not the text itself that is funny, it's just very basic situations. One person knows something that the other one doesn't, and one person looks at the other two who don't know – and the audience knows the most!

RB:

That's the best.

KG:

Somehow the packing order of Shakespearean comedy is this: the audience knows the most, then comes the supporting characters, and the main characters know the least. And isn't the clown a kind of mediator between the audience and the story? Someone who can connect both worlds somehow....



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