



Bell Jars. Creative Processes and Compromises

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Abstract: *In 2017, I participated in a performance, titled “Üvegbűrák” / “Bell Jars” / “Die Glasglocke”, as a costume, puppet and set designer. The performance had two very different venues, and due to these two venues, the change of location had brought up problems to be solved and it thus went along with creative compromises. The encounter and merging of the artistic concept and practical feasibility was unavoidable at this point, but one can inspire the other, and a space structure could be found, which met both standards - the dramatic and practical function. My aim in this paper, based on my own experiences, is to examine and analyze the visual aspects of the performance as a series of creative and cooperative actions, and the artistic and practical issues which were raised in the creation progress.*

Key words: *theatre design; set design; performance design; creative compromise; collaboration.*

As a doctoral student of the Hungarian University of Fine Arts, the subjects of my doctoral research are performances which are not created in the classical, proscenium theatre, but they are developed in non-traditional spaces and use theatre as an expressive tool to examine nowadays' problems. In connection with my research work, I am a participant in a project titled *Collaboration and compromises in the practice of creative work*, led by É. Kiss Piroska.

This project investigates the topic of creative workflow, focusing on cinematic and theatre work. Making a cinematic artwork or a theatre play is a process which requires serious technical background and involves situations that draw in many individual artists and creators. It is a process in which a lot of compromises are needed to realize the final artwork. As a part of this project, I would like to analyze one of my recent theatre works from the point of view of these specific aspects of creative collaboration. Based on my experiences as a set and costume designer, my aim is to examine and analyze the visual aspects of the performance as a series of common thinking and creative actions. I would like to describe the artistic and practical issues that were raised throughout the creation progress.



In the first half of 2017, I was involved in a video- and object-animation-based puppet performance, titled *Üvegűrák / Bell Jars / Die Glasglocke*, as a costume, puppet and set designer. The performance was shown at the Fitz! Zentrum für Figurentheater in Stuttgart within a contemporary theater festival called NEWZ 17: *Alles muss sich ändern*, and then at the TRAFÓ House of Contemporary Arts in Budapest. The director of the performance was Helga Lázár, the writer was Sára Gábor, with whom I had had a chance to work before. The actresses were: Alessandra Bosch, Anika Herzberg, Sarah Wissner. The base material was Sylvia Plath's novel, *The Bell Jar*. The autobiographical literary work, which tells about Esther Greenwood's life, has a lot of layers: spiritual crises, suicide attempt and healing. It is full of questions about anxiety, fears, the search for identity and search for one's own path.

Due to the two venues mentioned, we had to think in a spatial framework in which the performance could be shown and operated wherever the basic theatrical technical background (pulleys and reflectors) was given. The change of locations and the major differences between them had brought up problems to be solved and necessarily went along with creative compromises. The encounter and merging of the artistic concept and practical feasibility was unavoidable at this point, but it was interesting to experience that one could inspire the other, and a space structure which met both standards - the dramatic and practical function - could be found. The semi-improvised performance was born in a theatrical and form-oriented thinking: the visuals, the toolbox used, the space, the script of the performance - these were not written or drawn on paper during the process, and because of the improvised, playful parts, the performance and the aftermath of the performance were always a bit different, differently told. They were always born at that very moment.

Thoughts, conception

Before the rehearsal process, before our text was written, we started our creative cooperation with the director and the writer. We talked and thought about the raw material itself, about the structure, the messages, the accents; it was a continuous discussion. We examined the questions: what did the character of Esther and her path mean to us? What were the points, decisions, traumas that we could identify in *The Bell Jar* and also in nowadays situations? Gender roles, chauvinism, emancipation, rebellion against the rules of the existing social order? How can a woman live in this social order, what can her position be?

Several artistic concepts emerged from the director, depending on what she "caught" in the raw material and what her focus was on. These concepts, based on different ideas and accents, were operating with different visual elements, spaces of different types and also



different materials, costumes, puppetry techniques, and theatrical scenarios. Finally, the language of the visual form was built on the naive, deceptive realities and material qualities of the paper. We wanted to build up a strange spatiality of three-dimensional picture books, in which readings work with visuals, dramatic impressions, illustrations. The dynamics and rhythm of the discovery of these images could emphasize the story itself.

Andrea Magyari also highlights in her analytical writing that “the space representation of *The Bell Jar* illustrates the progression of the heroine towards a spiritual collapse. The space eventually collapses into a cavity where Esther is trying to commit suicide” (Magyari s.a). The real environment changes into coloured pages of women's magazines, "posters", abstract two-dimensional images, and the human characters change into rigid paper figurines. Identified reality and symbolical fiction is merging in abstraction.

Paper is a material with a very broad association, it contains the purpose of writing, and in general, the nature and process of creation, reflecting on the protagonist's - Esther's - longing for writing; it can be easily shaped, it is tearable, foldable, and it can be shaded. We were thinking in pictures, visual études, atmospheres, compositions, rather than depicting angular narratives. We wanted to create pictures which were not static, but they lived with the dramatic process, fed on it, evolved, changed; their ultimate form and structure were obtained through the rehearsal process, through collective experimentation. We experimented with a multitude of static or moving light sources, colouring the image field, with the light-transmittance of different materials, changing the path of the light, moving between the light source and the shaded area, for varying the size of each silhouette form, and thus creating grotesque circumstances.

The paper-world was photographed with an old camera that was in continuous, real-time communication with a projector, projecting the images onto a paper screen. When the camera took on the surface of the canvas, it produced a kaleidoscopic effect, multiplying the image.

The performance took place in two dimensions: the space behind the projection surface, which was also split into several tables and animated surfaces, and the plain canvas of the projection screen itself. Eventually, these screens would be cut off, the cloak of the tricks would fall, and we saw all of the extraordinary tools used for creating the lyrical visuality: ladders, crumpled and creased paper-pieces, plastic toys, scattered clothes, tables, spilled water and an aquarium. It reached a visual and dramatic disclosure, and the inevitable self-discovery of the creative space happened.

But the show must go on: the actors were improvising from this point on. They were seeking for situations, desperately trying to reengage with the others, refined their relations, their purpose, and their characters. At first, they tried to continue Esther's story, but it did not work out, so they had to look for other solutions. They started



questioning themselves and the others: what to do then? The director and the writer had interviewed them at the beginning of the creative process, about their own lives and how they had been through situations similar to Esther's. They had these personal stories built in the performance, mostly into the second part.

They were trying to find their own answers to these questions, but at this time not as dramatic, two-dimensional characters, but as young actresses: what can be done then? Should it be written, or should it be done? Would that be that easy? Or one can go simply to bed and sleep, the other can go to Amsterdam to drink beer, the other can go to work at the family shop, marry a decent man, be a decent wife?

The second improvisation exercise followed a loose system, as the continuation of the first part. We saw human figures that had been perceived only as shades before. They had different faces, they had their characters, their own thoughts, their desires, their problems, and they could not hide behind a screen anymore. They could not hide from themselves anymore.

The theatrical vision and unity in the traditional sense were both deconstructing, disintegrating into elements as the players began to anatomize each other - the space surrounding them - their relationship to creation - and at last, themselves. These questions, which are all about a young, talented artist who wants to thrive and seeks for inspiration, who wants to build up his or her own identity and existence, are very important to me, as well as the visions and possibilities, the future of my own generation, in the light of Esther's personal crisis. These are questions that are worth asking, they are worth to be faced. It was very important in our collaborative work that these questions were pressing for all of us, even though we spoke different languages, lived in different countries and had different life experiences. István Magyari-Beck stated in his study about creative groups that "without common values, there is no common task either" (Magyari-Beck 1986, 14).

Puppets and puppeteers

For Esther, those around her would eventually become puppets, mannequins put into the showroom behind the glass. The three actresses were the puppeteers in the strange world of the performance. They were 'pulling the strings', they animated, moved the puppets and the objects, they produced pictures with them, and their own stories were directly 'published' through these images.

Finding the suitable puppet technique was also an experimental process. First, I made puppets that were inspired by paper-dressed dolls. The two-dimensional dressed-up dolls have also become fashionable games since the end of the 18th century, first as characters



of popular books and tales, and later the actors in movies, comics, real celebrities and actresses appeared in this printed, paper form. Unfortunately, they did not function properly, because their static nature provided a small game; however, we incorporated them in some scenes. I also made Muppet puppets from paper, which the actors could move with their hands and make them "talk"; these puppets brought famous artists and female creators or creators with female identities into the story: for example, Maya Deren, Cindy Sherman. The final form of visual abstraction was a shadow play, which was combined with the aforementioned paper puppets and other animated objects.



The Bell Jar, photo by: Zsófia Mihály-Geresdi

Objects

Pop art was reflected in the objects we used - its ironic - kitsch-world-aesthetic, the phenomena of consumerist society. We used newspaper clippings, commercial photography, a yellow Erika typewriter, a Barbie doll, a plush toy, a toy gun, pearls and various jewellery, women's dresses on hangers. We selected the objects together. Among them there were several which were the actresses' own personal possessions. A



spatial assemblage was composed of these personal, intimate objects, drawn from their own contexts, their own surroundings. They became a banal set of fragments.

There was one object which had an important role: an aquarium. Réka Kosztrabszky analyzes Plath's novel positioning the elements of water and glass as literary topos. "Water is associated with death, suicide, suffocation and amniotic water, and thus revival. The glass and the bell jar made from glass are: window glass, pleading, closure, petri dish, preparation." (Kosztrabszky 2013) By using the aquarium, combining these symbolic elements, these two materials – glass and water - together with the paper, we could create impressive images.

Execution, location

As I wrote in my introduction, the performance had two very different venues: the Stuttgart Fitz! Zentrum, where the premiere took place, and then the performance was brought to the TRAFÓ House of Contemporary Arts in Budapest, to a dance rehearsal room. During our work process, we had to keep in mind that we would have to travel with the production and to operate the performance in another space, in very different parameters, but preferably in its original quality. Regarding the theatrical space, we had to think of a visuality that could be shown and operated wherever the basic theatrical technical background (pulleys and lamps) was given. At the same time, the change of location brought up problems to be solved and the necessity of concluding compromises.

The piece had to be toured, so we could not reasonably think about the use of large, traditional decorative elements, which require a long time for installation. We could only operate with smaller, mobile elements that take up little space and could easily, flexibly adapt to the proportions and circumstances of any small or large space. We could only use elements that can be carried and had relatively small size (lamps, personal objects and puppets), or could be dismantled and assembled (our fixed screen, which was overall quite big, but it was glued together from smaller pieces of paper), or ordinary objects expected to be found on site (tables, chairs, ladders, a projector).

Different number of lighting positions and possibilities, different spatial dimensions. Inevitably, different effects, different feelings. In our case, first, we got a larger, classic box stage and then, a smaller rehearsal room. In the narrower space, the play was inevitably closer to the viewers, as the audience was also sitting on the same level as the stage. This changed position also changed the viewers' experience. Therefore, the performance worked differently. In the larger space, the set and the viewers were further from each other, the audience was rather in an observer status. In the smaller space, the



whole experience became much more intimate, the audience became a part of the set, a part of the play. They became participants only because of the changed spatial setting.

The change of space was interesting not only because of the different surroundings, but also because of the significant change in the language medium. The Stuttgart performance was performed in German, with German actors and a German audience, and in German and English in Budapest. The German section was subtitled in Hungarian, and the improvisation part was performed in English. It was an important, but necessary compromise, and it had an effect on the play, which was much strongly, intensively interpreted in German, the shared mother tongue of the actors and the audience.

Artistic cooperation, creative collaboration

Through such a formal experimentation, the boundaries became interoperable, the classical theatrical hierarchy and roles faded into the practical aspects and into the active, continuous unity of creation. The factors of changing venues and the limited options, the compromises I had to make, freed me in a certain sense, freed my creativity. Every time a new sentence came in, a new movement, a new thought popped up, we arranged a new structure, a new image. With this cooperation-focused work method, we formed a group, with members of the group having an influence on each other and their experience of their joint operation, their artistic cooperation also had an impact on them. It was created for the realization of a process, consisting of different kinds of creators who worked for the common purpose and for the creation of joint work.

The cohesion of a group of theatre practitioners working on a production is always based on creative force and will, motivation and solidarity to reach the common goal (creating a play, a performance). The group has its own goal, its participants are tied to each other by an action that has a common purpose, which also means functional interconnection.

The progress-oriented creative group can become an informal community in a formal framework, which is a hierarchical structure formed by different roles and statuses, and which may include value judgments, or prestige ranges. In theatre, this structure and these specific roles are given: director, playwright, actors and actresses, designer, technicians, and so on. The members' activities are differentiated into roles, relationships are organized and functions are created. But if there is continuous experimenting with visuals, text, movement and acting, and everyone is involved, these strict roles will quickly dissolve. The resulting group dynamic differs from the formal structure organized around the definitions of tasks and powers, and this can strengthen the group's functioning.



For me, as a set designer, the most interesting experience was the fact that I did not had to draw exact drawings of the set, the puppets or the costumes after I got the finished script with the director's concept, as I always do in a classical play, but I had the chance to think about it in a coherent process, always changing it, building it, shaping it during almost every rehearsal. I had the chance to think in images, effects, materials.



The Bell Jar, photo by: Zsófia Mihály-Geresdi

Summary

The concept of collective theatre, 'devised theatre' as an artistic endeavour redefines the structure of a performance, a performance's aesthetic, as well as the types of different creative co-operations. This working method is undoubtedly useful in theatrical experiences and, above all, in human experience. Altogether, closely-articulating areas of art - in the traditional sense of the work - interact with each other, develop together and learn from each other. The visual world is also born together with the rehearsal process and the play itself, so the final product is an outcome of the joint search of the director, designer, actor and writer. It is the process of finding a common



theatre language. Making theatre, in which several creators have the objective of creating together a single piece of art, is a cooperation before everything else.

Working in a group is essential when we are talking about theatre, or making theatre, where succeeding in making a production, a play, needs a lot of creative compromises. Many factors can occur, inside or outside of the creative team, which can be hindering or can be an important source of creative ideas and innovations at the same time. Magyari-Beck writes in his study that "the creative activity always starts from a somehow problematic situation" (Magyari-Beck 1986, 15).

It is therefore, based on this one, particular experience of collective creation, and based on my previous observations as a theatre-designer, that I think it is worthwhile to continue to discourse on the study of creative relationships, the nature of artistic collaboration, the models of creative teamwork, and overall, artistic knowledge and practice.

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