

## An actor on acting in the classroom: Reflections on performance

### **Eight Years!**

I have always been acting for children. When I started I was a child myself, and the audience my comrades and classmates. Then I became a professional actor and have spent the larger part of the last 25 years performing for children, preferably in schools in classrooms. So in a way my audience has not changed. But I have, and my thoughts and attitude about it all.

The first production I did after theatre school was called 'Eight years'. It was about three eight year old kids meeting in a playground. We performed it on tour, in the school gymnasiums for children in the age of 7 to 9. A very special occasion took place after about half of the run. It was a big gymnasium so instead of playing in the middle as we used to do, we huddled up in one corner with the audience on the floor in front of us. It's always difficult playing in oversized rooms, but we made the best of it. We were approaching the end of the play when I heard noises from the door in the other end of the gymnasium. Suddenly the door opens and a woman stands in the doorway. She looks puzzled. Nothing happens. From the corner of my eye I can see, (while acting), how she first steps out of the room and then after a short while comes back. Now she closes the door behind her and stands still, watching the play. No one except us three actors has taken any notice of her. Then she starts walking, towards us. I think that maybe she wants to take a seat among the audience. But instead she walks past the audience, crossing our so called stage, passing in between the actors and the audience and moves down to the left corner. Now everyone is watching her. She grabs a handle and starts pulling down the venetian blinds. By this time, all motion except hers has completely stopped.

When the blinds are down she walks back the same way she came and leaves the room without a word. We are all puzzled. What happened? Was that real? The beauty of it is that my next line in the play was something like: 'Oh, it got dark. No we have to go home.'

This story is quite extreme in many ways, but in other ways it represents a quite common problem performing in schools. As an actor, acting in schools, you have to deal with a lot of things that have nothing to do with your own part of the performance.

## **What I do!**

Acting in schools is basically not different from acting on stage. The first thing that struck me during my first tours though, was that nothing in the physical environment of the schools was aimed for theatre. Badly lit classrooms with lots of posters on the wall, or nothing at all... Noises outside and the sun shining in through the window or maybe heavy rain gushing against the windows. The other main difference compared to working for adults in theatres is that my audience of pupils in the classroom has not paid for the ticket. They have probably not chosen the play or might not even be interested in the art form as such. Our visit is part of their education. So, how do I as an actor relate to an audience that is not completely voluntary in an environment that is not aimed for theatre? School audiences are often described, especially the older they are, as difficult and sometimes even hostile audiences. What can I as an actor demand of them?

My job as an actor is to use my own body and soul to portray the characters in the play. I must turn written text into spoken words and actions. I must find the emotional and physical expressions. For a short moment I will pretend that I am Hamlet or Lady Macbeth and act as if it was a real situation. If this is going to work, the audience must accept this charade. They must, in their turn, pretend that what is happening in front of them is serious and for real. If they don't, the theatrical agreement does not work. The magic won't happen. This immediately raises a problem with certain age groups. Young children often accept this game of make-believe without complaining, with or without contract. Older children, especially from the puberty and older, tend to be less willing to play along.

## **The innocent**

Some years ago, I was in a play called 'The innocent'. It was a difficult play to perform and in one scene my character realises that he and his friends by making mistakes are responsible for a child's death. Just as I opened up for all the vulnerability it takes to act such a moment and say my line: 'Oh my god, we have killed a child!' I could see a young man in front of the stage loudly yawn as he took a nonchalant glance at his watch. I just fell to pieces, shattered. Revealed, humiliated. And all I could do was to continue. This moment lasted for a short second and I don't think anyone else noticed it. But while the play continued as if nothing happened I worked in the shadow of that yawn.

## **So much going on ...**

At the same time there's no sense in being mad at the guy. There is so much going on with kids in their early teens. They have a large part of their social interaction in school. They build different groups, try to adapt to new patterns which can change in an instant. We have puberty and hormones all over the place. It is not that they don't know how to behave or what is expected of them in a theatre situation. They know! Sometimes they obey orders and sometimes they don't. If they don't it's either because they don't care or because they just simply can't sit still or be quiet or whatever. They know all about behaviour. Since their smallest years they have heard: Sit down, be still, keep quiet and take your cap off! But sometimes they just can't be still. It's physically impossible. And then we have the world of the school in itself with all the sounds, people and things going on everywhere.

A classic situation. We were playing Othello. At the end when Othello has his weirdly beautiful but, especially when performing for an audience of thirteen year-olds, difficult speech about his love for the woman he is about to murder:

I must weep,

But they are cruel tears: this sorrow's heavenly;  
It strikes where it doth love. She wakes.  
(William Shakespeare, *Othello*, Act V, scene II)

We can hear a young man shouting from outside: 'Kiss my ass! Kiss my ass!' as he loudly and energetically spanked himself.

## **Who am I in their eyes?**

At this point it's easy to stop and think: Why? What on earth am I doing acting in schools? And sure, I don't know how many times I've been prepared to get down on my knees and pray for a curtain, a spotlight and a grown up audience who will remain passively in their seats, shut up, laugh when supposed, applaud in the end, and then just go home. But the thing is that I have had many of my strongest experiences as an actor in schools, in a classroom with 60 pairs of restless eyes in front of me. How is that possible? To me it has to do with the fact that what is tough and hard about being in the schools, the tempo, energy and the close encounters, also are the things that makes it rewarding being there. When you reach behind the obvious, really wonderful things happen. And when the pupils open up they are really mind-blowingly open. But to get there I have to realize who I am in their eyes.

Just being an actor, moving around in the school creates an attention. Some years ago I featured in a television show aimed at young children. The first time I was out in a school after that, I was instantly recognized by a young girl. She looked at me, stunned. 'Is that really you?' I said, 'Yes'. Then she looked around; 'But where is your limousine, and your bodyguards?' In her mind actors did not walk the earth as normal people. I have to realise that just being in the school as an actor is a sort of statement in itself. It is also a question about my position and which role I should take in school. Am I just an actor or do I as well have a pedagogical responsibility? In a theatre I can be just an actor, sheltered from the audience before and after the performance. When I enter a school building trying to locate the correct classroom, I am fully visible. A public person, but at the same time a private one. Being in a school I will have many different roles, and they can shift in an instant. I am myself, the private person and the actor preparing, the stage

manager and the performer about to shift quickly to the pedagogue and host of the event. But since the reason I am where I am is because I am an actor, and as such a representative for my whole profession, I will also have the role of ambassador. And as such I have a pedagogical role, or at least take part in a pedagogical process, whether I want to or not.

## **For whom?**

Some years after the production of 'The innocent', I took part in a course on practical knowledge and started writing about this phenomenon of actors reeling under the burden of humiliation. It was a revelation. It gave me a perspective on other people's view of my work. And when talking about position, one part is to evaluate the 'humiliation felt'. Am I as with the yawning incident to take it personally or can I just see it as an example of teen-age angst? It is not a disease that I am cured of, but I have discovered some of the mechanisms behind the humiliation, and it makes it easier to keep my calm in edgy situations.

Even so, sometimes I feel I just can't go on. There are limits and it can be necessary to put your foot down. But that is a complex situation too. If I for instance get the feeling I need to stop a performance, I have to decide why and when and for whom?

Before a performance of Othello I saw a young guy in the audience who had brought a newspaper with him. He waved around with it a lot so I walked up to him and asked him kindly to put the newspaper under his chair during the show. He said ok and everything seemed to be fine. But about twenty minutes in the play I saw that he sat with the newspaper again. A bit later he started 'reading'. Nowadays I'm fine with that. He doesn't have to appreciate our work. It's his privilege to disapprove with theatre. But after a while I notice his reading is not just an act of being bored and wanting to shut of. He communicated his discontent to his fellow classmates. His movements became more lavish and I could see he enjoyed the attention he was getting. Now, this was not ok. At this point he has crossed a line since he makes it harder for his comrades to enjoy our performance. I thought of different solutions and then, while 'acting', moved closer to him and finally stretched out and took the paper from him, folded it under my

arm and continued the scene. I put the newspaper away and gave it back to him after the show, explaining why I had done what I had done. Everything was fine.

## **What can I demand?**

This is a cute little story with a happy ending, but I know that just a couple of years before I could have gone crazy and stopped the show demanding the paper to be thrown away or just accepted it and just continued while the focus was lost and I was just pissed off but incapable of finding a solution. To me the key has been realising my position and if I'm going to interfere, in whose name I'm doing it. Everyone is to be given a fair chance to approve or not! And I must be prepared to act through annoying situations without interrupting. Sometimes though, you must react strongly. When, again with Othello, we could hear a pupils harsh comment about Desdemona as we approached the end: 'Oh, why don't you just kill her so we can go home!', we had to stop. There was no way we could continue, pretending that this comment had not flown through the room. But even if we were upset, we managed to make the break to a discussion of the nature of theatre and acting and what it takes/needs.

I consider myself as being an artist with high quality demands. I am a professional. But how much can I demand of an inexperienced involuntary audience? If I would go crazy as soon as anyone coughed in the audience as sometimes happens on our national stage, I wouldn't get far in the school world. I'm in the school because I want to give the pupils a great and close theatrical experience. But if I can't do a good job because of fidgety children or bad circumstances, what's the point?. It's always a balance, a give and take situation. Again it helps repeating why I am where I am and for whom I play; but also to be honestly curious and oblivious at the same time about the pupils in the audience.

Curiosity is hard to fake though. My research and writing about the actor and humiliation was a way for me to stay curious. I was now able to witness the process from more directions than just one. There were times when I felt bored with what I felt was a lack of progression

in school theatre, at least as we made it at the time. Neither did I truly see the point in our pedagogical approach. But thanks to my colleagues and teachers at the course I could see what was specific with my work in the schools, something that is difficult when you do it on a daily basis. Nowadays I see many different perspectives and possibilities. And if I can honestly welcome the pupils to a classroom, for the moment our theatre, in a positive way, it will be so much easier to work and talk together.

## **Curiosity and prejudice**

A central thing for the actor is to be able to pretend to be someone else in certain situations, 'as if' it was for real. It is also essential to perform as if all this happened for the first time. I might have performed the role of Hamlet 50 or sometimes even 250 times. I can have loads of experience both in the part and as an actor. But I can't show that to the audience. If I signal routine in the manner of: 'Trust me, I know what I'm doing!', the audience will probably be disappointed. For them it is a unique visit and they too seek the 'as if' experience, but from their point of view. Of course they know this is not the only time the play is performed. They also realise that this is not for real and they need to be comfortable and confident that the actors won't hurt themselves etc. But the whole point with theatre is that everything is in a way possible. We could change the play if we wanted to, and things do happen, which affects the performance as with my example about the teacher and the venetian blinds. I have to trust my play, our production, and then let go. If I am confident in the story we're telling I can explore the small changes and possibilities that will occur this very day, with this very audience. It is not easy, but it is in a way necessary to involve the audience in my own curiosity. 'Let's see where this takes us today!'

Another way to stay curious is sometimes know as little as possible. A lot of teachers want to, in a very helpful spirit, tell us or sometimes warn us about their children. Then we say no thanks. It's vital that we see our audience with our own eyes. We already have a lot of prejudices to work with or against, we don't need more. The thing is when I come to a school and enter a classroom, I do it as a guest in their world. I'm invading their home territory. And to be able to do so in a good way

I must be sure of what I'm supposed to do and open for the rest that happens. In many ways my performance starts the very second I step in to the school with a little note in my hand saying which room we're going to be in and which teacher we're going to meet. In my encounter with the kids it's an advantage that I don't take them or their answers for granted. That will help during the performance and afterwards, when we talk about the play. A couple of years ago I played around actively with my prejudices. One way of doing this was to try and guess before the performance which children would be participating actively in the discussion afterwards. I thought I at least would be able to hand-pick six pupils who would not say a single word, based on my experience and prejudice. I could just as well have been flipping coins ...

## **Active thinking**

The last eleven years I've been working at Friteatern in Sundbyberg outside Stockholm, Sweden. When we perform in schools we always have discussions with the audience afterwards. What happened? why did it happen? what could have been different? and further questions. After a show of Othello last autumn, and a discussion afterwards, I asked if anyone had any further questions. A girl raised her hand and said: 'Why are we watching this play?' My initial reaction was; 'Oh, my god haven't anyone understood nothing? We've played and talked, what's so hard about that?' Then I heard my colleague saying: 'That is a really good question!' I was stunned; What's she talking about? I tried to answer the question and started blabbing and realised I had really no idea. Not that I didn't know, I just had forgotten all about it. Taking it for granted after about 130 performances. I had lived with this project for three and a half years and had explained the point so many times. My colleague was right. It is a good question, a central question. Always go back to the starting point. Why am I an actor? Why this play, here and now? But it's not really going back. It is, and this is the difficult part, about making a new decision every day even if it means the same one. Active thinking again and again. At the same time I must be prepared that the answer to the very same question might change. I'm aware that this is a classic sign of madness, expecting the answer to change but at the same time it is necessary. It's part of the actors



work, but also, the point of being an actor is to tell stories, to show possibilities, address issues and pose questions. If I am not prepared to consider and sometimes reconsider my own position, how can I expect anyone in my audience to honestly reflect over the questions I pose?

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