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EEN SCÈNE SCHOPPEN

THEORIE EN PRAKTIJK VAN HET PARTICIPATIEF DRAMA

Luc Opdebeeck en Karen Bevers

EEN SCÈNE SCHOPPEN

theorie en praktijk van het participatief drama



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VSBfonds, iedereen doet mee

VSBfonds ondersteunt initiatieven die bijdragen aan een samenleving waarin iedereen actief meedoet, zich betrokken voelt en de kans heeft persoonlijk en maatschappelijk te groeien. Het fonds is actief op drie gebieden: Mens & Maatschappij voor sociale initiatieven die meedoen als doel hebben, Kunst & Cultuur voor plannen waardoor meer mensen kunnen genieten van kunst en cultureel erfgoed en Beurzen voor studenten die in het buitenland verder willen studeren of onderzoek doen. Het fonds steunt projecten met geld, kennis, ervaring en een professioneel netwerk.

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VOORWOORD

THE ART AND CRAFT OF FORMAAT

Formaat is a name by now well known to anyone involved in the field of participatory arts in the Dutch speaking world, but also beyond the tiny Low Lands, to the growing community of practitioners of the Theatre of the Oppressed worldwide. It is the first TO group I ever came across with a theatre and rehearsal space of its own. Not an improvised shed or living room or backyard or classroom corner or seminar hall borrowed on good will and persistence, but a 'proper', autonomously run theatre-cum-rehearsal space, technically fairly well-equipped and designed to include a friendly bar for drinks, snacks and conversations. As the large oeuvre of work presented in the book demonstrates, Formaat has also managed to survive, grow and sustain itself over close to two decades. This is not exceptional but nonetheless remarkable, given that community theatre groups and collectives have the reputation of leading intense but short lives, sparked and invigorated by, but also dependent on the vagaries of a few motivated, charismatic individuals. Formaat is increasingly heavily invested in education and skill-sharing, as is amply evident in their training and outreach programmes, in the extensive documentation of their work and publications such as this one, which undertake the task of systematizing and making their practices accessible.

Seen in this light, it would be fair to claim that Formaat is an institution.

But wait a minute. To most participatory art practitioners rehearsing their revolutions, this may not come across as a compliment. After all, isn't institutionalization a sign of stagnation? A mark of the onset of hierarchies? Doesn't it risk making participatory art into a meagre replacement of the ailing welfare state? Where fundraising overshadows consciousness raising and transforming the status quo becomes a project management issue? Where organisational squabbles start taking priority over larger political struggles?

The question I therefore have as a critical, yet admiring well-wisher is not how Formaat succeeded in establishing itself as an institution, but moreover how they learn to nourish a cutting-edge practice of participatory art *despite* their institutional success? For ultimately, it is not relevant how long a group has existed, how many productions it has done, how many people have been trained or how big its reputation is. It is more important to grapple with the difficult questions of how to retain the integrity between means and ends, how to *not* lose sight of the broader collective vision that both forms and is informed by the theatre practice. How not to fall in love with ourselves.

This book serves as a do-it-yourself handbook for jokers, particularly for those in an early stage of their involvement with participatory theatre. It explicitly tries to make the tasks and challenges of joking accessible to all, a craft that it perceives as one that can be mastered with practice and effort, rather than a mystified

art that demands some inborn talent. Indeed by creating a new verb out of the original noun *joker*, a term directly translated from the Portuguese *curinga*, the book argues that the actual doing of '*jokeren*' has primacy over being or becoming a '*joker*'. Paradoxically, because of this emphasis on the work of *joking* rather than the status of being a *joker*, the book is also a don't-do-it-yourself manual. It makes it clear that the practice is grounded in collective efforts and inseparable from the messy processes that entails. The tips and advice offered do not therefore work in the same formulaic way that an instruction manual for a washing machine does. There is a fine balance to be struck in the process of sharing knowledge and experiences from the ground, without turning it into a packaged commodity on the informal education market.

The book adopts a pedagogical attitude that does not confuse equality with equivalence. It does not avoid being directive or prescriptive in giving do's and don'ts purely out of a sense of political correctness or false assumption that any kind of participation is innocent and benign in itself. The underlying pedagogy of the book assumes a certain responsibility for the standards of *joking*. It offers questions to ask oneself and discusses negative examples in group processes, recognising the value of failure and error. At the same time, the '*joker arsenal*' does not claim sole ownership over its artillery. It acknowledges the input it has received from various sources and the (albeit largely brotherly) camaraderie with practitioners from different parts of the world. The book is to be appreciated for trying hard not to be promotional material for *Formaat*.

Since pedagogy is a central concern of the book, it seems apt to turn to Paolo Freire, who eloquently argues in his book *Pedagogy of Freedom*, that 'teacher preparation should never be reduced to a form of training. Rather, teacher preparation should go beyond the technical preparation of teachers and be rooted in the ethical formation both of selves and of history'. It is true that *jokers* are not equivalent to teachers, but since learning, teaching and disseminating the art and craft of *joking* is so crucial to their participatory practice, Freire's statement continues to speak profoundly to the context of *Formaat's* theatre-based interventions. *Joking* is not a mere skill-set or qualification for the employment market. It needs to be viewed as a means towards the ethical formatting of the self, a self that is always and already a social and political formation. It is this ethos that one hopes the readers of this book will imbibe and draw inspiration from.

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