

## HOTEL PRO FORMA

### Exposing Reality as a Visual Illusion

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The Danish theatre company Hotel Pro Forma is based in Copenhagen and under its director Kirsten Dehlholm has been making large-scale visual theatre events since 1986. Hotel Pro Forma is a hotel-like factory hall on Amager just outside Copenhagen where the theatre has its workshop, archives, costumes, depot, a kitchen and a library and meeting-room. Engaging in a nomadic dramaturgy between the moving theatre and the static exhibition, between role and fate, the theatre of Hotel Pro Forma is an exhibition that borrows aesthetics from the world of theatre and a theatre that uses the aesthetics of the exhibition in order to stage the gaze of the audience.

#### The hotel

As implied by its name, Hotel Pro Forma is a theatre company whose point of departure is form and the formal. It is a theatre with no stage, no specific members and no repertory. But it is always in motion. It is the hotel as a stage. A temporary home in that foreign borderland where one is liberated from series of social and psychological questions. The borderland is a *displacement* which is always off-balance, due to cultural shifts and discontinuities. In such borderlands the individual's culture, background and history dissolve. What is left is a figure, standing in an unknown context. Hotel Pro Forma is a nomadic stage in a land of possibilities, where one can lose one's sense of direction, context, social position and identity.

Hotel Pro Forma works with a coherent, recurring concept, which has been developed and tested through constantly changing forms and points of departure. The company's creative development, or change from one performance to the other, is interesting not only as a historical development but also as a total oeuvre.

Hotel Pro Forma's restless scanning of various materials and shapes which has one common theme - formal or existential boundaries. This means that a number of questions emerge. What is a staged representation? What kind of knowledge can be presented or represented? How is the process organized? What is the creative process, the relationship between producer, actor, set designer and spectator? Where does the process start? In this way it is the rediscovery of theatrical forms which is crucial. In her attempt to answer such questions Kirsten Dehlholm has attempted to redefine the actor, the use of text in theatre, the theatre space, the relationship between spectator and actor, dramaturgy and the identity of the artist.

Hotel Pro Forma creates a double staging: partly of the performance and the space, partly of the concept of theatre. The stage is no longer a clearly defined place, but metaphor which can be established anywhere, even in a traditional theatre. This does not mean that everything is theatre but that the boundaries of the institution of theatre have been moved to new areas, framing not only the individual performances but the work as a whole in a constant delineation between art and non-art, theatre and non-theatre. A staging of the theatre concept where the theatre's framework, the building, the institution and the perception are all dislocated or displaced, could also be called a retheatricalization or ritualization of the theatre, which seeks a basic form

through a kind of reductionism or minimalism. This runs contrary to a traditional theatre, where the issue of credibility is connected with the actor's ability to enter into a spirit, where the actor represents and plays a part. With *Hotel Pro Forma* credibility is an inherent part of the concept. In order to achieve credibility it is necessary to create a precise form which catches the audience's sense of orientation and perception without leading to a strict interpretation.

The place of enunciation is the 'hotel' as a metaphor, a stage, a temporary home in the unknown. It is a way of staging a void, which can open up for potential opportunities a haven in which one can play with identities, motives and dimensions.

### **Between baroque and romantic**

Performances in non-theatre spaces - in a public swimming-bath, in an old railway station or on the roof of a supermarket - are familiar forms of artistic displacement. Here the background, the space or the situation 'plays' along and influences 'the figure' or the way in which 'the figure' is experienced. The framework of the theatre visualizes itself as a stage-set. The relationship between figure and background or text and context is revisualized in *Hotel Pro Forma*. This creates uncertainty or disorientation in different ways. Placing something in unfamiliar surroundings, in a new context, may create an unusual way of seeing reality and a new form of understanding. The figure or the background changes character. The well-defined borders between them are dissolved. In the end, the relationship between work and framework, between theatre and non-theatre, is brought up for discussion, and eventually the relationship between life and death. The two worlds begin to merge in a peculiar way.

*Hotel Pro Forma*'s first performance *Terra Australis Incognita* (1986) played in the hall of the National Museum in Copenhagen. It dealt with the idea of an unknown southern continent, shaped by the imagination and pictured somewhere between the heat of the equator and the ice of the North Pole. The need to discover new worlds was conceived in order to complement the well-known, the familiar. The audience had a bird's-eye view of the performance. The floor, which was the stage, was painted as a hierogram (a secret holy scripture) without any depth perspective. This initial use of the bird's-eye view was further developed in *Why does night come, Mother* (1988). The viewpoint of the audience is vertical instead of horizontal. It was first performed in the five-storeyed town-hall building in Århus, with the audience on the upper floors, around an inner well that cuts through the building. The audience looked down on to the performers on the floor, which served as the stage. It seemed as though gravity had been removed. The performers appeared to float in a void between life and death. In a fine example of double staging, the actors' movements on the white floor became signs, patterns, icons with secret meanings. At the same time the placing of the spectators signified a staging of their viewpoint and sense of direction. As a sense of direction was lost, due to its dependence on the horizon and gravity, the disintegration of space set in and this made it possible for the audience to interpret the scene freely. It was like looking into a grave in which the dead were floating, as though they wanted to ascend towards the gaze of the spectators.

The 'figure-background' relationship is well known in psychology and geometry. An example is the ambivalent picture of the young woman/toothless crone. One and the

same picture, changing according to how the eye plays with the figure-background relationship. It is also well known that proportions, dimensions, colours and so on are decisive in the experience of the figure-background relationship. This is a basic principle in the so-called 'puzzle pictures' or visual illusions, which aim to trick the observer with their hidden writing. The same principle is used in '3-D' pictures, in which the two-dimensional image is changed to a completely different three-dimensional picture, when the observer represses the usual urge of the eye to focus. The sensory work (which could be called the *double view*) of the Rorschach test, in which a person observing form, colour or rhythm in an image 'finds' a personal and unexpected meaning, provides a further example.

In *Carpe Carpe Carpe* (1989), performed in a shipyard hall, a figure-background relation is created between children and texts, through complicated poems which the children have learned by heart, but which they do not understand. Consequently these texts are recited without interpretation. With the children as 'background' the texts are given a new meaning and a new textuality as sound images, just as the children themselves are made more prominent by the adult quality of the text.

*The Ship Called Bridge* (1991) was created in connection with a carnival week in a small provincial town and performed on the roof of a warehouse in the town centre. Approximately 700 citizens participated in various activities: archery, motor-cycling, aerobic teams, dog-training and so on. These well-known but not usually visible activities were taken out of their original context on to the roof, where they were performed at unusual hours - at night, for instance - and combined in new ways, contrasting with each other and/or supplementing each other. The consequence was that these apparently purposeless activities took on a whole new meaning. They became mythical actions, like secret rites, choreographies and patterns or pictures revealing the hidden strangeness and mystery of the neighbouring activity. The actions and activities were associated with a new code so that they could be read or seen from a different viewpoint. The dramaturgical technique lay in *montage*, which removed things from their original context and transplanted them into a new context.

Central to Hotel Pro Forma's practice is a formal engagement with shapes and sense of direction or orientation which, among other things, is inspired by the principle of the earliest museums, the *Wunderkammer* or the 'cabinet of curiosities'. Here no distinction was made between nature and art. Items were collected and exhibited in a very peculiar order: minerals, fossils, animal skeletons, ethnographical items, crafts, sculptures, paintings, and wonderful natural formations were all placed together. The idea was that there was a relationship between nature and art, the traces of which could be found when things were taken out of their usual functional contexts and placed together in new ways.

*Fact-arte-fact* (1991) was a performance and an exhibition at the State Museum of Art in Copenhagen. It was an 'art treasure' which brought together human beings and strange objects, both displaced from their point of origin, without any explanatory text, but presented in a way that made the tableaux illuminate and contrast with each other. The performance dissected life and dissolved creation in an anatomical theatre which asked the questions: What is life? How is life created? How does life disintegrate? Can life be copied?

The performers were five pairs of identical twins - ranging from 7 to 67 years of age - presented or exhibited as supernatural phenomena, wonders or creatures who touch the themes of authenticity or artificiality (genetic engineering), the unique or the copied. Typically one associates twins with something sacred, divine, mythical in relation to creation itself, but also as something scary, disastrous - the double or the shadow from Hans Christian Andersen or Dostojevskij. The twins are both exhibited objects and living miracles. During the performance the audience was divided in two groups, walking in either direction in the parallel rooms, able to see only half of the performance but able to hear it all.

*The Shadow's Quadrant* (1992) also used the vertical viewpoint, the 'bird's-eye view'. The spectators were placed on balconies on two levels looking down to a baroque garden characterized by geometrical constructions and mathematical patterns, which formed the principles of encounters or evasions. Twelve characters and two musicians populated the scene, all using different qualities of movement, which resulted in an authentic and specifically baroque choreography.

The text was concerned with four faculties which the gods steal from human beings: sleep, pain, memory and voice. Themes like geometry, passion, staging and 'the artificial' or 'the beautiful' were utilized to form an epic play about identity, fate, possibilities and shadows. Like a court audience the spectators become observers, the 'cognoscenti'. They can embrace the play with its knots, its staging of live components, each with his or her own specific allegorical characteristic: the one-legged man, the archer on stilts, the lame person, the hunchback, the singer, the dancer and so on.

*Operation: Orfeo* (1993) used the idea of an optical space able to function, due to the lighting, as a two-dimensional expanse, a flat wall, or a three-dimensional space, a deep staircase. The legend of Orpheus provided a familiar framework. In this performance opera, visual art, dance and architecture met in one great limbo, in which individual art forms are autonomous and appear simultaneously, merged without repeating each other and without linear narrative. *Operation: Orfeo* was installed in the classical Royal Theatre, Copenhagen. However, it was not a return to the institution of theatre as such but a staging of the theatre space which was being used as a form. The space has its own specific architecture with certain qualities and principles including a determined linear perspective.

Using a large white frame in front of a shiny white staircase with half-metre risers meant that the frontal viewpoint of the audience gave the impression of a never-ending staircase. The performers - a chorus, a solo dancer and a solo singer - were all situated on the staircase and appeared alternatively as individuals, a singing pattern, a relief, or a shadowland. The singers carried out a number of minimal actions, gestures or movements while the dancer slowly glided down the staircase and later ascended again. They were all dressed in greyish black costumes and crowns reminiscent of imperial Japan or China.

The performance, like the legend of Orpheus, dealt with the transitory state between darkness and light, between life and death. This threshold was to be found in the construction of the set, where the contours of the staircase disappeared under certain lighting, making the figures seem as if they were floating on the wall, defying gravity. In a different light the contours of the staircase were sharp and the figures conse-

quently grounded in the pictorial frame. The audience was partly sucked into this floating state and partly held by gravity. The visual composition of the performance was strictly graphic, arranged in accordance with geometrical changes rather than with narrative development. It was a precise range of pictures, like a story-board, forming a movement. Not a story but a movement.

In this sense the scenic concept was very similar to the tradition of classical Chinese or Japanese theatre. The set flats of Kabuki are movable in the same cinematic way, in relation to the precise physical actions of the figures. The entire performance reached its climax with green laser beams being transmitted from the staircase into the smoke-filled audience space. This created an undulating surface slowly rising like a floating sheet towards the ceiling, making the spectators sink to the bottom. The spectators were now travelling in limbo themselves, with an ocean of smoke above them as a borderland between this world and the kingdom of the dead.

The use of negation as a distinctive feature of Hotel Pro Forma's working methods is here very clear. The immediate starting-point is not the desire to express something in particular, interpreting a legend or creating a specific subject-matter. On the contrary, the basis is the forms which are being compared and contrasted. These create a semantic void which the spectators can fill with their own meanings and readings by letting themselves be sucked into a concrete physical space created by the frame, the staircase, the movements of the chorus, the shifts of the light, the text and the music. There are no limits. There is only a limbo in which possibility for the creation of new meanings may arise.

The play with the limits of the visual originates in the *trompe-l'œil*, and particularly the visual deception of the Baroque, in which the picture plane extends the architecture of the room, framing the sensed 'reality'. Such a technique consists of creating two different levels of reality in the picture. When one of them is depicted as fiction, something painted on a canvas and thus flat, the viewer is led to see the other level as three-dimensional reality. It is a fiction within a fiction, a play within a play. The level outside the fiction is identified as reality, even though it is a layer in the construction. *Trompe-l'œil* provides a reading of the relationship between art and the frame, and thus what is on the other side of the frame - a 'reality' which, on closer examination, turns out to be yet another fiction. When playing at the limits of art uncertainty is created about what is art and what is reality. *Trompe-l'œil* points to the fact that limits exist while at the same time being a fiction and a passage to another fiction. *Trompe-l'œil* provides a reading of the deception of the 'borderland' and the play of illusions.

A study of strangeness, *The Picture of Snow White* (1994) was performed at Kanonhallen (Copenhagen) and extended the theme of the format or the relation between figure and background. Eight dwarfs and two twins, two soldiers, an opera singer and a young woman were used as natural 'objects' situated in a borderland where the relation between figure and background is problematic, though not abnormal.

The twins reflected themselves in a mirror, both doubling themselves and developing a kind of narcissistic gaze. Quite the opposite happened to the dwarfs who were never reflected in their surroundings but were always observed by others. Actual dwarfs and twins were included in the performance, their differences, their mental

and physical presence, their peculiarities, enabling them to represent 'the other'. They were used to being looked at as part of their existential being (like strangers, different races, celebrities, the disabled and so on); it was this quality of 'being' which was exhibited.

The performance however, was not a simple 'exhibition' of these dwarfs and twins. Its point was 'the other' is a mirror, which in reality shows only yourself, and therefore the dwarfs and twins functioned as a mirror to the audience whose voyeurism was displayed. The performance dealt with the idea of being a 'format' (size/measurement) and being a spectator. The actors' own thoughts about identity, fate and existence were very central. Dehlholm has persistently opposed the obvious interpretation of the story as a process of individualization concerning the integration of evil, innocent and emotional qualities (as we know, the colours of Snow White are black, white and red). In some senses the story was deconstructed by looking at the individual elements as exhibits: the individual dwarfs, the individual number, an object and a text; all of them single fragments which were only sporadically allowed to interact. Attention was focused on individual stories ('fates'), edited and played on a tape recorder. The actor-characters' own lives were brought to the foreground and the fairy tale receded into the background. Usually it is the exact opposite in a performance. The private fate of the actor is more or less an unknown background to the fictive part.

The dwarfs are introduced one by one through an action or an object, with their own stories as recorded speech. The common feature of these stories is 'format' (size, what can be measured) as point of identity orientation. The stories of fate here become form or format and the played part becomes a copy. The continuing small stories or characteristics become universal. The dwarfs are formally different but turn into archetypes. They become metaphorical characters because they touch the 'child-like' and 'sacred' elements of the audience.

In a contrast to the dwarfs' thoughts on physical size and their perspectives on the surrounding world, Snow White's way of orientating herself was more psychological. The actress told her own story, an identity parallel to that of Snow White's. The two hunters tell how they were trained to have an almost mathematical attitude to killing. They have been taught to separate life from death mechanically. The Queen and her reflection (the twins) describe their mutual relationship and their desperate need to find a difference between them. Letting the performers tell of their own worlds, creates for the audience a kind of identificatory space, which changes the stories to statements about the human condition. This play between 'dwarf / child' and 'big / adult' was the focal point of the performance. Here an almost ritual play between identification and distance was established. Between figure and background, between normal and abnormal, between big and small, between mirror and reflection. It is the identity between fate and role: the geometry of existence as the enigma of format and reflection.

The enigma of beauty: Who is the most beautiful? How do we drift towards beauty? The Queen wishes to have her identity as the most beautiful woman confirmed by the mirror. She seeks the absolute, unchangeable answer to her identity. Only in the world of art does beauty exist as something unchangeable, fixed and immortal. Everything else in life is mortal, degradable, losing beauty. Only the dwarfs are able to let go of absolute beauty. The Queen is not, and as a consequence she murders

Snow White. In the performance the dwarfs were subject to constant observation by the spectators, while Snow White took on the Queen's urge to see the immortality of her own beauty. In this crossing between mobility and constancy the performance ended, like a visual illusion. In some sense the mystery or ambivalence of life was represented in this deep, unnerving, unbearable, beautiful sound of silence.

The ambiguity and sensorial deception that helped stage the world optic of the Baroque is expressed in the theatre metaphor: *teatrum mundi*. The concept captures the unreal and the invisible in the cultural pattern. The face is a mask, behind which hides another mask in an infinite recession. The same thing goes for space, which apparently can be limited only in perspective and which turns out to be a side scene hiding a new room in a labyrinthine order. Acting is a play for the eyes, an optical illusion in which only differences and outlines create a limited reality. *Teatrum mundi*, then, points to the fact that reality is not a given and can be experienced only through the staging of the theatre. The world is, so to speak, framed like a theatre.

*Dust (Wau!) Støv* (1995) was staged as a baroque-drama, a *teatrum mundi*, with two actors and various voices; for instance, twins and dwarfs. In a special, rhythmic, chanting way various texts, omens, proverbs and horror stories were recited; for example: 'If one goes away and has said goodbye, one must not turn around and look back, it brings bad luck on the journey'; 'If for fun, one puts a child outside a window and pulls it in through another window, the child will never grow bigger'; 'A witch can be recognized by always looking people straight in the eyes'.

The lovers in the performance, He and She, sang and spoke a text written by Christina Hesselholdt. The two lovers could be Hamlet and Ophelia, Othello and Desdemona, Romeo and Juliet, seeking to interpret their experiences and sensations in relation to the world which they themselves create and are a part of. Shakespeare is the unsurpassed master of creating a scene for the play of illusions and sense illusions. Is the phantom in *Hamlet* a real one or a sense illusion? Is the love of Othello and Desdemona false or real? Are the twins in *Twelfth Night* delusions or reflections of each other? Everywhere Shakespeare creates doubt, because he incorporates a theatre metaphor, a game, reflecting the story. This reflection is once again reflected in the performance situation, becoming a hall of mirrors - reflection upon reflection in an infinite process.

The audience for *Dust (Wau!) Støv* was placed in the cinema at the Copenhagen Planetarium, where the stage is a 1,000-square-metres arched dome reaching from floor to ceiling. The performance consisted of 70 mm omnimax film and ordinary film as well as texts projected on to the screen. There were taped voices and two actors, showing up in different places behind the big screen in small rooms outlined by light, in which they both spoke and sang. At the same time a film was being shown on the rest of the screen. Sometimes abstract pictures, patterns and movements, sometimes recognizable pictures such as a chair, a veil, a room, or a shoe being enlarged. The two characters were in a changing picture universe, a theatrical frame around human existence. The performance had nine parts - the nine lives of the cat. The text explored the idea of being shaped: moving from the body as prison, the home, the hug, death, lust, the storm, the blue, between ocean and sky, to the heavy sleep, which threatened to paralyse her: 'It seems as if my one hand becomes enormous. I cannot move, let alone lift it. The hand is an anchor, tying me to the bed. I have to struggle to get loose.' The 'I' of the text struggles between form and formlessness in

a boundless universe. Confronted with dissolution the performance all the time sought the formed, the limited, the safe. But over and over again the limit turned out to be fiction. Certainty is given only in the shape of omens and lessons.

The stage is a theatre (a world of illusions), in which signs, omens, questions and phrases both help to create this world and, conversely, make it possible to understand it. The Baroque drama has to involve the audience in this infinite process of interpretation. The audience is situated at the origin of the theatre, the pre-expressive stage, the beginning, when nothing is what it may later become. The audience is placed in the room of creation. The place where interpretation can be moved. The audience is part of the physically sensuous illusion of the theatre and practically surrounded by this world theatre both visually and acoustically.

For the audience the sudden sensation in the stomach feels as if one is riding in a lift, or as if the figures are moving even though one knows that they are standing still. It is like a dream. And one wakes up in a previous dream. Or is one still in another person's dream? Someone once said to me: 'You have not awoken to a waking condition, but to a previous dream. This dream is within somebody else and so forth, infinitely...'

The audience was staged physically not from a bird's-eye view but from a wide-angle worm's-eye view. But the view of the audience was changed by means of optical illusion. That was probably the most unique function and surprise of the performance: that the body (the stomach, the sense of equilibrium) believed this *trompe-l'œil*, which could make one just as sick as a real roller-coaster. Sense illusions work in defiance of our conscious ability to understand what is happening.

On the stage, for instance, two performers were seen, illuminated through the big film screen which showed a measuring device for longitude and latitude. If the eye focused on the vertical axis the horizontal axis moved. However, if the eye focused on the horizontal axis the vertical one moved and the two illuminated figures moved with it, as they were standing on a lift. After a short while the spectators felt as if they too were moving upwards. And it was almost impossible to stop this sense illusion.

*Dust (Wau!) Støv* explored this double field of art as a sensuous object, which must be seen from some viewpoint in order to become art. Hotel Pro Forma's work on the construction of the authentic exhibits sensation itself as real and unreal, as between physical and metaphysical, between reality and sense illusions. At the same time it exhibits the place from where we sense as a place in movement. Sensation becomes a relative phenomenon, which we try to systematize to avoid bad luck, illness and death, in the same way as we try to systematize rules for beauty, art and the divine. Without yet having succeeded.

In a way it is also about art as representation. In Hotel Pro Forma there is a wish for a pure art, representing nothing else but itself. An art which touches the senses without trying to determine meaning. An art, in the words of Antonin Artaud, that is 'cruel' in touching life before language. The theatre metaphor creates a hall of mirrors, where figure and ground no longer let themselves be deciphered, and where no one knows where the original is. Here it is the dissolution of the audience (to dust) that one looks in the eye, like Orpheus who turned to Eurydice and saw himself as a picture, dissolving and disappearing.



## Nomadic dramaturgy

The dramaturgy of Hotel Pro Forma seeks or recreates reality as comparison, juxtaposition and isolation, uncovering, wrapping and exhibition of early and spatial shapes: not through the continuity of the story but through discontinuity. It is not a dramaturgy of the line but of the jump, not one story but parallel stories between baroque tendencies towards staging of space and romantic longing for the indestructibility and formalization of time as beauty. It is the dramaturgy of restlessness or of the nomad somewhere between movement and being, format and identity. As a nomadic theatre it has chosen to be in motion and, thus, sees reality from different points of view, contrary to the settled, who sees the world from home and, thus, structures the world with the home as the centre. The nomad has no such centre, but perceives the world as differences, distances, proportions, points of view and therefore develops a phenomenal sense of direction and an ability to find his or her way in the visible and invisible spatiality, in proportion to light and darkness, depth structure and flat, movement and stagnation, distance and nearness, figure and ground. Nomads do not allow themselves to get confused by 'optical illusions' or sense illusions (*trompel'œil*) as a natural effect of, for instance, the *fata morganas* of the desert or of the snowscape. The illusion is part of reality.

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