

# Looking at the world anew

By LARS QVORTRUP

FEW OTHERS on the theatre scene, here in Denmark or elsewhere in Europe, have worked more intensely in recent years in the laboratory of form than the theatre group which, for the same reason, have quite simply use this as their name: Hotel Pro Forma. The hotel – the domicile – for form. The laboratory of form. The head of the laboratory down through the years has always been: Kirsten Dehlholm.

It all began just over twenty-five years ago – with Billedstofteatret from 1977, which was replaced in 1985 by the present-day Hotel Pro Forma. Both were and are theatres to do with the stuff ['stof'] of images ['billeder']: visual material. The most important concern has not been to create yet another narrative but to visualise the material that narratives are made of – namely, time. It has not been to create a new scenography but via the scenography to make 'space' visible and thereby demonstrate what space – this apparently so innocent and self-evident thing – is, and what it does to our awareness. The project has not been to add yet another piece to the puzzle of beauty but to make the rules of this puzzle more apparent: What are the conditions and rules for 'beauty'?

This is why Hotel Pro Forma's performances have not dealt with politics or love, family life or child-rearing but with apparently metaphysical constants: with space, time, the manifestation of beauty – and thereby, inevitably, with the instance that has the monopoly on being able to see what the rest of us cannot see: God – or the Devil.

But how does one make space visible as space? The task is not to depict a large or small, lovely or ugly, claustrophobic or expansive space. The task is to make 'the spatial' itself visible as one of the self-evident facts of everyday life that we normally do not give a thought.

Again: How does one do that? How does one make the experiencing of the spatial unself-evident and thus the subject of observation? Try yourself: Stop looking at the newspaper in front of you or at the coffee, rolls and kitchen cabinets. Look instead and the way in which you sense things. Place yourself, so to speak, outside yourself.

Hotel Pro Forma's first performance from 1986, 'Terris Australis Incognita', which was performed at the cultural centre Almásy Tér in Budapest, was already based on this idea: to turn the experience of the spatial into the subject of observation.

The audience was placed on the balconies of the cultural centre in Budapest. Standing up there, the audience looked down at the thirteen performers, who performed a kind of lying-down ballet on in floor, with relief-like stage-aids. Firstly, space was reproduced in a two-dimensional world of perspective drawings on the floor the actors were lying on. Secondly, gravity – looking downwards from a high position instead of forwards and outwards – contradicted the self-evidence of the perspective. You saw one thing, and felt something else with your body.

The experiment was continued in the performance 'Why does Night come, Mother?' from 1989-90. Now it was the balconies of Århus City Hall that were where the audience stood, with the action taking place on the floor between the balconies. High up, you looked down onto a ritual, lying-down performance. Once again, the stage-aids, which were drawn on the floor, created a spatial illusion of a vanishing point and linear perspectives, with the actors acting as if they were standing up. With a bodily feeling of falling, you looked down onto a horizontal, flat proscenium, with the props transforming the floor-surface into a space. By reducing space to surface, i.e. by dissolving space as space, and by 'recreating' space from there, space was made graphically visible as the optic we formally confidently treat as being perfectly self-evident.

Some of Hotel Pro Forma's performances have made 'space' visible in this way. Others have experimented with another metaphysical constant: time.

WHAT BECOMES of time if it loses its universal nature? Does it stop, or does it become impossible to distinguish between before and after – and thus between cause and effect? If you can hurry ahead of the march of time, can you then become the cause of your own birth – or death?

The answer is that if time does not exist, it must be created, for example by rhythm, just as social time is created by the social rhythm: the ritual. That is what children do when they play: 'You're father and I'm mother, and anyone outside the line is dead.' But it is exactly the same adults do, though as far as they are concerned it is in deadly earnest: 'This note means ten euros and corresponds to a bottle of wine, but not in Denmark.' We make a ritual and in doing so create an apparently stable world.

This is what we do in our everyday lives in

order to stabilise a chaotic world. But it is also what the schizophrenics does before he or she has lost a sense of so-called natural stability. That is why precisely the schizophrenic apparently has to construct rules to an exaggerated extent, for without rules everything is possible – and the possibility of everything is chaos.

But this is also how the artist thinks who wants to make time, space and rituals visible as constructions that are to stabilise a chaotic world. He or she constructs an art-world alongside the actual world: a world of artefacts that demonstrates how a stable world comes into being.

This is the theme of the performance 'Fact-arte-fact' from 1991. It revives an old stabilising technique, that of self-invented systemisation as known from the European collections of curios. Here, sculptures, shells, rare stones, unicorn horns, musical instruments, miniature paintings, rare books and objects of value stood side by side, creating their own orders. They created orders and made themselves naturally inevitable. They demonstrated that such a self-evidence is a self-evidencing seen from the inside.

'Fact-arte-fact' consisted of a corresponding diversity of fantastic objects, installations, lights, sounds, paintings, texts and movements, the juxtaposition of which represented an apparent but unfathomable systematics, an 'order of things', as the French sociologist Michel Foucault has called it. Modern European order as a construction.

All of Hotel Pro Forma's performances are built on this principle, one which could be called the meticulousness of the schizophrenic: to want to impose order, create patterns. In the exhibition 'Ether' from 1987 one of the basic metaphors was structure as we know it from the Arabic woven carpets, i.e. a so complex pattern that its principle defies observation. It was a sequence of events with eighteen chapters, the constellations 2-9 with

a total of 135 combinations, four points of the compass, a right-left axis and four persons. The catalogue contained pages written in Braille, thereby indicating another non-accessible order. Most recently, the multimedia performance 'Site Seeing Zoom' from 2001 has explored the chaotic systematics of links of the digital network.

Hotel Pro Forma has made the unobservable observable. But how does one do that? And what happens when one does?

HOW CAN we gain a glimpse of what we cannot see? Let me give a banal example. We see things in the world around us. But we do not see the light which is the precondition for the sense of sight. But by means of an artifice, an artistic touch – indeed, a touch of art – it is possible to see the invisible. By placing coloured glass in the windows, for example, light becomes visible. For light then stands like coloured pillars in the interior space – that of a church, not least – and draws attention to the fact that there are basic conditions that we ordinary mortals do not normally catch sight of.

This is precisely how art and science worked in the 20th century. They made the invisible observable. They made it possible to observe the conditionals that usually just surround us in their self-evidence.

But it is an age-old experience that when one experiments with getting a good look at the basic conditions, when one refuses to make do with observing the world from the inside, but from where its terms can be identified, i.e. from the outside, one is poaching on God's preserves. For whereas 'from the inside' is the place of normality, 'from the outside' is the domain of God and the Devil.

This has been Hotel Pro Forma's ultimate project: to get a look at God. Who is he, this observer of the unobservable? What are his conditions in a world that no longer thirsts for certainty but for coming to terms with uncer-

tainty? And what happens when one places oneself in his stead and observes what only he has been able to see?

It is precisely this problem you are confronted with in the many tableaux of the performance 'jesus\_c\_odd\_size' from 2002. Behind a curtain, Jesus and the robbers were hanging on three crosses in an absolutely present-day version. The three figures were not nailed to the cross but each was held fast in his own huge plastic bag, out of which the air was being sucked by an exhaust system. There they hung, like vacuum-packed sausages in the food counter, only just being kept alive with the aid of a tiny tube that supplied oxygen.

Yes indeed, here was an offer of a present-day religious imagery that is miles removed from the gentle, common mainstream church version. Here we had an attempt to get a look at Our Lord in person.

THE TWENTIETH CENTURY formed the framework of a cosmological revolution, the extent of which we are only gradually becoming aware of. The natural order of traditional society has been challenged to its very foundations, but the picture of the new order is as yet still unclear.

Naturally, the theatre also has to be part of this revolution. It cannot be right that while the scientific world-picture is being transformed, while art is being stood on its head, and while the world in general is developing from ideological self-evidence to a state of hypercomplexity, that the theatres are putting on post-Ibsen living-room dramas on the small stages and musicals on the big stages.

It is precisely this challenge that Hotel Pro Forma and Kirsten Dehlholm have taken up. Hotel Pro Forma is not a psychological theatre that is in search of insight into the recesses of the mind of – for the umpteenth time – trying to uncover the mysteries of love or the tiresome scenarios of the nuclear family. It is

not a political theatre that is advocating the correct opinions. Hotel Pro Forma has put the 19th century behind it. Hotel Pro Forma is an aesthetic research laboratory for the same major issues that science deals with: What is space? Time? Form? Hotel Pro Forma has made it possible to see what we formerly were unable to catch sight of. It has moved our position of observation to where it has not been previously, to past the point that, according to tradition, has been seen as the position of the self-evident and of fundamental assumptions. From this vantage point, the world is seen anew – and seems a different place.

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