

K N U T E R

REFLECTION NOTE BY INGRID LIAVAAG
MASTER IN THEATER 2019 - 2021



INTRODUCTION

Photo Ingrid Liavaag

In this reflection note I will focus on two distinct pieces I have created during my masters in theater. Namely ; The performance KNUTER and the performance Nuclear Family presented in Paris during the winter of 2020/2021. My aim with this Master was to refine my methodology in combining live theater performances with cinematic material. The themes and methods differ per project. And although the medium varies, the subject remains similar in all of these pieces. My role has varied as well. From project manager, director, script developer, cinematographer to editor.



KNUTER

Photo Ingrid Liavaag

Before the making of KNUTER, I had three questions :

How do I use a methodology from theater to create an audiovisual work ?

How to make fiction out of documentary elements ?

How do I combine audiovisual material with staged elements in a significant way ?

With this reflection note, I'd like to formulate an answer on these questions and expand on my insights gained during my Masters education.

I am trying to adapt techniques from the theater tradition to develop audiovisual works. As a director and actor in the performing arts, I often use the technique of Devised theater; creating from a collective exploration and improvisation. The way I collect the material is similar to a cinematic documentary approach.



WHAT I MEAN BY DEVISED THEATRE

Photo Ingrid Liavaag

I started developing theatre through the Devised method in 2010, when I was studying at Ecole Jacques Lecoq, and have continuously developed work in this way, until today. Devised theater is a method of theater production in which the script and the actions originate from the collective. It is often an improvisational work of a performing ensemble. The ensemble usually consists of actors, and in some cases it also consists of visual artists, composers and choreographers. When a piece prepared through improvisation is presented to the audience, it usually has a fixed or partially fixed form.

A pure approach of Devised theatre would demand collective improvisation methods through which dialogues and scenes are created together. In Anne Bogart's essay "The violence of making choices" from her book "A director prepares" she describes how the collective work is dependent on the director making choices for actors who develop scenes through improvisation. Once actors have been told to keep a limited action or line, the work of refining through repetition can begin.

Bogart's approach does not apply itself well for actors on film.

For the actor, this necessary violence in creating a role for the theater is distinctly different from the violence necessary in acting for the camera. In film acting, the actor can afford to

do something impulsively without any concern for repeating it endlessly. What is vital for the camera is that the moment be spontaneous and photogenic.

*(From the essay "The violence of making choices" in the book "A director prepares" by Anne Bogart.)

I agree with Bogart on this note - good acting work on film happens when experienced dynamically, when the audience manages to penetrate through the actor's mask, into something genuine and real at the same time. And so I have adapted the Devised methodology for the creation of cinema.

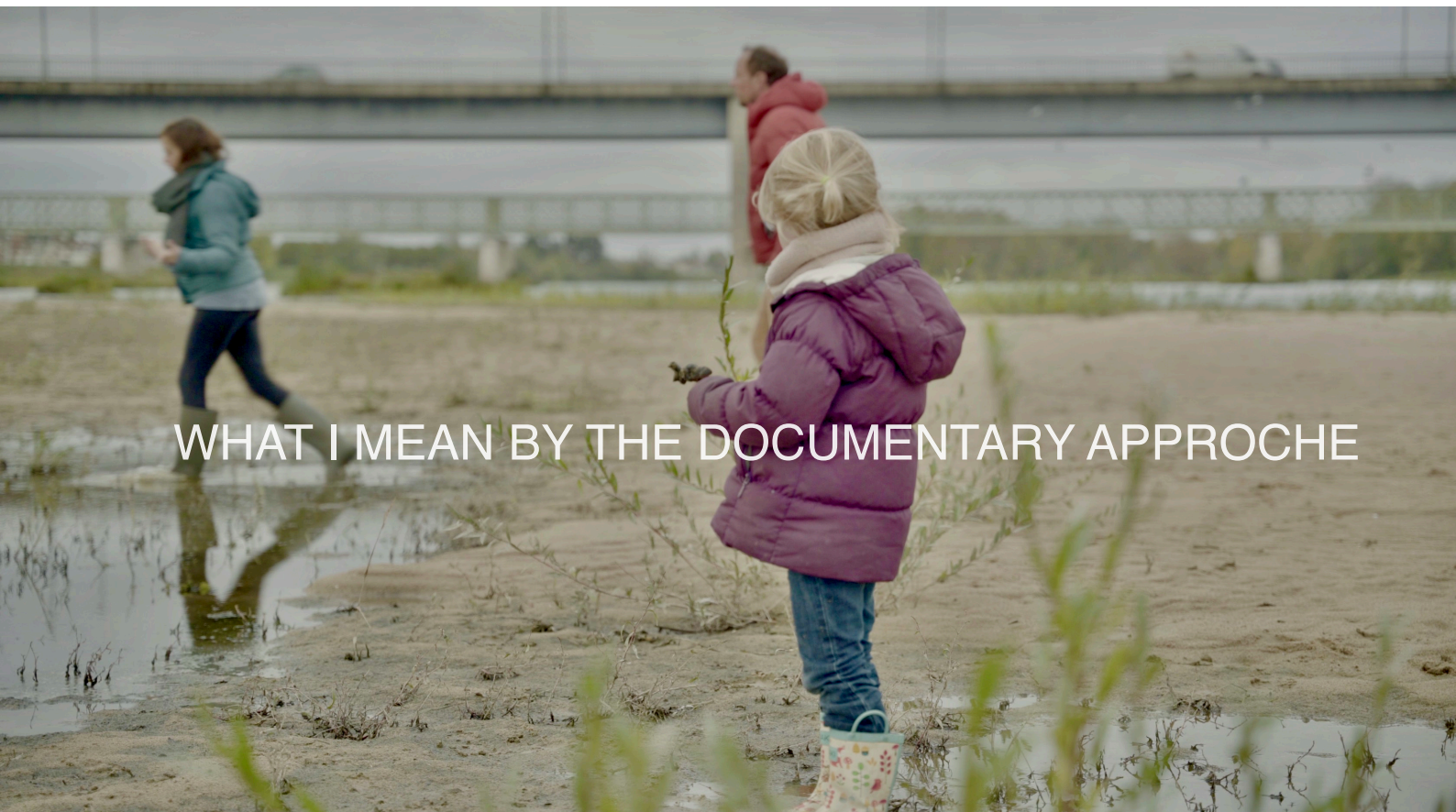


Photo Ingrid Liavaag

My inspiration for collecting material within this project comes from how filmmakers use a documentary approach to make cinema. This choice came organically, by simply picking up the camera and starting to film. This was a new way for me to gather my material. In my previous documentary work, i.e. with the performance Flawed product/ Feilvare, I gathered texts based conversations I overheard in a supermarket, given sms exchanges, and recorded interviews of people. I subsequently staged those collected elements within a supermarket. Goes without saying that this installed an interplay

between the public and the private and between the staged and the real. The piece was staged during the regular opening hours of the supermarket. Civilians were unknowingly cast as extras in the performance. Their private life, my observations of those very acts being the base for the play to begin with, became a theatre piece once more. The play presented itself, paradoxically perverse in the most delicious of ways, between the chickens, the cold cuts and the eggs.

According to philosopher François Niney, "cinema was born as documentary, and before being a genre (opposed to fiction), "documentary" designates a property of the camera"; "its capacity to immediately capture and reproduce" life on the spot. This being the case, the production of a documentary film obviously involves choices: in the first place, the choice of what part of reality to document, and subsequently the choice of the shots and their respective length. Another significant element is of course the bias of the documentarist, apparent in the organisation of the raw material and its initial comprehension. This initial bias determines the relationship that is established through the film between reality and spectators.

(From: *Frontière de la non fiction* by Tiphaine Larroque)

The camera's "capacity to immediately capture and reproduce" life on the spot has inspired me. Like my heroes of the Nouvelle Vague cinema; Chantal Akerman, John Cassavetes, Maurice Pialat, and Ingmar Bergmann, I have used real life situations as clay to form fiction.

My goal with this project was to get inside real relationships through observation, and to rewrite fact into fiction by giving the actors incentives for actions and steering them with remarks, towards or away from reality.



MY APPROACH TO COMBINE DEvised THEATER AND DOCUMENTARISM AS A METHODOLOGY

Photo Ingrid Liavaag

"I'm not acting," stage star Myrtle Gordon (Gena Rowlands) tells her bemused director after a violent episode with her ghostly muse in Opening Night. That's a loaded claim to be making in a movie that so conclusively smudges the line between acting and being.

From the essay *Opening Night : The Play's the Thing* by Dennis Lim.

In "Opening Night" by Cassavetes Gena Rowlands (the main actress, in nearly all of his films) and himself are playing husband and wife in a theatre play within the film. A fiction within fiction, within the real. Since they actually are husband and wife, in real life. This film was one of his most biographical pieces. In all his films, he was inspired by his wife and their relationship when creating the characters, the script and while detailing the scenes. Cassavetes worked continuously with all his actors over a long period of time to co-create a script, in a similar way as done within devised theater.

In KNUTER, I introduce the adjusted devised theatre methodology. Based on conversations about the actors' real family situation, I started out with a synopsis. We talked openly about their couple's therapy sessions and the insights gained. I built on my experience of making my short film *Regissøren (The Director)* (now in post production). For this film, I wrote out situations together with a co-author, and with director Linda Gathu, but the actors were free to improvise around the written material.

I took this a step further in KNUTER, basing the situations on the couple's real conflict and their open conversations about it. We thought out actions together. They directly tried out the co-created scenes in front of the camera, without any rehearsal. The conversations we had before recording, continuously served as a source of inspiration and as a reference point. We saw what worked and what didn't. For example ; I had written out a physical fight between the couple based on a conflict they'd had. Since the actress was pregnant, she was too nervous to fight, and this showed on camera. So we decided to shoot and edit it in a different way, which had implications for the whole film. We built on scenes that worked, and so the film, as I had envisioned it, changed. This is not a classical approach to how fiction films are usually made. This methodology is closer to a documentary approach. So for KNUTER, I did use the collective approach of creating the story together with the cast as described by Anne Bogart, but avoided the repetition altogether. The focus was on spontaneity and credibility, for which the camera demands something entirely different than the stage does.



Photo Ingrid Liavaag

I have been pertinently choosing to direct through the camera. My gaze will in this way define the way the story is told. Through this approach I gain access to, and control over, the fine-tuned balance between exposure, emotion and atmosphere. In this way, I play with the child, holding the camera. And so the camera becomes her. The child and I developed a methodology through playing a game with the camera. I filmed, she watched and told me what she was excited about. Through this beautiful symbiosis, we co-directed and created an exciting and unique collaboration.

The construction of the film kept its organic and collaborative form. Later in the process, Youseff Chebbi took over the camera so that I could direct more freely and concentrate on the sound. Giving away the control over my camera was a challenge at first. It forced me to voice how I had envisioned the camera's gaze. Chebbi had another visual language than me. He introduced more close-ups and held the camera instead of using the tripod. Once we found a collective visual language, it allowed me to move around more freely. This way of working opened up the possibility to film in more desolate and dangerous locations, which would turn out to be necessary in order to translate the danger of the kid running away. When editing, the evolution of the gaze functioned as the natural turningpoint of the film. Evolving from a more observatory perspective while having the camera on a tripod at a distance, to a more subjective view, closer to the action with a dynamic camera. This evolution pulls the viewer increasingly inside of the situation.

TIME. THE REAL THE STAGED & THE SIMULTANEITY



Photo Nikolai Lieblein Røsæg

Heiner Müller declares he wants to load so much onto the readers and the spectators that they cannot possibly process everything. Frequently, language sounds are simultaneously presented on stage so that one can only partially understand them, especially when different languages are being used.

From the book Post-dramatic theater by Hans - Thies Lehmann.

When first having the idea to show the filmed material and stage the performance of a family together in one space - I was afraid it would simply be too much. I had already tried to combine the filmed material and a performance when working on *Nuclear family* in Paris. When working in the little gallery space with the actual family in the film and all the raw filmed material, the overload of information was indeed too much. So for the little space, I ended up simplifying the combination. We see the family eating dinner together with only two talking heads, and through sound the audience hear a reenactment of the couple's therapy with myself in the role of a silent therapist. The audience can follow what they choose to follow through headphones. The combination of these elements became just enough to make for an interesting little game between the private and the public, between the real and fiction. Feedback after showing the performance gave me insight into how the piece had evoked the audience's identification and empathy. They had experienced similarities with their own relationship problems and this had rendered a sense of intimacy for them.

For KNUTER, I had access to a bigger stage. And so the overload of material was less of an issue. I also made the choice to use a different family - different from the one in the film - on stage. The audience is free to project meaning onto the combination. A gap is thus introduced, between the different languages, the different realities, the different spaces and the differing perception of time (a frozen time in the cinematic material and the live time on stage). It seduces the viewer to find connections. One connection is obvious - a heterosexual couple with one kid is presented in the filmed material. On the stage, we see a heterosexual couple with three kids. But there are more subtle, small hints of similar texture and connecting colour hidden for the audience to discover or ignore. By giving the audience these small treats - these moments of clear connections within the chaos; a release is introduced.

What would happen if I'd introduce more disparate elements in the combination of the staged and the filmed? Referring to Hans Thies Lehmann in the text above, is there a connection to be made with postdramatic art? Is the balance right as presented, or is a more loaded, troubled connection more valuable ?

The compensatory function of drama, to supplement the chaos of reality with structural order, finds itself inverted; the spectator's desire for orientation turns out to be disavowed.... It becomes crucial that the abandonment of totality be understood not as a deficit but instead as a liberating possibility on an ongoing (re-)writing, imagination and recombination, that refuses the 'rage of understanding'

From the book Post-dramatic theater by Hans - Thies Lehmann.

When shooting and editing the film I composed a drama. The synopsis I had for the film was clear.

Short synopsis:

Mother (Charlotte) and father (Jan) have marital problems due to stringent gender roles. Their constant conflicts result in their daughter of four (Nora) being turned into the trouble solving parent of the family. After an argument in their small city apartment, the family goes to find some air at their countryside house, outside of Paris. Their issues do not subside. In the midst of the parental conflict, Nora understands that a new baby is on the way. Back in the city she runs away from the suffocating situation. During her walk through the

streets of Paris, the four-year-old discovers the city, as well as her own independence.

The film has an arc, from the conflict in the beginning to the disappearance of the child in the middle to the reunited family with their new baby in the end. There is a plot, therefore the film itself doesn't subscribe to the category of post-dramatic art. However, by splitting the screen and introducing a performative layer; I move away from the direct, without abandoning it entirely. I no longer work with classical linearity for the story. I don't direct the audience's gaze. The images are not put after one another. They are there simultaneously, to be viewed at will as a whole or individually. They become intertextual with one another. The gap that is created introduces a third space within my work. This gap undermines the sovereignty of the author. It leaves open a function which I don't fill in myself, a space for interpretation, for which the audience is solicited. The audience functions in this way as the editor of the piece .

The presentation of the piece as a whole proves to be as fluid as the setup of the gap mentioned above. It supersedes the linearity of a medium in itself. Rather, its flexibility and its performative nature add to the conviction inherent to its creation : there is no hierarchy in form or function, there is no paradox between the chicken and the egg. The author is a mere balance-maker; Between the improvised and the real at its source, between the devised and the documented and between the audience and the performers during its presentation.



Photo Ann Kristin Enebakken