

An Introduction to the Other

Annette van Zwoll / translation Wendy Lubberding

‘DISAAAASTER! DISAAAASTER!’ The Dutch Charlotte pronounces the words slowly and fiercely while frighteningly gyrating her hips and slapping her hands on the floor. It is the first day of the *International Ensemble Week* which is taking place during ITs 2010, the International Theatre School Festival in Amsterdam. Yesterday twelve young people arrived in Amsterdam, recently graduated or nearly so. They have come from all over Europe: from Iceland to Spain, from Bosnia to the UK. They have never met before, but for five days will immerse themselves in the theme of the *site specific performance*. They will attend workshops, see performances, enjoy their meals together, share the dance floor, and at the end of the week they will treat the city to a short performance. But on this first day they face each other a little uncomfortably. Not only are they from different countries; they have also attended different types of schools. One may have specialised in dance, another in drama, while a third may be a director. Starting from their various disciplines and backgrounds and from their shared love of the performing arts they will be exploring the differences and similarities in their work and working methods during this week.

Irishman Andrew Loretto, theatre director and the co-director of Chol Theatre in Leeds, is leading this Ensemble Week and forms the ‘glue’ between the different activities. This first day is predominated by the football world cup, which is taking place in South Africa during the same period, and the economic crisis. The two subjects go beyond the national boundaries and invoke exciting stories in all the participants. Everyone has brought newspaper clippings and the two themes take us from the affectations of the rich in Eastern Europe and the depressingly big victory of the rightwing politician Wilders through to the Dutch elections and the faded glory of one of the best footballers in history; Maradona. The stories thus stirred up break the ice. With their clippings and headlines they set to work. Individually at first, then in smaller groups, they transform the stories and associations into movement. Three of the participants portray cheering in slow motion, with tensed, crooked arms, which then transforms into a devastating disappointment. An expression of the football craze that so persistently determines the look of the city outside the studio walls.

The body remains the focal point throughout the week. Both in the formal workshop Kathak by the British/Indian Balbir Singh and in the sensitive, physical workshops by the Belgian Sarah Ringoet and the French Pierre Nadaud. In the workshops by the Spanish Fernando Montoya and the ones by Loretto, the body is used in a more theatrical setting, and the participants explore the possibilities for entering a public space. Although the participants think the number of workshops is somewhat extravagant, they do respond enthusiastically to their contents. The focus on the body helps the workshops surpass the linguistic and cultural differences. The Icelandic Lára observes that the focus on the body creates a bond between the participants whereas language can confuse things in this international gathering of people. Leonie from the UK calls it being ‘lost in translation’. According to her,

everyone is using his body during this week to feel out the direction in which they are all moving together. This increases people's awareness of 'the other'. The fact that they do not know each other contributes to this increased sensitivity to the bodies surrounding them.

After five intensive days, the final day dawns. In a few hours they are expected to give a performance out in the street and they still have to assemble it. This makes for a great deal of last minute stress during this Ensemble Week. But then it turns out the first day is still fresh on the participants' minds. The Dutch Anouke volunteers as a director and by the time it is half past three we see a group of football fans running up and down the Amsterdam canals in mismatched football shirts and pants. In the narrow theatre street *de Nes* they pose in front of a car leaving the driver completely flabbergasted. In front of the Irish pub they wriggle their way in among the real football fans and try to do high-fives with them. They cheer on unsuspecting passers-by, and with their whistles they draw everyone's attention. Their final destination is the Dam square, where they all sing their own national anthems at the same time in front of the Koninklijk Paleis. Then they silently perform the euphoria and the disappointment of the football fans. A crowd of people has gathered around them, the living statues in the square slink off for a coffee break. Then they raise their pace, wave their fists in the air, clap, run, whistle, and the football fans transform and become football players, and back again. They end with a song and then they disappear as unexpectedly as they appeared. To my question what she thinks has just happened, a passer-by responds: 'it's like praying, but to another God.'

Back in the studio the adrenaline slowly drains from their bodies. It is time for a brief evaluation of the week. With surprise the participants note the many similarities between the participants and their working methods. Enes (Bosnia): 'Everyone is about the same thing, but the process to get there is different.' Lára confirms: 'The most interesting thing is that so many things are the same.' The similarities come as no surprise to Ensemble leader Andrew Loretto: 'Although the participants all came from different disciplines and different countries, we could find quite a lot of similarities, fundamental truths, you could even say. They are all dealing with questions as: why do I make? Who do I make it for? Where do I make it and how do I make it?' Still, they actually have set out a new course for themselves, broadened their horizons and turned their principles upside down. Anouke: 'it felt naked. Your patterns are questioned and it all becomes a bit loose. A week like this creates a different level of intuition.'

In the end, this was not about meeting someone from another country, the point was not to delve into someone else's culture. This week has been about an introduction to 'the other' in a general sense. A person you do not know, whose patterns you do not know, and whose reactions you cannot anticipate. This creates a higher sensitivity, a more acute awareness of the self and of the other. During the Ensemble Week the participants created a place where everyone was 'the other'. Enes puts it this way: 'I know how my colleagues in Bosnia will react. Here, I have to concentrate on a high level because I don't know what the other will

do. You have to feel, to really listen to your partner. It makes you a better person and a better actor.'

Afterwards they talk things over on a sunny Amsterdam pavement while the information is slowly beginning to sink in with their bodies. Back home, in Belgrade, Bilbao, Reykjavik or Arnhem, they will have time for further reflection. Then it will become manifest which part of the information has stuck, and what they will carry with them in their further development. But first, it is time to say goodbye. Out into the first street; there are plains to be caught and souvenirs to be bought. One of the participants sighs: 'feels like we're just getting started.'