

**Alexandra Portmann: Between Teaching And Not Teaching or How to Make The Audience Believe You. Artist Talk with Eero Epner, Juhan Ulfsak and Mart Kangro about the performance *Workshop* (Kanuti Gildi SAAL, Tallinn).**

In: *Festivals als Innovationsmotor?* Hg. v. Alexandra Portmann, Beate Hochholdingner-Reiterer. Berlin: Alexander 2020 (itw : im dialog 4), S. 152–159.

Alexandra Portmann (University of Bern)

## Between Teaching And Not Teaching or How to Make The Audience Believe You

Artist Talk with Eero Epner, Juhan Ulfisak and Mart Kangro about  
the performance *Workshop* (Kanuti Gildi SAAL, Tallinn)

*Workshop* is a performance about the relationship between learning and teaching, about knowledge and not knowing, and the ambivalent question of who teaches knowledge and why. Choreographer Mart Kangro, dramaturg Eero Epner and actor and director Juhan Ulfisak approach questions of authority and mansplaining in a humorous, sometimes bizarre, subtle and equally poetic way. The performance was produced by Kanuti Gildi SAAL Tallinn. As part of a Doctoral Workshop at the University of Bern, a discussion with the artistic team was held after the performance at the auawirleben Theaterfestival Bern.

**Alexandra Portmann:** We had the opportunity to watch your performance *Workshop* yesterday evening. As the title suggests, the performance has to do with teaching, learning, and developing. I would firstly like to ask, why did you, three white men in your forties, decide to make a performance about teaching? What is the broader conceptual context of this performance? What initially interested you?

**Juhan Ulfisak:** This distinction ›men in their forties‹ is important. We are indeed all men in our forties, and are at an age where there is a general expectation that you have something to teach. We've all had teaching invitations from theatre schools and other educational institutions. During the process for this show we talked a lot about our position as artists and as human beings and also, about the expectations society has of us. As well as, from a critical angle, what do we actually have to teach and why would we do that?

*Mart Kangro:* I think our discussions then were mainly about the question of authority.

*Eero Epner:* During the process, we spoke with teachers and other experts about teaching and their experiences, but I want to emphasise that teaching was only the starting point. What often gets overlooked, also by the critics, is the concept of verticality that we often refer to in this theatre show. It is not only about teaching for us, we wanted to look for other layers within this thematic framework.

*Alexandra Portmann:* What kinds of layers?

*Eero Epner:* Well, it's difficult for us to pinpoint the kinds of thoughts that end up in the show. It's more important to know what you saw there. The term and concept of verticality, that was represented by the vertical wooden elements on stage, reflects this approach. What was your perspective?

*Alexandra Portmann:* In our discussions during the PhD workshop we talked about different perspectives of teaching. Who is in a position to teach? Who has the authority to speak and about what? So, it appears that when questioning teaching there is also a more general connection to power relations. In particular, we discussed two aspects that came up while when watching your performance. The first is the idea of mansplaining as raised in feminist discourses. The other is the obvious references made in the show to Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. You are – as you said – all white men in your forties, so did the question of power relations in teaching affect your conceptual work?

*Eero Epner:* Yes, this was very important. The situation we create on stage is very similar to theatre schools. There are always teachers, students or actors and the audience. And there is always someone who is on the stage and tells some kind of truth while the others listen and obey. This was the situation we thought would be fun to play with critically. And certainly, a feminist approach was important to us, maybe even too important. During our rehearsals we physically and verbally



Workshop, *Mart Kangro, Juhan Ulfsak, Eero Epner*. Foto: *Veiko Tubin*

emphasised these mansplaining discourses and our producer Maria Aarusoo would point to their predominance. For her it was clear that the performance is about three guys talking about things they know nothing about. Like giving birth to a child. Which Juhan hasn't, as far as I know, experienced himself.

*Mart Kangro*: I just want to add that when we started working we discovered various patterns, almost like the structure of the piece, which seems very simple. We found it really useful to experiment with various and subtle ways of knitting other layers into the piece. And for me that was the most interesting part of this work. Because you can actually talk about a lot of things when you are not being too literal, and at the same time you can be very straightforward.

*Audience Member (Regina Rossi)*: Coming back to the different layers of the piece. I wonder if you were also working with Hitchcock as a way to dramaturgically organise the material? Hitchcock's *Vertigo* has almost a compulsion for repetition and you obviously work with repetition in your performance.

*Mart Kangro:* No, not really. I mean Hitchcock actually entered in the middle of the process. Even though there was not an immediate connection to Hitchcock, there is one of course. But in general, we were already working with repetition in this production. Repetition was important in terms of text, it related to scenes, and certainly to the structure. Furthermore, ways of creating a poetic through the piece was important to us. I am fascinated by repetition as a choreographer, and also by somehow keeping things very simple. Not easy though, for me these are different things.

*Audience Member (Lab):* Have you as a person, whether as an actor or as a man, been affected by creating this process? How has this work changed you? Perhaps also with the experience of presenting the performance in different places?

*Mart Kangro:* I think what was great about this collaboration was that we really shared the responsibility. There weren't really fixed roles where for example, Eero as dramaturge takes care of the text. Although we all bring very different qualities related to our professional backgrounds and aesthetic approaches, we really mingled during the process, which was fun. I must also say that we were very cautious about presenting this work. We didn't expect it to be received so well, at all. We thought that it was a rather dangerous game – we were in a way scared, I think. Because we asked ourselves, how can we contextualize this work? Who is our institutional partner? Or what kind of aesthetics do we aim for? And I am personally still unsure where this kind of work formally belongs to. Is it theatre or performance art? In the end, the Kanuti Gildi SAAL was our coproducer, and our producer and adviser Maria Arusoo originally comes from the art scene. It was a rather long process of hesitation before coming out with this piece.

*Juhan Ulfak:* Your question of how this work changed me is a very hard one. I think the process was very interesting and we enjoyed it. But what do you mean by change? Do you mean what changed me emotionally or as a human being? I can only say that it was great working with these guys and maybe we will do it again. But what really

changes for me is each time we do the performance in a different place, the intimate meeting with a specific audience. I think every single time the performance is different.

*Eero Epner:* Yes, as Juhan said, it is hard to say how this work changed me. Of course, it did change me as I happened to be on the stage for the first time and that was horrifying.

*Mart Kangro:* It's your second time.

*Eero Epner:* And I can't say that I have learnt a lot. Because still after each show Mart comes to me and says, »you know this pause was still two seconds too short« and all the rest. But in a wider context I would say that Mart and Juhan present a kind of theatre language which allows space for a certain poetic, even a metaphysical dimension. And this dimension is something, I think, that often gets overlooked in contemporary western theatre. Both of them can combine clear conception and poetic dimensions within their works. This aspect was certainly important to me during this collaboration.

But coming back to the question about the reactions of the audience. It is very different to perform the show in Estonian compared to English. We have played the show in English seven times. When we perform it in Estonian, it's much easier. In Estonian the show is not so language based, and we can feel kind of more relaxed. Whereas, when we play it in English, I think the show somehow becomes more physical for us. We are aware that we speak broken English and therefore we have to use our bodies more.

*Audience Member (Alina Aleshchenko):* In what way is it important that theatre goers in Estonia know more about you and the political dimension of your work? For example, as a theatre goer in Switzerland we only have information about you as artists that is printed on a small piece of paper we are given before the performance. This information states that you donated your income to the Feministeerium. So, in what way is this information important to the understanding of your work?

*Eero Epner:* I don't think it is important to us. We don't play with our backgrounds in this production.

*Mart Kangro:* Even so, it might play a role in Estonia.

*Juhan Ulfsak:* Donating our theatre prize to Feministarium was a political act, this has something to do with Estonia. The right wing-government decided to close this human rights organisation and we therefore wanted to send a political sign. But this has nothing to do with the piece you saw yesterday.

*Audience Member (Regina Rossi):* In our workshop we spent some time discussing the end of the performance, which becomes very poetic. How do audiences relate to the ending? On one level you present a big forest of phalluses. On another, you ironically play with masculinity, and so on. And yet that was not my interpretation of the end of the piece. What is your opinion of the end? How does the audience relate to its discrepancy?

*Juhan Ulfsak:* The real end is that everything disappears. This is the super end. Phalluses and everything disappear.

*Eero Epner:* The wooden elements are more abstract objects for us. As we start the whole show with some references to verticality, we continue to use those signs during the performance. These remain more abstract symbols for verticality.

*Juhan Ulfsak:* We are now turning to the idea of what is actually abstract in theatre. And this is a very strange question. It's almost impossible to remain completely abstract. During the process we create so many symbols and images, things come together, and in the end we create a certain dramaturgy, which can be poetic. We do not make these decisions based on theoretical reasons. I can still find something new in the performance when I do it for the twentieth time. One evening I can see in the wooden elements as phalluses and another evening, as New York maybe. And two days later I see a forest that is

destroyed by men to build new cities. There is so much stuff in it and therefore, no specific answer for it. But what I like about this piece is that all of that is in there.

*Audience member (Lab):* I have a question about the text: How did you produce and create the text? Did you work with improvisations?

*Mart Kangro:* We started to collect things we thought that were necessary to teach. You know things that could somehow form the arc. And of course, during the process this became more specific.

*Eero Epner:* Actually, I don't remember it that way. It wasn't that beautiful and smooth. I think our starting point was teaching. So, we were thinking about the specific skills we have and the things that we could actually teach.

*Juhan Ulfsak:* We only have one authentic situation in the performance, Eero's theoretical lecture on a painting. He has a professional background as an art historian and is regularly lecturing in Estonian art museums.

*Eero Epner:* Another situation would be Mart explaining sewing and drilling. It is really something he can do as he has built his own house. But after that it was really zero. It turned out that we had nothing to teach, then we came up with those texts and fantasies.

*Juhan Ulfsak:* We also decided that we were not going to make a performance about theatre making itself. We were certainly discussing the similarity of power positions in theatre and in teaching situations. But we decided to skip this whole theatrical context. We didn't want to play with the question of who and where we are. We didn't want this level in the performance.

*Mart Kangro:* One of the major tasks was how to avoid our performance becoming more than a simple collection of anecdotes. How can we escape this situation? It is basically a question of balance. Although



we talk about teaching, we do not want to become teachers. We do not want to create a situation where we teach the audience.

*Eero Epner:* But we wanted the audience to believe us. So, we had to compose a puzzle of authentic and fictional elements. How can we create a balance that allows an audience to imagine? This is the basic foundation of theatre and we wanted to play with it.

*Alexandra Portmann:* Throughout the performance you seem to play with this, fiction and fact, teaching and not teaching. But by the end of the performance, the structure doesn't allow this ambivalence anymore. In other words, we have to believe that you are theatre makers and that what you are doing is a piece of art. Was this important to you during the process?

*Mart Kangro:* I think that is quite fundamental to every artist. That you can seem pathetic and miserable on stage, but you cannot fail as an artist. This dilemma is there – you have to find a way to deal with it.

*Nicolette Kretz:* I just wanted to add to this train of thought. The title of the show opens up such ambivalence – it is not easy to call something ›workshop‹. People are going to ask: »Am I going to have to do something?«

*Juhan Ulfusak:* Actually, we weren't like one hundred percent happy with this title. It was initially our working title. But three days before the posters went to print, we hadn't come up with something better.

*Mart Kangro:* But I must say that *Workshop* in this sense is an interesting title because workshop as an undertaking is so common in the performance world. It is in a way part of a whole machinery. As workshop operates in the performance and art worlds, it is also a reference to our initial question of how to locate this performance when the three of us come from different educational and artistic backgrounds.

Redaktion und Druck wurden unterstützt durch die Schweizerische Akademie der Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaften, die Philosophisch-historische Fakultät der Universität Bern und das Institut für Theaterwissenschaft der Universität Bern.

Schweizerische Akademie der Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaften  
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Philosophisch-historische Fakultät  
Institut für Theaterwissenschaft

UNIVERSITÄT  
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ISBN (Druckversion): 978-3-89581-535-5

ISBN (elektronische Version): 978-3-89581-556-0

DOI: 10.16905/itwid.2020.14

*itw : im dialog 3*