

Once and Future Performance Activism: Asylum Seekers Imagining Counter-Memories

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The facilitators of Malmö Community Theatre explore a practice of contradictions resulting from the process of continuous meaning-making between asylum-rights activists, the facilitators themselves and the audience. The created work may appear as a potential space for re-imagining counter-memories for a different future.



For me, the theatre is beautiful because it is a secret, and secrets seduce us, we all want to share secrets, we all want to share our dreams.

—*Dreamlands*

In June 2016, Malmö Community Theatre performed *Dreamlands* (directed by Nina Norén and Sara Larsdotter, artistic leaders of Theatre Interakt) at the international conference *Performative Commemoration of Painful Pasts* at Stockholm University.

The Malmö Community Theatre was founded in 2014 as a result of a former collaboration between Teater InterAkt and a group of asylum-rights activists. These activists were asylum seekers and/or didn't have residency rights in Malmö. Between 2011–2013, the asylum-rights activist scene in Malmö radically changed from being run by mainly white, middle-class women aged 20-35, to being led by people who had experienced migration difficulties. It is in this context that the community theatre was born.

In this frame of reference, the theatre is viewed as a valid platform to address human rights and asylum issues. Moreover, the theatre is seen as a place for participants to re-imagine their position in society as activists and spokespersons of their own cause. However, the community theatre is full of contradictions, as Sheila Preston showed in her book *Applied Theatre: Facilitation* (2016). Preston argues that if to properly understand what is performed, one has to uncover these contradictions and move beyond community theatre as something good per se. This essay seeks to uncover

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Ed. Note: a video collage of photographs from *Dreamlands* accompanies this essay and can be found at <http://liminalities.net/14-3/dreamlands.html>

some contradictions we were faced with when working at the Malmö Community theatre. The essay is guided by the following question: what are the possibilities for asylum seekers to present their own memories not covered by preconceived agendas, such as the need to present facts suitable for the asylum process?

Visions of Dependency

The work with *Dreamlands* started around ten months before the premiere in June 2016. When asked to participate in *Performative Commemoration of Painful Pasts*, we were entrusted with creative freedom under the loose premises that our performance displayed performativity and painful pasts. Throughout the work with Malmö Community theatre we, the facilitators, have met many migrants' contradictory desire to tell their own migration story, wanting to forget about their situation as a migrant for a brief moment and a will to participate in theatre as part of a creative process, or just because it is fun or relaxing.

In her article "Dirty Truth: personal narrative, victimhood and participatory theatre work with people seeking asylum" (2008) Alison Jeffers argues that the reason why the stories of migration are difficult to move past when working with migrants is that the asylum seeker is dependent on their story. The story is crucial in conveying a convincing argument of why one should be given residency and protection rights. The narratives have to be considered authentic by the authorities, worthy of protection and residence rights.

Teater InterAkt frequently works with *devising* as a collaborative method to derive stories and dramatic narratives from sources other than a scripted drama. According to Jackie Smart in her article "The feeling of Devising" (2014), devising is thought to have a playful openness and enables a democratic process. This process involves using input from the majority of group members when constructing a performance. A common technique of devising is to use stimuli as a point of departure and to bring forth physical, imaginative, and other material from group members.

As facilitators, we decided to work with a visualization exercise as a stimulus, somewhat similar to active imagination. This is in order to give maximal freedom to the actors to tell whatever story entered their mind. The actors were guided in an inner journey, which is a way to experience one's inner world and imagination. In this particular exercise, the actors visualized an empty theatre building with a big stage. Actions, symbols, movements, forms and rhythms that came from this exercise served as dramaturgical tools and formed a skeleton for *Dreamlands*. The intention of the facilitators was to offer the actors the possibility to tell a story that was not necessarily one of migration and asylum, which went beyond their difficult life experiences, and to create a space to express a variety of experiences. Yet, while the actors were given free rein, they nevertheless focused on the experience of migration. From these stories the actors and the facilitators constructed the individual

scenes. All these scenes were stories of rejection from European migration authorities.

To have somebody listen to your story can ensure a feeling of relief and of being respected. To be able to tell about one's situation and to be heard and mirrored by others can convey a sense of being seen and acknowledged. This seems to be a reason why participants still tend to tell a story about migration, even when offered the chance to create a performance about something else. But does this give real agency and the ability to re-imagine one's situation?

Why Community Theatre and for Whom?

In one sequence of *Dreamlands*, a very poetic scene is followed by a circus act. The actors are juggling, doing clown numbers, walking on an imaginary tightrope, riding horses and performing magic tricks. It is a scene that brings in both light and energy in an otherwise somber and bleak performance. The initiative for the scene did not come from the actors/activists but from the facilitators/directors. For the facilitators, it was a meta-scene mirroring the spectacle of theatre constructed as a circus where tricks and stunts are performed with a physical desperation and a forced smile to gain appreciation. The things we do to make people like us! Moreover, it tried to deflect and negotiate the stereotypical image of the refugee as a victim. The reason for the facilitators juggling victimhood and the agency in a scene like this comes from the experience of the audience's reaction. Often, the facilitators are told by audience members what great importance their work is to the actor/activists. There seems to be a general common notion that it is a good thing for the actors to be able to tell their story. This, of course, comes from general Western views and values around the individual's need to express their individuality in order to progress with their personal development. However, hidden in this ascribed 'good doing' is the stereotypical view of the refugee and asylum seeker as a victim in need of help, which is only one aspect of the personal story of a refugee.

Although many people seem to believe that the actors play mainly for their own sake, as a healing process, or possibly with a political agenda, the actors themselves often express that they are showing something that the audience has a need to hear. Thus, their performances contribute to Swedish society. Stories told by those who directly experienced them mediate perspectives on, and increase knowledge about, contemporary migration history.

Even though the circus scene at first might seem to be about comedy, it holds up a mirror of itself to the audience that tries to highlight that the form of community theatre in itself creates contradictory positions of victimhood and agency that need to be open for negotiation. It is to show an awareness that performative community work is not an innocent practice, but that it has its own power structures to wrestle with. This open-ended meta-scene of the spectacle of community theatre is thus an attempt to guard the work from reproducing stereotypical images of the actors. Moreover, it is in the very

tension between victimhood and agency that the counter-memory can be presented. Avery F. Gordon argues in *Ghostly Matters* (2008) that putting life back in a memory, in other words to re-present a contested past, is also to refashion present social relations and strive towards a counter-memory for the future. All of which is necessary if the stage is to be truly a transformative place where refugees and asylum seekers can re-imagine themselves as agents of social justice.

The Actors, the Facilitators—Different Views

For facilitators who get their income from the kind of artistic/social work that community theatre is, it is imperative to examine one's motives in order to try to avoid reproducing power structures. When the facilitators at the Malmö Community Theatre received the invitation to participate at the academic conference in Stockholm, the actors were asked for their opinion. Immediately, they answered that they wanted to participate, without knowing much about the context or about the audience they would meet—some 40 scholars from various disciplines gathered during three days to discuss performative commemoration of painful pasts. On one evening a performance should be given by the group. For the actors, it was foremost the chance to travel to Stockholm and perform that was the most compelling. The actual context of the invitation seemed less relevant. For the facilitators, the context was however clear and longed for. This was a situation from which Teater InterAkt could clearly benefit. The theatre would be part of a context that allowed facilitators to reflect on issues that they find interesting and important. The invitation also gives our work credibility in what the theatre does, and how it does it. The conference was supposed to be thought-provoking, giving beneficial synergistic effects. Additionally, it might enhance the facilitators' own careers. And the conference organizers and participants alike were thought to "profit" from having a very up-to-date movement/work as part of their program. A concern that came up was that the benefits were the facilitators' and conference participants, rather than the actors'/activists'. However, to be a part of an academic conference might trigger awareness of power structures, which to some extent can pose a challenge to the very foundation of one's commitment to a line of work which at times is perceived as inherently good, but also rewarding in terms of reflection and analysis. Moreover, the insight from conference participants at *Performative Commemoration of Painful Pasts*, many of them dealing both with personal struggles and their artistic expression, made it obvious that the audience of the conference was very receptive to the content and form of *Dreamlands*. All of which made it a rewarding event to perform at, both for facilitators and actors.

Paper Boats—Negotiating between Actors and Spectators

For the audience to take a paper and write down a personal dream on it, and fold it into a paper boat, tends to be *Dreamlands*' most gripping moment. To turn the audience into participants in this way is to dissolve differences between actors and spectators. According to Erika Fischer-Lichte in her seminal work *The Transformative Power of Performance* (2008), the *performative turn* is characterized by collapsing binaries and a shift from art object or piece, to an art event. This approach distances itself from representation and the making of a fictive world associated with traditional theatre. To make the audience interact or to be active in one way or another, is an attempt to avoid the audience only passively consuming the spectacle on stage. What Fischer-Lichte calls "moments of enchantment" is immanent when actors and spectators are mutually involved in a dynamic 'here and now,' and a shared process of being in the world. Regarding *Dreamlands*, the approach also facilitates a dialogue around re-imagining the stage, who is telling what story, and whose memories are at display—or at risk. To negotiate the roles of spectators and actors in an event that involves everybody (present) enables struggle and pain to co-exist with the agency and counter-memory of the activist and thereby opt for an enchanted space that might re-imagine a different future.

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