

The Second World Congress of Free Artists

In Three Acts

Camel Collective

AARHUS KUNSTHAL, AARHUS, DENMARK

Dictatorship of an Audience

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NARRATOR
YOUNG MAN
OLDER MAN/OFFSTAGE VOICE
YOUNG GIRL
YOUNG WOMAN
CHILD

Staging should be similar to a game of musical chairs, with fewer than performers. The staging is not meant to bear a direct, realistic relationship to the actions described in the text, but should, instead, represent a separate universe—that of the actors themselves as real people on stage, in the process of playing one or more roles as scripted, in that very theater and at that very time, in that moment in history, and in front of a very real audience.

With this in mind, the company should use the rehearsals to establish a set of rules or system of movements that will govern how they will be together on stage: Sitting in and switching between the chairs, rotating or working between them; responding to the shortage of chairs,

to a context of scarcity, inside and out; honoring the circle or revolting against it, all of this developed according to the company members' own interpretations of the meanings and rhythms of the text. The result should be a loose improvisational score that structures a set of physical tasks and relationships—a separate “story,” perhaps, that runs parallel to the story described in the script. The goal being that parallel stories, times, places, and characters will develop out of the performers' actions and script indirectly, with each player's actions supporting the rhythms and pacing and tone of the performance as a whole.

To support this, all or at least some of the actors might read directly from the script during the performance. The opening and closing of the play have a more directed set up and break down, but this, too, can be resisted if the ensemble finds it necessary.

All characters enter as their lines appear in the script, allowing the choreography to respond to the entry of each new player.

The lights come up on an empty stage. The NARRATOR enters and begins arranging the chairs in a circle.

NARRATOR. A play is under way. As in so many modern stories, a young man is the protagonist. The son of workers, he is struggling to overcome the course that his life has taken—a course that appears decided for him, determined

by the limitations of the class that he belongs to. New to his world however, are certain institutions, institutions designed to bring people together around some function of society that is believed to be of common value. The play would have us believe that by gathering people around a common purpose, a greater value can be achieved for the whole—the common welfare increased through collective organization around collective purpose.

One of these institutions is the school, which may allow our character to overcome the kinds of barriers that lock him in place. This discovery fills him with a sense of possibility, and he wonders if that sense of possibility is what freedom is supposed to feel like. Our opening scene ends with this realization and a burst of optimism, as his family pour their excitement over him, even though we know, as their dialogue has told us, that losing his labor power will cause the family significant hardship.

OFFSTAGE VOICE. But he is our son.

NARRATOR. We hear them say.

OFFSTAGE VOICE. We have always sacrificed so that he wouldn't face the hardships we've had to endure. Why should this be any different?

NARRATOR. When our character arrives at school he sees that not everyone understands its purpose in the same way, as we watch him meet a series of characters. Each character seems crafted to stand in for a different point of view. Perhaps we are meant to recognize their perspectives from our own lives, from history or philosophy books, from our parents and friends, or from pundits. Perhaps we are meant to locate our own perspective somewhere within their conversation, finding agreement and disagreement with them, as does our character. And as we

find ourselves investing in the success of our character, each conversation poses a new difficulty to that success.

Across these conversations we see the outline of an argument begin. The first person he befriends is also the child of workers. This boy declares that an education is a right for every person, a way for the skeleton of society's rigid structure to be broken.

OFFSTAGE VOICE. And our generation will be the one to do it.

NARRATOR. He exclaims.

NARRATOR. Next our protagonist comes into conflict with a character who argues that education is wasted on the children of workers.

OFFSTAGE. It's not in the nature of the manual laborer to value things of the mind.

NARRATOR. Then we meet two teachers, one framed as a liberator, the other as an oppressor. The liberator gives the students hope, insisting upon their ability to become anything they want and instilling the courage to struggle for it. And in a different meeting, the oppressor makes it clear that they don't belong in school, that they're only there because of the hysterical politics of radicals and bureaucratic policies.

OFFSTAGE. You're wasting your time. You should be taking care of your family, who certainly need you drawing a wage alongside them. You shouldn't just sit here reading books that are not in your nature to understand or make proper use of.

NARRATOR. Here, in a debate that seems to reach far into the language of the past, the author seems to hope that viewers will recognize how social barriers of the old world remain mirrored within the institutions of the new, translated from

arguments that called upon gods and kings and providence as well as hierarchies of genetic traits, behavior and family values. What emerges, the author hopes, is a drama shaped around our protagonist—a modern individual with the same right to be a subject of history as anyone else, struggling under the weight of history.

Lengthy pause.

NARRATOR. Throughout the performance, however, the audience was more restless than usual. Their attention drifted from the stage to one another, first in whispers, then murmurs, and finally, a volume that competed with the performance itself. An increasingly charged conversation clamored out of the darkened aisles and echoed onto the stage [*pause, long silence*] much more so than one would expect during a children's matinee. But it wasn't until the two young women and the older man climbed onto the stage that the play was finally stopped altogether.

Rather than speak to the audience, these three addressed the performers and the crew, including the stage manager and stagehands, the director, the writer, producer, and the house manager.

YOUNG WOMAN. We have been selected by the other audience members to represent all of our collective aesthetic interests.

YOUNG GIRL. As such, we demand a pause in this crappy performance so the audience members can reflect on what they've been watching and decide whether they are happy with it continuing in the same manner.

NARRATOR. There wasn't much that the cast or crew could do, as the audience had already begun filtering onto the stage behind them. The playwright, a progressively minded man

YOUNG GIRL. Yeah, we sit here in the dark, pretending not to be surrounded by our own friends and families, imprisoned in these uncomfortable chairs, while you get to stand up there in the light, moving around freely, and you're the only ones allowed to speak. It isn't fair!

OLD MAN. It's just like the character in your play who's limited by these structures of inequality all around him. You make this inequality a subject matter or a theme, but then you perform that very same inequality here in the way you put on your play.

NARRATOR. At this, the playwright begins to weep. "You're wrong," he shouts at them. "This is a good play, a just play, it is about equality!"

YOUNG WOMAN. You're right, it's *about* equality, but it doesn't *enact* equality. You segregate us out, you talk *to* us rather than *with* us.

YOUNG GIRL. Like one of the awful teachers at my fucked-up school.

NARRATOR. The cast members are also tired and feeling increasingly protective of their director. One of them rises and shouts, [*to the* YOUNG GIRL] "Well, what do you want from us?"

YOUNG GIRL. First of all, we wanna stay here on stage. We don't wanna go back to those shitty seats.

OLD MAN. And we would also like costumes. If we're going to be on stage then we should have some costumes.

Sounds of applause from the fictional audience.

YOUNG WOMAN. Listen, I've been to college, too. Rule by the specialists? Rule by "the talented"? We have to get rid of these notions. If we want democracy, then we need democracy in the arts too, democracy everywhere, because what you're talking about is governance. You want to govern our art, but you don't want our input—you won't take *our* recommendations.

OLD MAN. You obviously don't know what it means to be told that you can't, that you don't have value, as the architecture of these theaters and concert halls and museums tell us. But we don't want to watch other people sing and dance while we sit on our hands and just buy tickets. We want to dance and we want to sing and we want to find pleasure in acting and pretending and staging our visions, our sounds and our movements!

YOUNG GIRL. I believe that we all deserve to be the subjects of art, just like your school character wants to be a subject of history, a subject of politics.

NARRATOR. The people who had until now been the audience roared with pleasure. They leapt to their feet and bounced about the stage, belting the verses of popular songs and operas that they knew. Some swiped hats and scarves and canes from the actors and struck poses they'd seen in other plays and in photographs.

NARRATOR. This insubordination infuriated the actors greatly: They felt scorned, unappreciated, and belittled, loyal to their theatrical leaders, and still a little paranoid from that joint they'd passed around. Realizing themselves to be the last line of defense to keep the play separate from the audience, they met the crowd with tugs-of-war, wrestling over their props and costumes—or *property*, as we call it backstage. Chaos spread across the stage and filled the theater with the pitch of a spectacular performance. Just as suddenly, a group of the

audience members ran to the exit, threw open the doors to the street and called out to the masses.

YOUNG MAN. Come and join us, everyone, free theater tonight, everyone's an artist, everyone's a performer, everyone's on stage and everyone matters!

YOUNG WOMAN. No admission! Everyone sing and dance and pretend with us so we all can practice living differently. Art is the space where we can see what our revolutions look like and show each other how they're possible!

YOUNG GIRL. Fuck commerce, fuck hierarchy, fuck the owners of culture and the institutions that make their ownership seem reasonable!

OLDER MAN. Fuck the schools that make art the playground for the few!

YOUNG MAN. Art belongs to all of us or it is just one more way to sugarcoat injustice!

YOUNG GIRL. Real art is what makes the unjust appear as what it is—unjust!

YOUNG MAN. Art is where we can begin to redistribute authority, where the way you see the world counts!

YOUNG WOMAN. The visible and the invisible, the silent and the loud, the inside and out, borders and belonging versus strangers and enemies, the ruler and the ruled, the specialist and the amateur, producer and consumer! What does art do but either maintain all these oppositions or lead us into revolt against them?

Silence. All the actors leave their places and walk casually to the foot of the stage.

NARRATOR. No one on the street responded as if these audience members were serious. No one acted as if they were being sincerely addressed. And why would they have? Where within their culture would these pedestrians have learned to be anything but spectators or consumers of one artifice or another; anything but buyers of the culture that someone else had made and marketed as “in fashion”? What would let them think they had a right to their own aesthetic interests, to equal artistic rights, to any of the things that the audience members had called out?

The cast members form a constellation with each other that suggests an ambivalent victory or an instructive defeat, staring out at the audience.

YOUNG GIRL. [*with confidence, her fist in the air*] We have a lot of work to do!

Curtain. All exit.