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How Real Is the Real Forensic? Transformations of Death, Dead Bodies and Maggots

Introductory Remarks

Good morning ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for getting up so early for this panel.

Thank you, Lee Weng Choy, very much for volunteering to moderate this panel.

Weng has been hosting the performance I will talk about in my presentation.

Since my performance dealt a lot with truth and deceiving, you might want to ask him what really had happened. Don't believe my talk.

The Title as a Focus

I entitled my paper "How Real Is The Real Forensic? - Transformations of Death, Dead Bodies and Maggots". I named it after I learned about the conference theme of "Theaters of Life". At this point I would also like to express my gratitude to Peggy Phelan to invite me to the conference, and now I know why she was interested in my topic. First she invited the performance "The Real Forensic". Due to a lack of funding all you get is me talking about this performance. Normally I try to avoid talking about my own work, mainly, because I see my theater work as a statement that can serve both academic and artistic demands, as well as personal / biographic elements. Ironically the production TRF had itself the format of an academic / educational talk going out of hand. Now this here might be another academic talk - going out of hand too...

Another reason I don't like talking about my own work is that it is never really finished. Following a philosophy of re-mixing and the ideas of an over-all-dramaturgy and meta-performance - that is the serious of a performance, travelling to different parts of the

world, appropriating them for each venue / context and understanding the entire company post theater as the "act" or the "media sensation", TRF has not come to a real closure yet, since we won't give up on performing until the piece has traveled to the city where it was conceived (which is between NYPD and NYU). Ironically, this Friday the German Consulate has shown interest in funding a tour of TRF to NY. Let's hope.

The title of my paper is a question that implies that there are different degrees of reality. "How" indicates a measurement. The question is not: "Is the Real Forensic Real?", but to what degree. Reality has been Baudriallards favorite topic in his "Agony of the Real". There he states that we already have reached the level of the "hyper-real". The simulation of a reality has become the norm, not the exception. What does this mean for theater, the place where there is clearly a simulation of a transformed reality happening on stage? The title of my paper is also the attempt to reduce all possible readings of the piece and all possibly discussed issues that come with it to the question of reality. The subtitle is just a reference to the PR strategy that accompanied our piece - luring audiences with seemingly disgusting and bizarre issues. I won't be talking about any these transformations, only about the one of a theater reality.

The Real Forensic - An Anti-Body Metaphor

In my presentation today I want to describe my theater piece, "The Real Forensic", which I conceived and directed in 2000 and 2001. It had been invited to festivals and theaters in Cologne, Berlin, and Singapore. After describing the performance and its meta-performance, I will try to draw some general questions and conclusions from it.

Can a performance be understood as a body? Can a passed performance be seen as a dead body? Am I talking about a corpse? Or a frozen body, melted and revitalized each time the piece is invited to a festival? There is the expression of a body of work. What it means is usually a collection of single works put into one coherent entity, the "body". Is the collection of all reworked versions and stagings of a performance the body of a performance piece? Are all performances by a director or a collective his or their body of work?

The body metaphor has been stressed and stretched by all kinds of scholars, and obviously most often by performance studies colleagues. This over use was the point of departure for TRF. Bodies that matter, have been looked at in all ways possible, read as carrier of all kinds of social constructions, related to gender, ethnicity, sexuality. And many performance artists joined in on the line, or even were the avant-garde to the academic discourse.

After graduating from PS in 1999 I had to find a way to escape the over-popular academic cliché of the body. What was paradoxically simultaneously distant and related was the dead body. I looked at the body after dying. And I was happy to be good friends with some of the leading scholars and experts on dead bodies, forensic medical examiner Mark Benecke. He introduced me into his field, and I was immediately intrigued in how to put this on stage.

post theater

A word on "post theater", my network of internationally dispersed artists who share a vision of genre breaking theater. We had used biographic materials, film scripts, transcribed internet chats and journalistic texts to conceive our plays before. "The Real Forensic" was on that line, but it took the diligent work of our dramaturge Klaus Fehling to edit on the infinite material about and by eloquent and well-published Mark Benecke.

The performance had quite some media intention in Germany in 2000. There we got all the yellow press to cover us, and we were sold out all nights. This is not, because the gossip press would be so interested in post theater (or any kind of off theater), but they were curious about Mark Benecke who is a celebrity scientist, and a media figure, often called "Doctor Maggot". To make him the theme of a performance motivated them to come up with headlines like: "Doctor Maggot Gets Theater Fame" and "Officer, Get the Maggots!" or "With a Little Help by my Insects". Benecke has his own radio weekly on a popular music channel, where he answers all kinds of questions related to biology. He frequently writes for Die Zeit, Sueddeutsche Zeitung and Frankfurter Allgemeine, all leading weekly / daily national papers. He also gets interviewed by the entire range from

men's magazines to scientific publications, tabloid press to private TV, Hungarian to German talk shows; Arte just send a one hour feature on him.

I'm telling you this so you understand that the most obvious angle to us seemed to be to look at his persona, his entire life rather than only at what he is researching on. So we sorted out the different Beneckes we saw: the player in the media game, the scientific journalist dealing with cutting edge questions around genetics, the scientist who gets to install genetic finger print labs in Manila and Bogota as well as in Saigon, the Benecke who works on actual crime cases in Cologne and New York, and the Benecke who teaches at universities as well as FBI academies.

Many media tried to portrait the multiple layers of this star scientist - but they usually forgot about the media hype itself. They would pretend to have discovered this bizarre character for themselves. In our theater project, the media gaze on Benecke's body became the focus to our performance. The media gaze on him was to be set as analogy to Benecke's view at insects feeding on dead bodies. So media relations / dealing with media had turned out to be central to our piece both content-wise and formally.

Benecke has developed a great eloquence in talking to and through media. This leads to the question what is real about him - and for himself. Let me give you one example: Benecke is confronted with the issues of disgust by the media constantly. The most frequent question he gets asked is how he deals with the smell of the dead or the maggots he has to touch on his job. He usually presents it as no problem at all, since the body he analyzes becomes part of an eternal transformation / recycling of biomass. He understands dead bodies as a fertile ground for a chain of succeeding creatures to live on, that is feed and grow on. This he communicated to media so often that he produced this as a reality for himself, not knowing what he actually thinks - so my assumption.

As I mentioned earlier, it is a post theater principle to re-mix the own work accordingly to the venue and its context. For several reasons we were interested in bringing TRF to Singapore, the most important of them was that there had been a forensic superstar too, Prof. Chao Tzee Cheng. Why would Singapore - off all places, have best-selling

paperback by a local forensic examiner in stores? I read it with great interest - and find it still a remarkable document about life in Singapore - on a content level: it shows how crime is a common within all ethnic groups, and on a formal level: it shows the desire to have science explain all oddities and lead to a better society.

For our Singapore remix we decided to add another performer to act out the dead body that's analyzed by the forensic. We were very fortunate to have Fu Kuen Tang who is both dancer and scholar, for this part. So we had a living dead body to be performing with the lively scientist character.

Both references to Singapore added to the "reality" of the show. It made it possible to both media and audiences to relate our import to their Singaporean reality.

Theater as Play with the Press

The play with reality depended crucially on the involvement of the press, so I want to reflect on their response in the following section.

Allow me to read from the papers in Singapore. There was quite some publicity on the internet too, including an interview with me, but I cannot estimate its outreach. The Straits Times (Singapore's leading daily) who covered us before and after the show with generous space and pictures did a great job. Most of all I have to thank the Substation, our host, for doing excellent press work. This particular performance needs a media hype. Which lead the editor Clarissa Oon of Straits Times to the title:

"Sex, Murder and Media Hype"

...

"The main riff of this production, The Real Forensic, is of a famous forensic scientist talking about his work and demonstrating on a corpse.

The scientist character is the real-life, 30 year-old star of German science, Dr. Mark Benecke. He is known for his method of determining how long a corpse has lain undiscovered by studying the insects on it.

Belgian Murat Belcant plays Dr Benecke and Singaporean Tang Fu Kuen, the corps."

Later the text closes, after explaining some of post theater working methods, with

"As a result, the shows often get re-mixed wherever they are performed. Tomorrow night, for example, Singaporean performer Tang adds his input as the dead body:.

I don't want over-interpret some one's preview on my own work, but it is obviously remarkable that the local collaboration aspect is stressed. Obviously being not a celebrity in Singapore, Benecke has not been so much the argument like the local appeal.

"Benecke is...rather like Singapore's own late Professor Chao Tzee Cheng".

It does strike me that Fu Kuen Tang is performing THE dead body. The ultimate, representative corpse. All press stressed the paradox of someone playing a dead body, by referring to the necessary, familiar and naturally present THE dead body. No forensic examination without a dead body. They depend upon each other.

I won't talk much about the actual performance. Just that much:

The audience gets to hear a lot of scientific, yet entertaining talk that is juxtaposed with unrelated dance by the dead body - who rather looks like a mummy, and partially confusing objects that were taken out underneath a life camera by the forensic expert. He would speak with a heavy German accent, but never be insecure about the load of biological facts. He would joke, as well as present macabre details about forensic etymology with no emotional affection.

Throughout the show he would present videos that ranged from cell division to insects' metamorphosis and TV coverage of Benecke.

The focus would increasingly shift from science to the scientist: Why does the person in the video resemble the performer on stage so much? Were the videos shot by the theater company? Or was the casting / make up so well done? And what's this bizarre acting style of improvisations meeting scientific precision all about?

In the finale the video-images of maggots would be replaced by life-camera images of real maggots. What came from tape first came now out of a box and crawled over the living dead body. Lou Reed's song "Perfect Day" would play to it, with the nice line audible: "Feed animals in the Zoo...and then home". But the end of the show wasn't the curtain calls, but the post performance talk - or, if you like, the press aftermath.

Let me continue with the probably most important review that was published in the same paper by the same author a couple of days later.

"Dead men acting"

"What you don't see is what you get in this part stand up comedy, part documentary on forensic medicine"

After briefly introducing an apparently similar spectacle, the film "Shadow of The Vampire", Mrs Oon writes:

"post theater's The Real Forensic plays similar games with what the audience sees on stage. At the dialogue session at the end, its German director Max Schumacher reveals his hand: The actor playing celebrity forensic scientist Dr Mark Benecke is really Dr Benecke himself. The fictitious creation here is actor Murat Belcant, described in the programme notes as the "most successful Belgian supporting actor in the Hollywood machine", appearing in Die hard II and Eyes Wide Shut. So who is Dr. Benecke then?

...

(A check with the Singapore General Hospital revealed such a person existed. You never know with these artists.)"

Oon is very in favor of the performance, and rounds up with saying:

"Nothing in The Real Forensic is too obvious as to become predictable nor too coded as to loose its audience. If you like, it's accessible post modernism with an insect-shaped cherry on top."

In the Arts Magazine (Singapore's main arts magazine) Otto Fong wrote a review that actually starts up with deep conviction in fact checking:

"Dr Mark Benecke is one of Germany's leading forensic medical examiners and a celebrated public speaker. His works ... can be found in libraries, bookstores and on his website. The good doctor is real. Murat Belcant, the actor playing Benecke in The Real

Forensic was fictional. Belcant's unlikely credits included major Hollywood productions such as Eyes Wide Shut and Die Hard II."

Fong ends his article:

"During the post performance dialogue session it was revealed that the real Dr Benecke had been onstage, explaining the overwhelming realism. But it also served as a reminder that the creators of Forensic were more interested in toying with our minds than hearts."

There are many interesting details about these reviews that might lead to interesting results. Just to give you an example:

Why is the "Dead men" in the first review's title in plural? Again, not jumping conclusions, but there is a general overlap of the realms of death and reality. No one is dead, no one is unreal - only that the dead body is obviously not dead, and the actor apparently is not an actor. Or has the actor Benecke played the actor Belcant who again performed Benecke?

The media as used within the performance - that is TV coverage of Benecke - have confused the sense of what's real. And the local media have helped to make Belcant real. No paper had doubted the unlikely biography of Belcant. The bizarre life of the subject overshadowed the performer.

Until today it strikes me that no one ever doubted the title of our show "The Real Forensic" - are there any wrong or unreal forensic scientists? Why would no one wonder why we chose for this title? Wasn't that enough of a hint?

In retrospect, and that's why I analyzed the press response to our piece more than our own work itself, I like to suggest to look at the metamorphosis a theatrical idea goes through. Schechner, combining his academic and his artistic backgrounds, developed a cycle of a performance's life that starts with a workshop, in which ideas get processed. This cycle goes through rehearsal, actual performance to a reflection by the team. So this "life of a performance" is seen from the creator's perspective.

I rather suggest an audience view. The performance's life starts with the press release and how a journalist gets hooked on it. The preview is what reaches most audiences first, and so is the invitation post card for many. Only after having shaped already an opinion that is positive enough to actually go to a performance, the audience enters a theater always

with a couple of stereotypes in mind. It's in the responsibility of the theater makers to play the game of PR well. The show is happening in the media, more than ever. It's hard to verify to what degree audiences came because we were German, because we were announcing DJ theater and multi-media performance. Or was it the subject matter of forensic biology? The smell of a science prodigy child? Journalists are no superior human beings, and once they are thrilled by an idea, they can communicate their interest very well. Our piece would have not been the same without the generous collaboration with the press. If we had tried to make the press to conscious collaborators they would have not helped us a bit. So the planned trick on both media and audiences was serving the purpose of the performance to generate the notion of media hype, for the piece itself is about a media figure.

Making a Performance Real

I do not want to generalize from this, but I do think that what can be learned from TRF is not so much that rare themes intrigue new / big audiences (which is never the less a deep belief of mine), and that shocking topics make good press. The more interesting insight to me was / still is, that employing press is leading to multi layered results:

The performance's life lasts longer, since it is extended by the media to start from when people read about it, maybe until they read the review afterwards. The involvement of the press adds to the reality and the realness, the media produced relevance of a performance, as much as it creates anticipation and modes of reception. Because it was written not only in the program notes, but also in the papers, people believed Belcant to be the actor and Benecke to be the topic. This belief was so strong, that even the explanation in the post performance talk would be doubted. That's probably why Mrs. Oong had to call up the General Hospital. There is a saying "Who lied once won't be believed in again".

Astonishingly enough I did play the trick the other way round in Stuttgart last Fall where I told the audience I had a real officer from a south Pacific island who would present an execution machine - not telling them it was theater and a Kafka adaptation. The biggest preview was written by a literature studies Phd holder who had learned about The Real Forensic's trick.

Wake up to Reality!

"An idea of the theater has been lost. And as long as the theater limits itself to showing us intimate scenes from the lives of a few puppets, transforming the public into Peeping Toms, it is no wonder the elite abandon it and the great public looks to the movies, the music hall or the circus for violent satisfactions, whose intentions do not deceive them. At the point of deterioration which our sensibility has reached, it is certain that we need above all a theater that wakes us up: nerves and heart." Antonin Artaud, Theater and Cruelty in The Theater and its Double

Is reality a concept that is rational or emotional? According to the Arts Magazine review quoted earlier, we did reach the audiences' minds - but not hearts. The Artaudian state of awake-ness - which he asks for as a response to new media (cinema) if you like - is a holistic reality of nerves and hear, that is emotions and reason. According to Artaud the main function of theater is to wake the voyeurs up and involve them in the theater as active participants. I hope we have challenged our audience with the blurred realities that were co-produced by the PR work / media response prior to our show as well as our show itself. Our "overwhelming realism" was not a style but authenticity. The inversion of the "real" and the "fictitious" was what actually stimulated the audience - not the authenticity or proximity to a scientific reality of the performance text.

Concluding from this I like to suggest that theater should not segregate itself from the media circus and other media, but use them, employ them, dialogue with them - be it within a performance or prior to it.

Last week the Foundry theater opened "TALK" at the Public Theater here in New York. It is an academic discussion around / about an African-American Studies scholar. And it isn't - it's all theater, and it's all acted out, it's fake. I haven't seen it, but I know that they chose similar aesthetics, but different "foreplay" - since I know from the press that it is a fake.

Thank you very much - for believing in this reality.