

# *In the role of yourself*

*An anthropological study of a theater performance about dyslexia in  
Frederiksberg and the potential of performing arts to negotiate subject positions*

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## Contents

<b>The dramaturgical process and movements in documentary theater</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>The director's role in the first meetings with the cast</b> .....	<b>5</b>
What does the instructor initiate these first times?.....	5
<b>The director's role in transforming stories into performing arts</b> .....	<b>11</b>
What does this include for the instructor?.....	11
Affective practices .....	11
Editing work .....	16
Participating in each other's stories.....	20
<b>The instructor's role in changing focus and rethinking positions in society</b> .....	<b>22</b>
The most important points? .....	22
A shift in focus .....	22
Elijah's poem.....	23
"I can decide what I say to them" .....	24
The power of representation.....	25
<b>Perspectives</b> .....	<b>26</b>



## The dramaturgical process and movements in documentary theater

This dramaturgical process, which takes place over these months, depicts a movement consisting of different parts:

1. Initially, the contributors open up and share their experiences of having dyslexia with each other
2. This is then written down in a document
3. Consequently, the cast must recall their story
4. The story then evolves into a monologue
5. Finally, the performers must play this edited version on stage, where they must "*feel their own story, as vividly as possible, so that the recipient can feel it*" (Inger Eilersen)

## The director's role in the first meetings with the cast

*What does the instructor initiate these first times?*

- Introduction clarifying the difference between documentary theater participants and actors - it's important that you are the protagonists!
  - Speeddating exercise - a way to break the jittery nervousness and create a space where *common ground* can begin to blossom.
  - The age circle can act as a direct link between people who don't know each other.
  - Themes of the best and the worst - an instant way to create recognition, for most people this is their first time.
  - To awaken the senses already in the storytelling phase.
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### To emphasize the importance of it not being actors

Director Inger Eilersen arrives a little before the cast. Naghmeh welcomes and introduces Inger - Head of the Danish National School of Performing Arts' Directing Program. For the next five minutes, Inger talks about her professional background and personal interest in this particular form of theatre, which can be characterized as scenic documentary. This is the sixth time Inger has been hired to direct a C:NTACT production. She explains:

*There's a reason why you are the ones who can convey what it's like to be dyslexic. It would never move the audience as much if we just hired actors to play the role of a dyslexic. It's your story, so you have to be the ones to tell it.*

Naghmeh concludes the presentation by saying that those who have turned up today don't need to know right now whether they will definitely be in the show, but that she would like to get final feedback from everyone soon. Already at the presentation, the intention of the performance and its format is made clear when Inger says: "*It's your story, so it should be you who tells it*". In this way, the 13 participants are given a special position: as a group, they possess a knowledge that neither Inger, Naghmeh nor myself have access to, as we do not have dyslexia.

What's important here is your emphasis on the difference between them as performers and actors. It can be challenging, especially when you're not in the theater world, to uncover why it's *me* who's on this stage and not a professional actor: *It will never move the audience as much if we just hired actors to play the role of a dyslexic*, is an important sentence you say at the very first time. It creates an understanding in the cast.

### Speed dating exercise

To begin with, Inger will do a little *speed dating* exercise with all of them, instructing them to sit opposite each other on chairs, two-by-two, where they get 2 minutes to tell a little about themselves, after which one row moves one seat to the right when the clock rings. "*Try to see if you can tell something different each time you move one seat*," she says. The conversation continues, and from my position in the room, it looks like the speed dating exercise is going smoothly and uncomplicated for most people. I have sat down next to Inger and notice how intently she is listening to them. I see how she lets her gaze drift between people without intervening. She soaks it all in.

The important thing here is to provide a space where spontaneous conversation can flourish. You set the framework for the activity. It's crucial that you don't intervene as the first hint of ownership is allowed to emerge. It also seems like a good time to frame such an exercise, as the participants can vent their immediate thoughts/worries/frustrations or the like.

### Themes - the best and the worst

Inger takes the floor a little later and says that tonight we are going to talk about the general themes that are at stake when you have dyslexia. She asks the participants to stand up and come over to her in the middle of the Silo. "*You must now place yourselves in a circle according to your age. You must do this without talking to each other, but just by looking at each other and guessing. Naghmeh and Emma, you're in too*," she says. We stand up and walk over to the others who, with hesitant steps, position themselves in different parts of the circle. With the exception of one person, everyone has placed themselves in the correct order. We all say our ages from the youngest participant, who is 13 years old, to Inger, 61 years old. There is laughter around the circle and the participants start chatting about how impressive it is that everyone was able to guess the correct age order.

What's important about this brief and seemingly non-central activity is that the very first concrete connection is made when you ask the performers to step into a circle corresponding to their age. This establishes a direct relationship between the performers, to which they see themselves as a whole in both a symbolic and practical sense.

Inger steps into the center of the circle and says that in groups of about three-and-three in the order they are standing, they should go out and talk about what the best and worst things about having dyslexia are. In the age-appropriate groups, the participants head out to Edison to talk. When they return, they sit in a circle around Naghmeh and Inger. Naghmeh has taken two boards, and she makes a minus and a plus in the corners of each. Each time a comment is made, Naghmeh assesses whether it is positive or negative. She then writes a cue for the comments made by the contributors. This is so that Inger can get an overview of the negative and positive elements of dyslexia as experienced by the potential contributors. I sit in the background at a table so I can write on the computer. Inger says they can start sharing stories as soon as they are ready. The conversation is lively and just as one person finishes their sentence, another takes over. There is nodding, laughing and eye rolling. The participants have been talking for almost an hour and Inger interjects that we need to move on to the last group. Inger interjects that time is running out. Inger says that next time she would like to elaborate on the various statements that the 13 contributors made tonight. *"I hope to see you all again next time,"* she says with a smile. A few of the cast members are quick to say that they will definitely see you next time. A few just smile. The potential new cast members are hard to get out the door, and Inger, Naghmeh and I stand for a long time talking to them with our coats under our arms.

This activity allows the participants to concentrate and dive into the experience of having dyslexia, creating an immediate recognition, which for most of them is the first time this has happened. It works well that the time frame is tight, as it can also make the participants want to come back, as they feel they haven't shared everything they wanted to.

This exercise shows the performers the potential of this form of theater.

## Sharing in the dark

*We started at 6pm today, and I think it has definitely been the most interesting rehearsal so far. Inger had prepared for us to sit in the dark. Naghmeh and I sat in the circle as 'spectators'. People had to talk about a situation where they had to tell someone about their dyslexia, and perhaps where it was uncomfortable or strange. All lights were turned off. I think Inger's request for the participants to recall and talk about a situation was to get them to get to the heart of the matter and evoke a situation where dyslexia has been in focus, important, even crucial. It was very different situations that people told. It was very moving to listen in, and I subsequently transcribed the entire audio clip. It took about 35 minutes, after which Inger got the participants to act out the situation they were talking about. We laughed and laughed - especially Jonas is just enormously funny and skilled at improvising. It was clear that this was an opportunity for them to take ownership of their story. Inger told them that they had to 'set the scene', find some extras among the cast and tell about the room, which for some of them required more guidance than others.*

This is an excerpt from my field notes from the third rehearsal. Inger stages an experience sharing in the dark, where the participants sit in a circle on chairs with a recorder in the middle.

The order of the stories should arise spontaneously, says Inger - it shouldn't be planned. Kasper starts off by telling about a situation at his current job. After the first few sentences, Inger interjects: *"Try to tell it with your senses; what you see; which person you're sitting opposite; what the temperature is like; what it smells like; how the chair feels. Then the rest of us can experience it at the same time."* From Kasper's first sharing that he was scared, he now tells us that his hands get clammy and sweaty. He further adds in detail what the people in the room look like and how he feels in his body. *"Great - why don't you try listening and telling with your senses. It makes a huge difference,"* Inger concludes when Kasper has finished his story. The next person to speak shares a story from his primary school, to which Inger then says: *"Thank you! You get a lot of details and situations here. You divide your story into small moments, which means that you can almost immediately create a small scenic situation. For the next one: Think of colors, scents, sensory, then the rest of us can imagine the situation."*, after which the next person takes the floor.



This situation is a testament to how sensuality is awakened in this part of the process. It's crucial for the participants that you continuously remind them to tell stories with their senses - this doesn't come easily when you've been telling the same tailor-made story for many years, which you may know by heart. It helps that the room is dark, as telling a story out of the blue (or darkness in this specific situation) can be a challenging experience for shy young people. The important thing here is to emphasize what you say after the next in line: "*Try to sharpen your gaze. Try to recall with your senses, because when we sit here in the dark, it's like talking to someone who is blind. So you have to paint some pictures*", which for many is a completely new way of telling and understanding. It needs to be cultivated, and this exercise is an excellent way to do that.



## The director's role in transforming stories into performing arts

*What does this include for the instructor?*

- Scenography: Helps it to be customized to the topic at hand.
  - Affective practices: The director's practice of transforming narratives into performing arts - presented as central to documentary filmmaking: to create an awareness of the "natural" stories/narratives for a rediscovery of the situation. Multisensory questions that require a sustained insistence.
  - Power and powerlessness: Between the director and the cast.
  - Body awkwardness on stage: Teasing and playing to address insecurities.
  - Language change from narrative to scene.
  - Patience: Participants may find monologue development challenging, which requires mutual patience.
  - Trust: It can vary in the editing phase as you can crop, delete and adjust without always having their 'approval'. Trust can be restored.
  - Co-actors: Cast members are staged as co-actors.
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### Set designs

The cast is rehearsing their stories in a set that Inger decided a few weeks ago would be a classroom. She stands between eight tables and chairs borrowed from an elementary school. The tables' built-in rulers and hooks on the sides for school bags bring back memories of sitting in her own classroom, which is probably the reason for this choice of setting.

The set design has an important function in terms of how you create the best framework for affective practices. This is primarily because the set design can contribute to '*feeling*'. It can be easier for performers to remember if it's not in a professional or 'stage-like' setup.

### *Affective practices*

#### "Feeling" - an orientation towards the body

*At the end of the day, it's all about you feeling your stories. As soon as it gets too overplayed, we might as well have hired actors. The most important thing is that you are the ones saying these things. It's your stories. You can hire actors, but it doesn't have the same effect as if you're standing*

*and tell it. You have an empathy that cannot be taken away. Where I get really touched is when I feel that you are moved or really in your story. When you're on stage, feel what it was like in those situations, because then you can convey that to the audience. Remember what a gift it is to be allowed to feel your own story inside you and tell it. -Inger, 61 years old, 26.11.18.*

As part of the initial exchange of experiences, Inger instructs the participants to share some situations from their lives that have been decisive in relation to their dyslexia. Inger points out that the key here is to ask about the surroundings and "feel". This includes questions such as; "What colors are there?", "How does it feel?", "What does it smell and sound like?" and "How do you feel?". This is one of the first times when the participants start to orient themselves towards the senses, which I call 'affective practices' in the following. Affective practices can be understood as the orientation Inger introduces through the dramaturgical process, which involves a focus on the body and the sensory, as clarified in the questions above. When I ask Tessa, Kasper and Elijah during a focus group interview after the premiere how they experienced this attention to the body, they tell me:

*Kasper: If Inger hadn't told us how to say things, we would never have had such an honest play. Because I would never have said the things I said if they weren't forced out. She has some great ways of getting us to say things. Otherwise, mine would have been very superficial. I'm not the type of person who usually tells feelings.*

*Elijah: I think she has used force.*

*Tessa: Yes, you could say that. She's a director, right?*

*Elijah: She has used her power to tell us what to do.*

*Kasper: Yes, the thing about just asking questions over and over again. You might not remember, but then you start thinking. It becomes visual all of a sudden. I think about how I really felt when all the children were shouting at me. Because I've just told you that the children were shouting. So then I tell them that it was unpleasant, and then I have to relate how it was unpleasant and how I felt in the moment. Then the story slowly started to unfold. The meaningless bullshit was removed. Boom. Then you have the story and it just sits there in your brain. I don't know if you feel the same way?*

*Tessa: I feel exactly the same way.*

*Elijah: Agreed.*

*-Elijah 21 years, Tessa 16 years, Kasper 24 years, focus group interview, 10.12.18.*

It is precisely the multi-sensory orientation that Inger encourages that is decisive for Kasper in recalling his story. "*It becomes visual*", Kasper says, which is why he suddenly feels what it was like for him to stand in his workplace with screaming children around him. Inger often expresses phrases such as: "*Feel your situation, your stories, your dreams - it doesn't matter if you forget anything - it's your life and you know it!*" "*Your body shouldn't be in front of your words, you shouldn't feel your intention before you do it.*" and "*When you practice, use your body and you will remember the words.*" All statements exemplify Inger's use of affective practices. She cultivates a body awareness in the young performers, a presence, a sensory awareness.

Affective practices are one of the most important things that take place throughout the process. This multi-sensory orientation is a way to activate the bodily memory of the participants' memories. It's great if you repeat the sensory questions, which are simple and complex at the same time, as they suggest a simple answer but at the same time reveal a whole web of emotions in the participants. It works especially if you're not satisfied, so to speak - you can go to them and insist that they make an effort to think about what the situation was like.

#### Power and powerlessness - about instructor strategies

When Inger, as director, states that the participants should ask themselves what the surroundings are like, what it looks like and the bodily feeling associated with the situation, it can be seen as an example of what Mahmood describes as "*behavioral techniques in order to provoke the desired affect*" (Mahmood 2001:843). Muslim women are thus recommended to make use of special techniques, as she writes. It should be mentioned that Mahmood describes a cultivation of so-called 'new' affects. This means that Muslim women should naturalize a bodily affect in a situation that is new to them. It is not taken from a memory and therefore does not need to be recalled or rediscovered. However, this is the case for the performers in the show. They have to recall a personal memory and the feelings they associated with that situation.

Inger asks the performers to make the story as vivid as possible, "*so that the recipient can feel it*". The expressions "*to feel*", "*to feel your story*" or "*to feel your story*" were frequently used by Inger throughout the two months of rehearsals. However, as Kasper articulates, this does not come naturally. He states that it is Inger's methods that are the reason why the performance is not "*superficial*" but rather "*honest*", as he says.

By instructing the performers to recall the colors on the wall and the smells in the room, you use visual and sensory strategies. Kasper sees your methods as a way to force emotions on the performers. Elijah agrees and describes it as a power that you do this. It's interesting that the performers actually experience it as a power and that it's something they are forced to do, as Kasper says. It's not necessarily a 'bad power' in this context, but it's certainly relevant for you to be aware that the participants feel a lack of control in this part of the process, even if they recognize that it's necessary.

Returning to Mahmood, we can understand this power as what Mahmood calls '*disciplinary practices*' (Mahmood 2001:837). '*Feeling*' can thus be considered a disciplinary practice. This practice is meant to evoke emotions by repeatedly connecting emotions to a context. In Kasper's case, the emotions arose as he had to recall what he felt when, as an educational assistant, he was faced with a group of children who expected him to be able to read their names. "*It becomes visual all of a sudden. I remember how I really felt when all the children were shouting at me,*" he says.

An important part of the dramaturgical process is that these stories, which the performers have told and recalled through affective practices, must be staged. This involves the performers editing and adapting their stories.

#### Familiarizing the cast with the stage

When all 13 cast members and Inger have arrived, Inger leads the way to the Hall on the first floor, where we will be staying for the first time today. The cast immediately jumps up on stage. When the cast has run around the stage and nudged each other, Inger indicates that they should gather around her. She explains that she has printed out the entire script, which she will now distribute so that everyone has their own stories in their hands. Inger redistributes the different pages with people's names on them. She then asks me to note down the order she comes up with along the way and the amount of material per person. The latter to ensure that everyone involved has roughly the same amount of stories. She asks people to step up on stage where she tells them to stay, even if it's someone else's turn to tell their story. They can't just "*sneak off*", as she says. This is currently the first time that the participants' stories are related to a theater performance. As the youngest performers step up, a change in the behavior of the youngest performers becomes apparent through teasing and play. As mentioned earlier, the performers can be seen as

documentary witnesses on stage. Melanie Hinz (2013) states: "*They don't need any acting skills, because their lived lives have been enough rehearsal and training for what they have to say on stage*" (ibid.:58). It may be precisely this fragility that is expressed when the actors tease each other on stage: they are unfamiliar in this space. Teasing can be a way of accommodating that uncertainty.

The important thing to note here is that performers find it challenging and awkward to be on stage for the first few times. For most, it's their first time and it creates an immediate feeling of wanting to leave the stage due to insecurity. Playing and teasing therefore comes naturally as a mechanism to deal with this bodily awkwardness, which must have some place here the first time(s).

#### The linguistic shift from stories to performing arts

"How about we start with '*The best and the worst*' as the opening scene?", Inger asks rhetorically, not expecting an answer. Inger then shares with the rest of us the order in which she has considered the performers' stories to be told in the performance. "*Today we're trying to tell the personal stories in 2 minutes. Just so you can try to convey something on stage,*" she continues. The cast currently has stories of various kinds. About 2/3 of the script is different types of situations from the actors' lives. These are either situations that have had an impact on their understanding of their dyslexia or situations where they have had to tell others about their dyslexia. The final third consists of stories in other formats such as poems, famous people's statements in the field of dyslexia or similar. Today is the first time the contributors get their stories in their hands like this.

The important thing here is that in the sentence: "*How about we start with 'The best and the worst' as the opening scene?*", you establish a change in the stories. When you start referring to their stories in this way, the stories are no longer a collection of sentences in a document based on the experiences of the participants, they are an "*opening scene*". They change linguistically from narratives to performing arts. This marks a transition that may seem artificial to the performers, as they are talking about their lives, which they are not used to being part of a performance.

## *Editing work*

### Developing monologues

A little later, Inger introduces that Naghmeh, Babak, herself and I will divide the cast between us and begin *'Monologue Development'*. In practice, when monologue development takes place, an employee from C:NTACT - in this case Babak, Inger, Naghmeh and I - sits individually with a cast member and reads out their stories with them. Then the performers articulate what they think is most important in the passage in question. I find that they each start to reflect on what I read out loud. I can sense this because they react to it as if it was the first time they heard it. Monologue development is part of the process of sharpening the stories and clarifying the point of each story. This involves opting in and out. From being 25 pages long, the stories are now one page long.

The important thing here is that the contributors are given time and space to reflect on what is important to them. The contributors have had a long period of time where they have had the opportunity to be completely honest and for many, this narrative process has been tough and a little exhausting. It is therefore a strange situation for most people to see their personal stories as part of something that will become a script. The most important thing here is not to underestimate this transformation from narrative to monologue as something that requires a lot from the actors. For most people, it's only at this point that they realize they have to present it on stage in front of 270 people every night.

During a focus group interview with Elijah, Kasper and Tessa, they discuss how they relate to their story after it has undergone an editing process:

*Kasper: My own story didn't actually move me. I was just telling my life story. It was only when Inger, or we cut it down, that it started to become clear to me. It's been pretty hard. Before, it was just t e l l i n g what you've experienced.*

*Elijah: We've forgotten everything, but after we've told, we've started to remember. Every detail and everything that happened.*

*Tessa: You get all the way to the bone. All the way to the marrow.*

*Kasper: That's when I start to feel my story myself, actually.*



Elijah: *It becomes very real. I never thought that story would be told here. It was a bit strange for me. But when Babak started reacting to what I was saying, he told me to say it in certain ways. And then it started to make sense. The words and the details brought the story to life. The story was dead, but it was brought back to life.*

-Elijah 21 years, Tessa 16 years, Kasper 24 years, focus group interview, 10.12.18.

The above statements depict an important element of this process, whereby the participants' stories are incorporated into a dramaturgy. The statements reveal a clear 'before and after' editing. "The words and details brought the story to life. The story was dead, but it was brought to life," says Elijah, exemplifying this point.

#### About trust and being able to see yourself in the story

"We're taking Elijah's story. We've erased the beginning, Elijah, just so you know," Inger tells Elijah as he stands ready on stage between the 12 other cast members. It's been almost a month since the cast moved from the ground floor, where the stories were shared, to the main stage on the first floor of Edison. Elijah freezes for a moment on stage. It's hard to read what he's thinking about this information. A few seconds later, Elijah turns and walks with quick steps towards the dressing room on one side of the stage. Inger frowns and looks at me, slightly confused. I sense that I should go after him. Elijah is already in the dressing room and has closed the door to the stage behind him before I can get up. When I find Elijah at the back of the room, he immediately tells me he's okay: "I just got a little overwhelmed. I just need to take it in," he says. It's important for him to have his story, he says, and after a while we agree that he can come back on stage when he's ready. I go back on stage and say: "He'll be back out in a minute". The others have had a little break in the meantime, and when Elijah comes out a little later, Inger says: "You have to trust that I know what I'm doing". Elijah doesn't seem to be in the mood to talk, so he just nods and says he's ready to go again.

This isn't the first time there have been challenges with Elijah's story. A week ago, there was a lot of back and forth between Elijah, Inger and Henrik, C:NTACT's Creative Director, about Elijah's story. It's about a school situation where Elijah has to take dictation. Neither Elijah, nor anyone around him, knows at this point that he has dyslexia. He can't keep up in school, to which his teacher gets frustrated and ends up hitting Elijah. He is thrown out of the classroom. This was the first story Elijah chose to tell at the beginning of the trial, and it was written down exactly as Elijah told it. After Elijah tells it on stage, Henrik tells him to remember to mention that it happened in Iran. Elijah calls me a few days

after and expresses frustration with Henrik's comment, thinking the story has changed too much already. Over the next few days, I communicate this incident to Naghmeh and Inger, who set up a meeting with Elijah to discuss the whole thing. During the meeting, Inger articulates to Elijah that the most important thing is that he can "*see himself in the story*", as she puts it. Elijah says that he will mention Iran if it means a lot to him.

When we show up one day for a rehearsal at the Edison Theater, the cast has immediately noticed that Inger has been editing and moving around the script since yesterday's rehearsal. Sara is one of the first to say: "Did you cut out my situation? I would have preferred it if you had cut both my story and my dream and *not* my situation!", to which Inger replied: "This is my job; I have and must have an eye for the dramaturgical, and I must be able to cut something out to see the stories and a coherence in it". There was some small talk afterwards, but no major objections like the one Sara made. During a focus group interview with Kasper, Tessa and Elijah, we talked about how they felt about having parts of their stories deleted. They say:

*Kasper: The only thing I thought was that I hope Inger has it under control. And she did. It turned out to be a great piece. But I also thought that Inger hasn't been working on this for so many years that she doesn't have a handle on it. I didn't really get angry, but I went home and had a feeling of regret that there was something I really wanted to say.*

*Tessa: When I went home with that paper and tried to cut it down, I thought about what Inger said, that I should think about what it is I want to say. When you, Emma, had to sit and read it, I thought that you were entering my territory. I got a little angry. I thought, I'd like to say this too, but it had to be cut down. But I got a bit grumpy.*

*Kasper: There was also one thing I would have liked to have said that Inger cut down, but I thought afterwards that we also need to have a piece where people don't get bored. I think it was really important that all children should be tested in 3rd grade<sup>1</sup>. That was one of the most important things. But she was right. It needed to be shortened down. [B]ut I began to doubt whether it could ever come to anything if she was always changing things. I really had my doubts. But when she came up with the final result, I thought it was just me being a total chicken, a coward.*

*Elijah: I think it was good that she deleted my story. I was very angry at first and thought, 'Why did she delete it? But then I realized she was right. She wants it as accurate as possible. She's really professional. But it was hard.*

-Elijah 21 years, Tessa 16 years, Kasper 24 years, focus group interview, 10.12.18.

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<sup>1</sup> See appendix 2: '*Kasper's dream*'.

Elijah, Tessa and Kasper above share experiences of being part of this editing process, where their stories are cut and take a different form, largely based on Inger's instructions. If we consider this editing process as a ritual for a moment, Inger can be seen as the authority that guides the participants through this ritual. Handing over control to this person requires trust, which does not naturally exist. It may require negotiation, habituation and acceptance to enter into the ritual under the conditions that Inger establishes, as the empirical excerpt above is an example of. What is relevant here is how a ritual will often have some form of authority that can take control of this process (ibid.:66, 70, 77). We can consider Inger as just this. An authority that controls the course of events for the participants in this ritual. The ritual will appear as a space of possibility, where the outcome will be unknown (ibid.:67). Nevertheless, one must be able to trust the process and that one will get through the liminal phase and rediscover a structure on the other side (ibid.). When Kasper says: "*The only thing I thought was that I hope Inger has it under control. And she did*", it shows an acceptance of Inger as an authority in the process. For Kasper, this acceptance balances between being reserved and surrendering to Inger's instruction.

This is probably the most challenging part of the process that you as a director have to guide the cast through safely. The time when this trust was most challenged was when the stories were deleted, changed or similar. Here, it was clear that the cast and crew found it extremely difficult to relate to this change. This makes sense, as it has already required trust to share your story and even to have it presented on a stage. Therefore, when something is deleted, it can feel like you have deemed that part of their life story not relevant or important. It can feel like a clash between telling them that it's *their* story and then making decisions that some of it isn't 'important enough'. It would therefore be worth telling the cast early on in the process about your responsibility to create a show without too much repetition and within a very specific timeframe, which means you will have to make choices about their stories from time to time.

## *Participating in each other's stories*

### Relational affect

A few weeks before the premiere, it is decided that Kasper will play the class teacher in Elijah's story. Elijah describes how he experienced Kasper taking the form of the class teacher that Elijah had back in third grade. Elijah experiences affect because of what happens relationally on stage. When I asked Elijah, Tessa and Kasper in a focus group interview after the premiere how they felt about playing in each other's stories, they talk about how each other's presence on stage creates an affect.

They articulate different aspects of sharing their story with others, listening to their story and acting out the stories on stage with the other performers. The performers experience affect by virtue of the fact that the stories of others *do* something to them when they are in the stories together on stage. However, we can only talk about affect when there is something close to us that touches us. In this way, emotions are not expressive, as they are not inside all people and are just waiting to come out in specific situations (ibid.:36). The effect is thus experienced relationally, which is also made clear when Elijah says that he cannot "*feel it*" the first time he talks about his situation, but experiences a flashback when Kasper starts playing along in the situation.

The important thing here is that the actors experience a high degree of affect during their stories, as you stage the other actors as fellow players. This makes it clear that your own stories are not necessarily brought to life by simply articulating them. Rather, they are brought to life performatively, bodily and relationally. The performers compromise and accept this editing to a great extent, as they can see that their narrative is part of a larger context - they are part of a community. They don't necessarily understand themselves through their own stories, but just as much through the co-created, shared product, which is helped by making each other active in each other's stories.



## The instructor's role in changing focus and rethinking positions in society

### *The most important points?*

- Shifting focus: Providing a framework for performers to create a different narrative about themselves than they are used to.
  - Talents: Appreciating what contributors bring to the table, whether it's a song, article or poem.
  - Self-determination: When the performers are given the opportunity to say what they want to say on stage.
  - The power of repetition: Being on stage and repeating the hardest thing in your life can give you a sense of ownership and power that you haven't had before.
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### *A focus shift*

Through Inger's instruction, the performers are given the opportunity to go into specific situations and change their focus in relation to the emotions they have associated with the situation. During a rehearsal, Inger explains that today the performers have to sit together two-by-two and tell each other what they think they are good at and in which situations this is expressed. *"You should tell each other about your gifts, and you should preferably exaggerate and brag a little about yourselves,"* she says, before sending the cast out on DDSKS to find quiet places where they can talk. I move around among them and take pictures and after a while, I stand near Astrid and Gustav, who are sitting in a corner on two chairs opposite each other. They are both embarrassed at the thought of having to "brag" about themselves, and they start talking back and forth about who should go first. Astrid starts after a little pressure from Gustav. I'm standing a few meters away from them when she says: *"I really like writing short stories. I like to play around with the element of surprise in short stories [...] And that's why I also like to write a little bit 'on the side', and then I get ideas for different good stories"*. Gustav curiously asks about Astrid's enthusiasm for writing short stories: *"Does it matter that you are dyslexic? Can you feel it? Does it help?"*, which Astrid thinks about for a while before answering: *"Well... I think it helps. I don't know, of course, but I think I'm more imaginative and maybe I use different words and think a lot in pictures"*.

I see one question in particular that is significant in this interaction between Astrid and Gustav. Gustav asks: *"Does it matter that you are dyslexic? Can you feel it? Does it help?"*. The way Gustav formulates the question implies that Astrid in her answer must emphasize the positive elements of dyslexia, especially through the wording: *"Does it help?"*. When the 13 participants sit across from each other and talk about a situation that represents what they are each good at,

it can be seen as an expression of just that. When Gustav asks whether Astrid can feel that dyslexia helps, Astrid goes linguistically into her mind and focuses on the positive aspects rather than the negative ones. Dyslexia is thus associated with imagination and visual thinking. It becomes linguistically clear that Astrid is not used to articulating positive elements of her dyslexia, as she says: *"I think I'm more imaginative and maybe I use different words and think a lot in pictures"*. The words *"think"* and *"maybe"* indicate an uncertainty about how to respond. This depicts a rethinking of how dyslexia has positively impacted Astrid's ability to write short stories. Kasper says a few days before the premiere: *"This is free therapy"*, to which Inger replies: *"It's great if you feel you can get something out of it."*, which greatly emphasizes what this form of theatre can and does do, without it ever being articulated as a purpose.

The interesting thing about this exercise that you initiate is that the participants are forced to concentrate on an aspect of themselves that most people haven't thought about. Asking them to exaggerate their positive thoughts about themselves turns out to be extremely beneficial as it allows them to brag, which is exactly the point - you put them up to it. Although for most, bragging and exaggerating was fraught with uncertainty, this situation highlights how the framework you've provided offers an opening to existing understandings of something that has always been seen as negative.

### *Elijah's poem*

When I interview Elijah a second time about a month later, he tells me that he has discovered that he has a talent for writing poetry. Elijah expresses a need to prove himself. *"I wanted to tell my story to people, I wanted to be part of a project so that I could later tell people that I'm doing well,"* he says. For Elijah, this desire becomes a tangible project that he can tie to himself and his accomplishments so that other people don't have to wonder if he's good at something. He equates having accomplished something that can be performed on stage with being strong.

Inger asks the cast to write a poem about what they each dream of: *"If everything was possible"*, as she says. Elijah writes the above poem about 14 days after the cast has met for the first time. When he presents the poem, Inger starts crying. She tells Elijah that it's really good and that she wants to include it in the performance, which he agrees to do. He looks proud and overwhelmed. Elijah presents the poem the first time they

The cast arrives on Edison's Main Stage. Inger takes a front row seat, has Elijah sit down with a printout of his poem at the front of the stage, and has the other cast members act as a chorus by saying "*It's violent*" behind Elijah every time it appears in the poem. When he initially sent the poem to me before presenting it to the group, my first reaction was to correct the spelling mistakes, to which Inger told me not to correct it: "*It has to be exactly as he wrote it*".

When you emphasize the importance of what they create and the importance of not correcting it, it plays a crucial role in building their confidence and self-awareness. For example, I explain the latter situation to Elijah during an interview, which is very surprising to him that you feel it shouldn't be corrected.

*"I can decide what I say to them"*

An important element of C:NTACT's format for Tessa is that she decides what she wants to say and what she doesn't want to say. To exemplify this, she says she had recorded a story about her relationship with her father, which she ended up regretting: "*It was a little too open. A little too exposed. I felt like I was standing naked in front of a swarm of wasps. I thought a lot about my parents coming in to see it,*" Tessa says. She says she got the feeling of being exposed while telling a particular story about her father, which gave her an immediate reaction of regret. She decided to erase the story again. In the situation Tessa describes above, she sat across from another cast member with a recorder between them, telling the story of her father. This method is not only used because of the participants' dyslexia and thus challenges with written language as a form of expression. It is also a way to speak freely without thinking about punctuation and grammar, allowing for a freer flow of thought. However, as in this case, there are times when the contributors share a memory that they end up regretting sharing and it is deleted. In other words, the participants have the opportunity to articulate concerns about what they have shared, but they will always have the option to retract it.



This section is about how the cast can and should articulate when there is something they want to remove from the script. It's hugely important that the cast can articulate if there is something they regret saying out loud and sharing with the group. This situation was quite straightforward as Tessa was able to immediately delete the recording - it wasn't yet part of the script. It's challenging if this has already become part of a script and is something that has been factored in time-wise and artistically.

### *The power of representation*

As highlighted above, the performers have the opportunity to control the story being told on stage. Language is powerful in the sense that when we tell a story, we have the ability to structure the story so that it is meaningful to us. Elijah sets a kind of benchmark that the more times he can repeat his story on stage, the more freedom, confidence and determination he feels. He draws a comparison between being able to say his story out loud on stage and the strength he gets from doing so. Elijah becomes the sender of the experience rather than the receiver. Inger says before we wrap up the final rehearsal: *"It's your story - you have created this performance - own it, it's fucking yours. Oh, now I'm getting all emotional"*, which makes several of the cast members get emotional too. Nette exemplifies exactly what this method can do - it can give ownership to someone who has never had the opportunity to have it before.

When there are rehearsals where the performers have to repeat text until they remember it, there is - in addition to the performers remembering their text - a so-called '*replication*'. This takes the form of a mantra, where the story moves from being something that has happened to the participants to something they take ownership of by saying it out loud themselves. It becomes a quotation, where the original situation becomes less significant and the recited story on stage becomes the important thing and what is manifested. It is therefore valuable for the performers in different ways when you have days together where they are allowed to repeat them themselves.

## Perspective

Another focus could be to explore the premise of "*healing through sharing*". C:NTACT has an explicit desire to create change for the people who participate in their performances using storytelling as a method. According to educational psychologist Helle Harnisch, articulating one's feelings is a dogma in Western psychology (Radio24syv 2017). Harnisch explains that most branches of psychology work on the premise that in order to feel better, we need to articulate our problems through, for example, narrative therapy (ibid.). She says that this is an idea that she has culturally and professionally accepted as a strategy for getting better. However, this changed during her study of child and adolescent soldiers in Northern Uganda. Here, she investigated how former soldiers 'get through' their previous participation in war. When told the harrowing stories, Harnisch acknowledges that the former soldiers did not feel better by articulating what they had been through (Harnisch & Montgomery 2017:103-105). Harnisch expands on this and says that studies have shown that children who have been in car accidents, for example, will benefit more from watching movies on an iPad than talking about it, as this will "*soften the memory*", as Harnisch says (Radio24syv 2017).

According to Harnisch, this breaks with narrative therapy, which works with putting difficult things into words. Harnisch explains that narrative therapy is about reframing the narrative and memory so that it becomes more appropriate for the individual to deal with in the future (ibid.).

However, recent research suggests that individuals don't necessarily need to talk about difficult experiences in order to "*heal*", as Harnisch says. The characters in *I Read False* are unmistakably in a different situation than the ones Harnisch describes. Nevertheless, there are some relevant aspects to Harnisch's critique of '*healing through sharing*' as a dogma of Western psychology.

We can see how some of the actors found it challenging to recall difficult situations during the dramaturgical process. During a focus group interview, it became clear to me how actors don't always find it positive to talk about their experiences. Elijah says: "*When I first created my situation, I was scared. I was afraid that I would have a bad flashback to school [...] I think it was very uncomfortable the first time we had to share*". Thus, it depicts a more critical focus on experience sharing than the thesis in its current form.