

The Theatrical Expression of the Text

On the process of staging texts by Gertrude Stein for a young audience.

Everything that's not a story can be made into theater.

Gertrude Stein

In Gertrude Stein's poem *Identity a Poem*, the author investigates philosophical and existential issues and concepts that are not only elusive and hard to understand, but are also often placed dialectically in relationship to one another. The beginning of the poem goes like this:

Play 1

I am I because my little dog knows me.

The figure wanders on alone.

The little dog does not appear because if it did
then there would be nothing to fear.

It is not known that anybody who is anybody is not alone and if alone
then how can the dog be there and if the little dog is not there is it alone.

The little dog is not alone because no little dog could be alone.

If it were alone it would not be there.

So then the play has to be like this.

The person and the dog are there and the dog is there and
the person is there and where oh where is their identity, is
the identity there anywhere.

I say two dogs but say a dog and a dog.

The human mind. The human mind does play.

The human mind. Plays because it plays.

Human nature. Does not play because it does not play again.

Let us try. To make a play with human nature
and not anything of the human mind.

Peonies smell like magnolias

Dogs smell like dogs

Men smell like men

And gardens smell different at different seasons. [...] ¹

¹ Stein, Gertrude, *Identity a Poem* (1935). This is the beginning of the shortened version of the poem that we used in the performance.

This poem was included, along with other texts by Stein,² in the performance *I am I because my little dog knows me*, presented at Unga Klara³, in the autumn, 2007. The overall dramaturgical structure of the performance consisted of three components: a detective story in which the five characters on stage meet to determine who killed whom; monological sections where their dilemmas were presented⁴ and our understanding of the characters deepened; and a newly written text that takes place in the present and where the actors tell about a personal fear from childhood.⁵ These various elements were woven together so that the performance alternated between being a collective drama and a monodrama. *Identity a poem* was the text where the character Sylvester - played by actor Per Sandberg – was presented, where his predicament was revealed and where he was the protagonist.⁶

The performance was made for an audience of about four years old, which demanded that the text was staged in such a way that a person of this age, with limited life experience and references could relate to that which was expressed. The choice to include *Identity a poem* in the performance came from our own interest to investigate what the text meant / could mean. At the same time, we found it to be an exciting, inspiring and quite possible picture of a young person's philosophical reasoning and search for identity. We also felt that the performative nature of the text was useful as a base for the theater's need of playfulness and outward expression.

The process to create a communicative theatrical expression from such an obviously multifaceted text must be based on the realization that no fixed meaning can be narrowed down and that consensus cannot be sought. The underlying thesis of our intention was that the young audience's propensity to create their own sense of Stein's complex philosophical reasoning would be determined by three things: the actor's ability and possibility to connect with the audience; the staging's ability to shape the protagonist's text and predicament as emotionally recognizable; and the staging's ability to create a theatrical form out of the abstract concepts that the poem experimented with, such as "the human mind" and "human nature".

The performance began with an unstylized, intimate first contact/meeting when the audience entered the theater space, walked across the stage and received help from the ensemble to hang up

² The four other texts by Stein that were included in the performance were *Three Sisters Who Are Not Sisters*, *Mi Careme*, *Lesson Four* and *Ada*, all translated by Görgen Antonsson.

³ Unga Klara (translates Young Klara), was at that time an independent part of Stockholm City Theater, devoted to presenting theater for and about young people. The theater was founded by director Suzanne Osten in the 1970s and has since then been a world leading theater working with theater art, with a focus on children's perspectives.

⁴ The fifth character was a musician who the audience got to know through a piece of music that she played at the same time that a painting by the artist Dana Schutz was shown.

⁵ We chose to see "fear" as a recurring theme in the various Stein texts. Playwright Erik Uddenberg asked the four actors to share a memory from childhood, when they were afraid. Uddenberg then reworked the material into a dialogue that was incorporated into the performance as a clearly separate part.

⁶ In these notes, I describe only some of the work with the actor / character Per / Sylvester. The performance starred four actors and one musician. The process of shaping the actors' monological lines developed largely in a similar way and the questions around the meaning and structure were basically the same. Their position and direction to and from the audience was also largely similar.

their coats. Per/Sylvester says hello to a child, helps with the jacket and shows a comfortable place where she can sit. Two important things happen in this initial stage of the theatrical event: the audience unknowingly seizes the stage, which is the place where Per/ Sylvester will soon tell about himself and his thoughts, and thus the boundaries between stage and audience become less sharp and the possibility for identification increases; Per/Sylvester makes direct contact with some of the audience, which creates the feeling that they are irreplaceable (he speaks to me – a reciprocity occurs - I become a person), and thereby reinforces their willingness to follow his train of thought. Later in the performance, these people that Per/Sylvester has connected to in the beginning, can be of use – as already established - recipients of his reasoning. To deepen and reinforce contact with the audience, the initial part of the performance focused on establishing an open and fluid boundary between actor and audience. This was done through name games and role reversals that had a clearly extroverted character and where the audience participated. This could be described as a confidence-building measure to strengthen the young audiences' willingness to follow Per/Sylvester 's (and the other characters') text.

The rhythmic structures of the performance alternated between being open to audience influence (e.g., when a question was sent from the stage to the audience), to structured rhythm (where the text's rhythmic structure was connected to the actors' movements and text's dialogic quality), and musically formed structure (where the rhythmic progression is entirely controlled by the musician's interpretation of a musical score). That the performance oscillated between these temporal structures made it possible for Per/Sylvester to let the rhythmical interpretation of the text be affected by audience reactions (breathing, sounds, exclamations, etc.), which in turn increased potential contact between the stage and the audience. The underlying intention was that the audience's inclination to perceive the text as "incomprehensible" - which he and the ensemble never really feared ⁷ - could be avoided if their relationship with Per/Sylvester was established and then deepened during the performance. ⁸

Stein elaborates in the beginning of the poem with questions about identity, the relationship nature - culture, and on the tension between the individual and the group. These are complex philosophical issues that must be given a theatrical form that grows out of recognizable human emotions, an emotional causality, if they are to engage the young audience. The text gives us insight into Sylvester's predicament, but the theater audience's experience and understanding needs to emerge, not from the semantic but from the non-semantic force of the theatrical expression. The poem has no narrative

⁷ On several occasions during the rehearsal period, the ensemble met a group of children, a reference group, to which they played various parts from the performance, as a means to test and discuss how the text and structure of the performance was perceived by the audience.

⁸ A young audience does not always see a clear dividing line between the actor's private "I" and character played on stage. This can result in a difficulty to understand meta-expressions, such as cynicism and irony.

structure, but rather moves in circles, giving it the quality of an inner line of reasoning. Stein uses markers that communicate theater - play, act, scene – which, since act three comes before act one, and scene one comes after scene two, pull the rug out from under those who are in search of a narrative. These theatrical signs create a performative mode that is consistent with her insistence on contact ⁹, and they also conjure up the question of what happens to the personal reflection when it takes form. Sylvester's basic energy on stage was dynamic and exploratory but sometimes somewhat preoccupied (he gets lost in his own thoughts). Per also added to Sylvester's character a relaxed, playful quality that he could make use of in the transition to the more emotionally charged sections. This latter performative quality in Per's portrayal of Sylvester counterbalanced the risk that his philosophical ponderings made him appear tense and closed off. The fictional level of Sylvester's intention and driving force was that he wanted to investigate his questions, sort out his thoughts, by staging them, with the help of the other performers. He took on the role of director of his own play. He was in control, setting the rules, and when his text provided the opportunity, he created an exemplary scene, i.e. a scene within the theater. But crucial to the audience's emotional involvement in Sylvester's character was that, in the more brooding parts of the text, he radiated a sense of disorientation and confusion that created a bond with the audience's (and sometimes Per's own) uncertainty about what the words meant: the performative quality that Per gave his character sanctioned that it was okay to *not* understand. This interplay between a vibrant, almost frustrating, longing to understand by seeing his reflections as theater and a more puzzled tone tinged with loneliness, created an emotional portrayal of Sylvester's existential dilemma that was necessary if the young audience was to gain contact with the text.

The transformation of the text into theatrical form was guided partly by the idea that both Sylvester and the audience needed a picture of a concrete interpersonal situation to place themselves and their concerns in relation to, and partly in the necessity to give certain abstract concepts a, so to speak, plausible but evocative theatrical form. The idea that these pictures, or tableaux, should have their own time progression outside the text, was a model that would prove useful. Although the theater as an idea and as a presentational format was planted in the text, the work still required, to a high degree, the use of other theatrical means to create a form that gave an experience of performativity, an experience which in turn could open possibilities for and invite interpretation. Music and dance were therefore very important as components when shaping the performance. The music that was used was from different movements from J S Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*, and the dance was based on an Indian dance form called Bharatanatyam.

⁹ One of my overall impressions of Gertrude Stein's texts is that they insist on contact; if I do not rest in the precise point of contact with the text, both the meaning and the experience evade me. This creates a more challenging quality, but I see it also as an offer for connection, or as Stein calls it: a coming together.

When Sylvester had an impulse to orchestrate, i.e. investigate, his line of reasoning, he gave his fellow players - as a director - wordless instructions (he pointed, moved them tangibly) to "stand there" or "do that":

The figure wanders on alone.

*Quite far back on the stage, Sylvester has arranged the other actors in a row, in front of which he silently paces back and forth, alternately, looking up at them and then down at the floor and then out at the audience.*¹⁰

So then the play has to be like this.

The person and the dog are there and the dog is there and
the person is there ...

Somewhat closer to the audience, Sylvester positions an actor as a Human/Person and an actor as a dog. He wants the Human to stand straight, a little proud and radiate thoughtfulness. The dog should be on all fours and hold up one hind leg.

... and where oh where is their identity,
is the identity there anywhere.

He looks at them in silence, opening his eyes to the audience and then starts frantically searching.

In most of the scenes that Sylvester "directs" during the first part of his text, the theme is about the individual and the group and the relationship between them. This theme is prevalent as a dynamic in Sylvester's text but it is also a reoccurring theme in Stein's writing (which is why the staging - even during the other characters' monologues – contained pictures of "to include" or "to leave out"). When Sylvester at one point had given his fellow players instructions to stand in front of him, he looked at them and tried to find his place in relation to them: where do I fit in? do I dare to approach them? Somewhat later, Per/Sylvester uses props instead to create an image that he can investigate and relate to:

Sylvester sits by his little organ on which stand two small toy dogs. He takes one toy dog in his left hand and one in his right hand, he lifts them up, looks at his fellow players and emits a little dog howl, turns to the audience and says his line.

I say two dogs but a dog and a dog.

From a dramaturgical point of view, the choice to perform exactly what the text depicts is questionable and results almost always in diminishing the expressive force of the text. But the open and inquiring nature and multifaceted meaning that Stein's text purports, created a contrast to the simple, often tableau-like pictures, and gave them a heightened poeticism. The combination of image and text, although admittedly obscure, still expanded the possibility for interpretations. Also, the fact that the

¹⁰ The parameters that the actor elaborates with, in the shaping of his expression is a complex combinations of: body energy and body posture; shifting pitch (frequency), dynamics and the tempi in the deliverance of the text; directions; facial expressions, etc. These notes describe only the parts of the actor's working method that relates to the stated issues.

scenes were broken up by the text passages, in which Per used a more restrained and pondering expression resting entirely in the language, helped to offset the hyper-clarity.

When shaping the theatrical expressions of the concepts “The human mind” and “Human Nature”, the music and dance were the main supporting components. They offered a tight but abstract form with a distinct "human" signature, a playful openness in the interpretation and - which was crucial - a temporal structure that was not steered by Sylvester, but rather pulled him along, analogous with the unruliness of the concepts.

The human mind.

Sylvester looks challengingly at the others, who in turn, a bit scattered, stand still and look at him. Nothing happens. He says daringly:

The human mind plays.

Sylvester goes up to each one, grabs their hands and makes a gesture where the elbows point straight out and the fingers encircle his eyes that are wide open and looking outward, completely still.

The human mind.

Plays because it plays.

Sylvester taps Kristine, the pianist, on the shoulder and sends her to the piano, where she begins to play. When the music starts, all the actors, except Sylvester, start to dance intensively. At first Sylvester watches but is also drawn, almost involuntarily, into the dance. A longer choreographic/musical section, where everyone participates, develops and ends when the performers compose a stationary "Indian" sculpture where Sylvester lies at the bottom with an evocative, searching expression.

In this depicted scene, the music's high, glittering and virtuoso character gives form to the human mind's playfulness. The dance places humankind in the middle of the unstoppable music and Sylvester is pulled along. He makes a "concession", but exudes fun and a sense of relief. It is reasonable to say that the intention behind shaping the scene in such a way was to create an image of "the human mind" as an endless playground. At the end of the scene, as he lies like a living foundation of the sculpture the bodies have created, Sylvester exudes vitality and curiosity. He jumps up and says:

Let us try

To make a play with human nature and not anything
of the human mind.

Sylvester sits among the audience and looks at the scene, he invites his fellow players to get started ... with something, with a play about human nature. An actor bends slightly forward and slowly begins to move his hands and fingers in front of her face. Sylvester comments:

Peonies smell like magnolias

Another actor places herself behind the first, bends her upper body slightly forward, lifts her leg and starts sniffing.

Dogs smell like dogs

The remaining two actors join in and they all start to smell each other.

People smell like people

The naturalistic smelling turns into an Indian dance formation where the actors' arms, legs and eyes move slowly and expressively.

And gardens smell differently during different seasons.

In the above scene Sylvester observes and describes what he sees. The timing of the dance steers the causality of the sequence and forms an expression that defies interpretation, but Sylvester's description provides a *possible* reading of the choreographic images. The gap that occurs between his words and that which the audience sees was intended to inspire entirely different interpretations (See what you want to see!). At the end of the movement, the character Ada breaks out of the picture, turns to the audience and begins her monologue. This marks the end of Sylvester's opening part.

In a similar way, the director and actors shaped the rest of Sylvester's text which was intertwined with the other characters' "monologues", and thereby the picture of him and his predicament developed. The staging shaped Sylvester's line of development in a way that is not clear in the text (even if the questions are becoming fewer and the assertions more frequent), which meant that, towards the end of the performance, he radiated that he was more at ease, both in his relationship to the other characters and to their - still unanswered - questions. This train of development was inspired by Stein's own words: We can transform ourselves and our relationships through language.

In her essay *Plays*, Stein says that you can make theater from everything that is not a story.¹¹ I understand this to mean that she intuitively (her experience of working with theater was limited) considered the theatrical space, the quality of the acting, the relationship between the actor and audience, the music and the rhythm, as the components that create the (necessary?) narrative. She understands that there is a willingness amongst the audience to assemble human activities (the acting body) and the course of events into a narrative structure with psychological explanations within the framework of a story. This human ambition, or shall we call it capacity, creates an opening and an opportunity to experiment, in language, with ruptured and unexpected structures.

The audience comes to the theater in search of a story, a plot with human activities and actions that can be perceived and interpreted. This is the energy they bring with them. Stein challenges this consumer attitude by creating textual structures that are not understandable unless you let go and meet them openly. She often abstains from using conventional narrative tense sequences and instead conjures up a now - the experience of time is never really extended further than the time it takes to tell what she tells – even though her "stories" can span a lifetime. I think this experience emanates from

¹¹ The essay *Plays* is included in *Lectures in America* (Random House 1935)

the fact that her language is so straightforward, non-secretive, nothing is hidden, rather, right out in the open. But even more so, it is because she tells with repetitions and interruptions. We do not really get the chance to fantasize about what is going to happen (in the future), because with the help of language, she cuts off, stops, pulls us in and checks that we are there. Her writing expresses a longing for a coming into being and theater is - at best – just that.

When conceptualizing a theatre performance based on non-narrative text structures, I believe it is essential to adopt a perspective that includes the entire oeuvre rather than just the specific text that one intends to stage, and in this way create a picture of the author's permeating themes and aesthetics. I also think it is good to not strive to understand, but instead to create forms and modes that encompass the esthetic stance of the writer/artist, hence open to interpretation. This, what might be called a displacement of ambition, inspires greater creativity and supports a dialogical relationship between both actor and text, and form/aesthetics and audience. When conceptualizing and creating the performance *I am I because my little dog knows me* the dialectical poles of comprehensible and incomprehensible were therefore not useful. The emphasis lay instead on creating an experience of the text, beyond hermeneutical interpretation.

The idea that the capacity for a young audience to understand is linked to their emotional response, is double-edged and unwieldy. Transferred to a broader culture, with a more mature audience, such a statement becomes a sharp tool for proponents of anti-intellectual and popular, easily digested entertainment. But if the desire is to present young people with alternative, non-normative approaches to social configurations, to language and aesthetics, then I think it is necessary to try to create presentations that dare to balance the unexpected and innovative with the audience's need for destinies and adventures.

In connection with the preparation for the performance *I am I because my little dog knows me*, I asked an actor if he was interested in being part of the ensemble. He read the texts and called back a few days later and said: "Why should one make a play with these strange and meaningless texts for children when there are so many good Swedish children's books to make theater from?" It may be that the actor did not like Stein, or that he did not have time, etc. but if we assume that his motive to not participate is true, then I am amazed: Here is the theater itself, in the form of an actor, who expresses a limited belief in theater's ability and means to create meaning and connection. In this assertion, a common expectation is exposed: that the dramatic text should show an accessibility *before* it has a body, timbre and spatial context. But this stance also exposes a suspicion of a text without a clear set of values. So it is: The Swedish theater is kind-hearted. It stands on the side of the weak, it criticizes power structures and the forces of evil in the world. It produces stories and performances, not always without linguistic qualities but usually with a numbing demand for clarity, about the oppressed person, about the need for love and equality and about human deceit and selfishness. The Swedish theater suffers in general from an instrumental and didactic heritage dormant in its belief that these stories

will make human beings (the theater goers) into more insightful and sensitive creatures. But the question is, if they do that, as long as the language itself is based on a confirmatory and frictionless agreement to refrain from seeing the unknown as an opportunity to expand life experience?

Most theater workers who create performances for young audiences, see themselves as defenders of creative integrity and carriers of artistic ambitions. I cannot see that they are more burdened by this righteous legacy than those who make theater for adult audiences. The scarcity and weaknesses are the same for both groups, and the reasons are most likely a lack of artistic imagination, an insufficient reference apparatus and the absence of courage.

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