

Staged intimacy. Signa's *The Ruby Town Oracle*

Signa is a Danish / Austrian performance collective, consisting of Signa Sørensen and Arthur Koestler. In 2007 Signa performed *Die Erscheinungen der Martha Rubin – The Ruby Town Oracle* at Schauspielhaus Köln. In 2008 this performance was presented at the Berlin festival Theatertreffen, as a 10 day non-stop performance, with about 40 performers. A village of 22 houses was erected in an old industrial building. Actors played one of two roles: outcasts living in the village, who dedicated themselves to an oracle (Martha Rubin), or members of the military facilitating this autonomous zone. Spectators “visited” the village, becoming thoroughly involved with the staged events, finding fragments of stories as they engaged with the actors. This interview is concerned with the process of making the performance. At the time of the interview, Signa had just finished another performance, *The Hades Fracture*. This interview happened at the site of *The Hades Fracture*, at the former hotel Timp (a transvestite hotel), amidst the traces of another enchanting and disorientating show.

About Signa

You both have a background in fine arts. How did you arrive at making installations and theatre? I think one can understand your work as theatre, although not a conventional kind of theatre.

Signa: I agree. I started out alone, in 2001. I studied art history at the university in Copenhagen. I got a bachelor's degree. Meanwhile I also worked in strip bars in Copenhagen and did other things around this sex business. I never had a normal job; I have been doing this since I was 20 years old. It was a parallel thing; I didn't do it to do artistic research as such, I did it for the money, but still it was a very interesting journey. During my studies I was primarily interested in installation art and contemporary art. At a certain point I decided I didn't want to study; I wanted to create something. The first thing I did was a conventional installation piece. I incorporated parties into the installation; and two times we also did a seminar there. The installation was about women in the sex business; actually, about the myth of the fallen women. After this I felt very unsatisfied: I made the installation but most of the time I left it alone and I didn't feel that it was really, truly a dialogue of any kind. The installation was an attempt to discuss my experiences in the sex business and in the world as such; about being a so-called fallen woman and that goes together with, for instance, being a mother. So I thought: it doesn't work this way, I can't do a piece and then leave it. If I do a piece, I have to be in it, all the time. This was a realization after the very first project.

When I did the next project, it was in a basement apartment, with big windows out to the street. I decided: I will put myself here for an entire week non-stop and I am going to see what happens. I will keep it open all the time, people can come in anytime. Then I got some actors for this. At that time I had a relationship with a theatre producer, who got me these people. But it never crossed my mind that it was theatre. Concerning rehearsing and things like that, it really didn't occur to me that there would be something to rehearse. I had the meetings with the actors and explained about the place. The first projects I just talked with the actors and let them administer the installation. I even found that when they sometimes were playing really badly, I thought it was nice. I think I have changed my mind about that very much.

Arthur: There was also a story in that installation.

Signa: Yes, there was definitely a story, constructed around a fictional identity called Nika. I played Nika in that installation, you can read about it on our webpage. I think I was attempting to find out how such an installation might work for me. I didn't want to make an installation and then just leave it. And I also wanted to relate it to my work as a champagne girl, which is a

mixture of fiction and intimate encounter, in that case always with a man. You are in a way being yourself, and you are limitlessly close. But at the same time you are doing a performance, it's a performance that is about mirroring the other. It is much concerned with object-subject relations, about making yourself the object of the male eye. That was a subject matter that interested me immensely in my art studies, this discussion regarding the object-subject theme. I also studied film and media, and this was something that I clearly took in. Of course I had a lot of experience through my work in the bar, as a stripper and a champagne girl, in which you have this staged intimacy. You bring across a kind of trust, a kind of closeness, which is actually artificial, but you create it very quickly. You are just yourself to the other person; you are mirroring the desire of the other person. And at that point I thought it was very interesting to find out whether it is possible to do this outside of an erotic context. The character I chose for myself in this installation, Nika, was fatally ill; I didn't wash myself, I was in a hospital bed wearing really dirty hospital clothes. I tried to arrange the same kind of interaction, but within the presence of death and disease. I wanted to see how that worked, and how maybe other things get in, like human compassion or pity. And it had quite an interesting effect. Then I did four pieces with Nika, and some other pieces. After that I did *57 Beds* and that is where I met Arthur. Arthur was hired as an actor. Actually we played a married couple, and fiction turned real. At that time Arthur was still in the art academy. He finished with a master's degree in Media.

Arthur: Actually I was mainly interested in music. I was not interested in theatre, and not really in art either. At least not in those art forms that make you watch something, like at exhibitions or in theatres. I played in a band for five years, but unfortunately I am not a musician. The other members of the band played instrumental music, while I did a performance with the music. So we were a sort of performance music group.

So you were already looking for how to do music, or perform music, differently than just playing music on stage?

Arthur: Yes, definitely. We tried to present some kind of show that was something other than music alone. The shows were always very hard. The music was not, but the shows were, indeed. We played with elements of body transgression and things like that. Perhaps it sometimes was a little bit too much for some parts of the audience. But then again, the music was always nice, so it was okay to watch. Then I moved to Denmark, and after that it became a bit difficult with the band. We were a "financial loser band." There is not much money in music and if you want to make a show on top of it all the money goes to the equipment.

Signa: But maybe you should also tell that you are a sword swallower. Arthur has another show, in which he drinks several liters of milk which he then pukes out. Actually it is an amazing performance. You can see his projects on our website as well.

Arthur: I always want to show things that people may find ugly or disgusting and look for ways people may simultaneously find beauty in it.

Can you elaborate on that? Why are you interested in beauty within ugliness?

Arthur: I'm interested in this experience myself. First you think something is nasty or horrible and suddenly your reaction may be completely the opposite. When you see something and your reaction is totally different from what you expect of yourself, then it leaves you with a very strong feeling, of course. You get confused, and out of this strong confusion arises something that works in you afterwards. I expect that from a piece of art: I don't like to watch something and then just let it go; I want to watch something that works longer, while at the same time giving a strong impression when I look at it. We worked with these elements with this band. After I left the band I started at the art academy and went to the media school. I was very happy when Signa asked me to join her project, because there I could see all the elements that are

important to me. And I like the approach as well. These projects take in almost anything. It is a whole universe. It uses almost all disciplines: music, graphic design, performance, abstract elements, a lot of visual things.

Signa: And we take care of almost everything, because we are very much control freaks...

Being in control seems important. It is also present in your decision to not leave behind the installation you put up.

Signa: Actually it is very complex. This form we work with, it is impossible to control. And at the same time we try to control it to as large a degree as we can. Take for instance the set design in *The Hades Fracture*. We took care of everything you see in this bar where we are sitting now. Take this lighter, we couldn't find lighters that fit this place. So we changed the looks of those lighters. But actually I have something to say about the beauty and the terrible. What I want to say is this: everything in life has its price. Death, and the fact that everything disappears and changes, is something that is present in everybody's mind. Everything beautiful will come to an end in some way. It is a fundamental human condition. This is something that, in order to survive, we sometimes have to close our eyes to, but on the other hand a lot of beauty exists only at the cost of other things. I think the human fascination with beauty is as well very much an attempt to protect oneself against that which is terrible. I think this is why the tension between the beautiful and the terrible or the sad is very interesting. I read a poem by Rilke, in which it is said like this, more or less: death is very great, when we are in the midst of life, it laughs inside of us. It is a very beautiful poem. Many poems of Rilke are even more beautiful in Danish than in German, in my opinion. Nevertheless, it is a little bit down that alley. We are all such consumers. We are human beings; we are all full of greed and desire. I see it in *The Hades Fracture* as well; there was an immense longing and greed in the audience. Part of the performance focused around a game, you saw the wheel of fortune, and there was an enormous longing to win the game.

Yes, I read a remark in a weblog in which the writer was surprised to find out how greedy he was, even if someone else was suffering. He was shocked by how easily he got into that state.

Signa: I think people are in that state all the time, but often not aware of it. A very everyday example: the coffee we drink; the clothes we wear. Everything has its price. These things have traveled through a lot of other people's destinies to reach their final place. But that is something rarely reflected upon. Things are not evenly divided, that was very clear in this performance, in a quite rough way.

The making of *Ruby Town*

How do you start working on such a huge project? What happens before the actors come in?

Signa: We were invited by Schauspielhaus Köln and they showed us two different locations to choose from. One was a black box and the other was an industrial hall, which was similar to the one you saw in Berlin. We didn't want to work in the black box; we chose the industrial hall. The first time being there I had this idea to make something about a village with an oracle in its midst. Usually it goes like this; often these ideas come very quickly once we see the space.

The space is the start?

Arthur: Yes, the space is the start.

Signa: Sometimes we agree to work with someone when we don't yet have a space, and than it works in another direction. But the space is really important. With regard to *The Hades Fracture*, we originally had another space, in which we wrote the concept. Then we got into this space,

which is totally the opposite of the first, and we totally changed the concept. So the space comes first. And from that develops a rough skeleton for the performance. Then we do casting meetings. We don't have the actors play anything. We don't pay much attention to their cv's either. We simply have a talk with them and during the talk we get an impression of this person. After the talk we decide whether we will work with this person or not. And if we do, we already know what part that person is going to play. So every time it is a "yes," the part is also pretty much clear. When the casting is complete, we make the adjustments and put the actors together in the constellations, so that it suits the performance. So we have the space, the ground concept, next we have the actors. And their characters add the next layer to the concept.

Arthur: We don't know what characters we need beforehand, so we don't cast on characters. We do it the other way round: we find out what kind of people we would like to work with and then we start figuring out the characters and develop the story in detail.

So you started with the idea of a village. Next you find the actors and then you develop the characters?

Signa: Of course we knew we were going to have an oracle; we were going to have the military and the villagers.

Arthur: And that there would be a restaurant.

Signa: We knew we were going to have the shop, the restaurant and a bar, the souvenir shop, the beauty parlour. But after the casting we decided who is family with who, who works where, who lives together with whom. With the military it was quite easy because we mostly took the people who couldn't speak German. In Berlin there were also military people who could speak German though, they replaced the ones who played in Cologne but couldn't get to Berlin.

You seem to be working with documentary facts. At least, in Ruby Town there is a recurring story about Martha Rubin, a story about her childhood in Romania...

Signa: That's no real story; that is a story I came up with. We never base our stories on real persons. I like very much to read on the internet and look at sites like crimelibrary.com where you find real crime stories. I use that way of storytelling when I write for the actors: simple descriptions of facts and figures; what happened, who did what, etcetera.

So the stories get mythologized in a way.

Signa: Yes and then of course when playing *Ruby Town* a lot of things happen in the installation itself. Stories are being told, again and again by the audience, and by the performers, seen from different angles. So these things that we made up then become blended with things that really happen. With *Ruby Town* it was an extremely complicated work, because we made up this village where everyone has lived their whole lives, and they were related in all kinds of constellations. We spent a lot of time on creating family trees, common childhood memories, characters that were not there - family members who had disappeared or died, ex-wives, dead children, everything. So everybody had an extremely complex story that was also connected to everybody else's story. It took a long time and a lot of writing. Each actor started with around ten lines about the character, just the basic idea, and then we started developing the characters, the actors got ideas themselves as well. We always let the actors add a lot to the character's biography.

Should I imagine these biographies as large amounts of paper on which everything is in the end written down? Or is it practiced, do you work with improvisation?

Signa: We do try out different improvisation exercises but talking and putting all these facts together, creating the frame story, is what takes the most time. It is very important that everybody

in this village knows for instance that this person who is now married to this person was earlier married to that person and has this child; everybody has to know that. Everyone has to know that this character called [Michaelis] once fell down from the roof of his caravan, he hit his head and that is why he maybe is like this now. There are many, many stories like that, and everybody has to know. And that of course you can't improvise.

Arthur: So it is mainly the past we are working on.

So you are sitting in a space with 40 people and you are just talking about characters' biographies?

Arthur: Yes, we only had the hall, and we were in the hall all the time.

Signa: We were sitting and talking and we wrote things down. Again and again until all these facts were in there. That is how we work in every project; we create this frame with as much detail as possible, with as much as possible a common understanding within the group about what the frame is. So when we start playing the actors can immediately, without hesitation, react to any given situation. They can react to what may occur, in accordance with that fictional frame story.

What are the limits of the frame? Does the frame describe what is going to happen over the ten days of the Berlin performance?

Arthur: No.

Signa: *Ruby Town* was very much a piece about the everyday life of the villagers. That means that what is fixed is that this person goes to work in the restaurant from this hour to this hour. It's like in real life. If I work in a café I know the times that I work there, and if I have an appointment I know that too. But I don't know exactly how it is going to be. This is the way we work. In *The Hades Fracture* it was pretty much the same, although it lasted 5 hours per performance. The actors knew the rules of the game, they knew that they were going to lead a group of visitors around the house and play the wheel of fortune. But what is not known beforehand, is where the wheel will land and what the wheel will tell them to do for the game.

Acting and directing

Do you prepare the actors on how to play their roles? Or does the working on these biographies already create a certain world, a certain mentality. I ask this because during the performance I experienced a particular universe or atmosphere that was carried out by all the actors, without exception.

Signa: I would say that more and more we try to explore the possibilities of directing. As with everything, you try to improve your work. Now that we also have Thomas Bo Nilsson as set designer, I, especially, can focus more on directing. We try of course to have the actors act as naturally as possible, although they are in very surreal surroundings, especially in *The Hades Fracture*, that was actually played in the Greek underworld. We tried to imagine those mythological figures as contemporary people. Then we did some improvisations, set out a situation and we discussed what is artificial and doesn't work, and what seems more authentic. So I think we try to reach some level of authenticity. But it is rather hard to rehearse this because it is actually not really there until the audience is present. In this production we worked with many professional actors. And of course it is very important to understand the difference between doing this and performing on a stage.

I think it's an interesting difference. In Ruby Town I never, not for one moment, thought about the quality of acting. Yet in conventional theatre I usually evaluate if the actors are good or not.

Arthur: I think this mentality already comes into existence when we develop the characters. Of course we made the outline, but the actors develop about 70% of the character themselves. By that time they already know they will have to improvise that character for 24 hours a day. So they will search for something that is not hard to play, something they may know from their friends or family or from watching hundred thousands of movies. Something they actually believe they can play. And they are very apt to recognize what works and what doesn't work. When they find out, during improvisations, that something doesn't work, we change it.

Signa: During the playing time the characters may develop as well, because actually these characters sometimes have a life on their own. You think you get a character but when you start playing, it may develop in another direction. We are very open to that. Of course we have the factual details of the character and that stays. But if an actor finds out that his character, which we first thought of as very aggressive or arrogant, is actually very nervous, or something, we always say that it is okay. It finds its own level.

In a review this way of acting was compared to the style of Stanislavsky, although the author wrote: this is larger than Stanislavsky acting. Do you agree or not?

Arthur: I have no idea, because I don't know anything about acting schools. Do you mean method acting?

Yes, sort of. The actor disappears behind the character, whereas with Brecht the actor is always visible next to the character, demonstrating his character.

Signa: Then I would say: yes and no. You cannot separate it like this. You cannot say the actor disappears behind the character. Because after a time you get so worn out, you know. But everything you have to do, you do in character. If you have to pee, you do it in character or if you sleep, you do it in character. That means that basic physical conditions of the actor's own body are very much present. I think what we try to achieve is that the actor really should not separate between himself and his character. And the audience should not do that either. I definitely see similarities to method acting but then again I want to underline I don't know very much about this at all.

I just thought it was interesting to compare. On the one hand there are similarities; on the other hand it is totally different, because all the actions of the performers, including the conversation with spectators, were very real.

Signa: You could say we don't have a script but you could conceive of the set design as the script, in a way. For instance in *Ruby Town*, the villagers really do not have enough to eat. They get food rations from the military, but too little: some onions, potatoes and cabbage and a plate of chocolate. They actually have to cook with this. The actors had only three sets of underwear and they have to wash them. They had to sleep in this village, they had to make do with what they had. If they have a bottle of vodka, they have to decide if they want to share it and invite people into their house or not. There was constantly something to do, to make the practical side of this life work.

Staging the audience

How do you draw the spectators into that fictional world? Do you give special attention to this?

Yes, I think it is very important to get the audience in. In *Ruby Town* we started with this informative video provided by the military. This already introduces you in a certain time and

space – well, not an exact time but you get an idea of the fiction. We are very much aware of the moment when the audience comes in and they don't know what to do. When people don't know what to do they can grab different strategies that may be bad for the performance, or for the spectator's experience. Therefore, in the beginning it is quite important to have some kind of welcoming gesture that says: make yourself at home, in a way. That way the audience will relax. Usually it works very well to give something for free, to offer a cup of tea or a welcome drink or something like this. This usually makes people feel that they have been invited and they feel freer to act. Next it is very important, after this point where they feel invited and start to move more freely, that there is also a kind of pressure, that there are also unpleasant things. It shouldn't just be "let's have a picnic" or the Holiday Inn. There have to be challenges and frictions as well. Being invited by the Ruby Towners, after you have entered the village, automatically creates a conflict with the military and vice versa. Next, in pulling the audience in it is important to create a relationship on an individual level, so one actor creates a personal relationship with a visitor, shows him the town, or his home, or shows some pictures.

These were instructions for the actors?

Arthur: Yes, we told them that when you see a newcomer or someone who seems to be a bit lost they have to approach that person, get to know that person. When you are in a place you don't know, and actually it doesn't matter whether it is a fiction or just a strange village you travel to, you first feel okay when someone approaches you and says hello and tells something about himself. So the actors tell who they are, they may offer something to drink, so that the visitor feels welcome and can relax. From that moment you can walk around easily, because then you already know the hairdresser or something. You can always go back there and say hello again. The actor will know this visitor because he knows you are there – there are not that many people on one evening.

Signa: And then we can send the visitor on, by saying things like: have you met my uncle, he works in the restaurant, I will introduce you to him. We also tell the actors that if people come in a group and stay together as a group that they should split up the group. We try to split up groups as much as possible, because if people stay within a group they are afraid of reacting, they are too conscious of what other people in the group may think, they shut off. Another thing we do is to give people the idea, in a subtle way, that there is a lot to find out. Actually you had to be many hours or preferably days in Ruby Town to find out all the stories, because in every drawer you could find letters, and photographs, there were things everywhere. The people from Ruby Town who were smuggling had their routines; the military would do their rounds and confiscate things. If you really took the time to listen you could have heard all sorts of stories that were talked around behind houses. There were secrets all the time, on all kinds of levels. And of course the actors would always act. Even if there were no visitors nearby, they never ever left the character. We are very strict with this: never leave the character within the playing space.

I noticed another strategy: after inviting the visitor for a drink, or into a house, the actor suddenly leaves, very abruptly. I had my nails done in the beauty parlour for instance and suddenly I was alone in there. That gave me the freedom to go and do something else. Was that also part of the instructions?

Signa: Definitely. We told them: get someone into the fiction but don't cling on too long. If you see this person is fine and you have given some information on where to go now, like "meet my uncle in the restaurant" or "if you need this you should go to Leo," then send them on. This also gives the audience the very important possibility to actually make choices on their own. I really don't like this idea of theatre as a kindergarten where the performer holds your hand all the time and tells you what to do. I think part of the art experience is to show people that the things you experience in life in general are totally dependant on what you decide. You have to decide where

you look, where you move, what you say. And what you say is also dependent on what other people say to you.

It is very much an artistic goal of ours, to reach some kind of reflection or awareness that everything is a choice within a constructed frame. These constructions or frames are always choices made by human beings.

Into the corners of the universe

In a way the fictional world was very transparent: it was very clear that it was fiction. However, the consciousness of the omnipresence of these secrets turned this transparency upside down: things were not as clear as they seemed.

Arthur: That is like in real life. I have been in Scotland, in small villages with about 80 inhabitants. They were very nice, they invited me for a party; you hang out with them. But after two days you realize how rotten it is. A guy who has been very nice to you warns you about someone else. Then there is another guy who tells you to take care. Then you realize that everybody is mixed up in intrigue with everybody, although they seemed so friendly at the beginning. In *Ruby Town* it was more or less the same. You get to know one, you think he is nice and everything is fine, nothing happens. But after you hang out with this person for some time you will realize this guy is actually a total asshole.

Signa: You find out that the Ruby Towners are involved in all kinds of horrible things: men beating their wives, people stabbing each other in the back. They were not pleasant people at all; nor were the military. It looks as if it is a total black and white division in the beginning: oh, the poor Ruby Towners; they have nothing, they don't have their civil rights and the military is evil. Then you find out the military people are not lucky either, they also have to carry out this program to help this borderland minority. Actually it is very complex. This issue of the secrets was very interesting because we didn't know everything ourselves, nor did the actors know everything. Especially when you are playing for ten days non-stop, it has a life of its own and conflicts come and go. Characters get into the strangest kind of things, and audiences got involved in this as well.

The military seemed to me quite obvious in their hypocrisy. How does it fit together with the oracle?

Signa: It is just two different worlds clashing. The military derives their identity from the North State, and they are given orders on what to do from above. The North State has certain ideals they are very proud of. The Ruby Towners have another ideal; they have their pride of being Rubins and being connected to this oracle. But actually the differences between the two groups weren't that great. Each group thought that the other group was totally strange, but they were very much the same. The same things were going on, just in different cultures. The military is a product of the North State, this big bureaucratic apparatus that decides: we have these minorities, it is not possible to integrate them in our society but at least we are giving them the same standard of living that we have, as a gesture. We are going to make sure that they have water, electricity, food rations. Of course, at the same time this North State doesn't want this minority to spread. It is very much a paraphrase of not wanting to help prisoners in Africa.

Give them the life that we have, only less...

Signa: And: no you can't get into the North State, but you can be here; we give you this but then you have to adjust to certain rules as well. We also played with these rules, the military could cut off the electricity, and of course the Ruby Towners were totally dependent on everything they could get from the military. So they put up with what the military was demanding, to a certain degree.

Arthur: But it was also part of the story that the soldiers that were sent to Ruby Town were the lowest of the lowest, it was a kind of punishment to be there.

Signa: The captain for instance was put away there. This was the only place he could be stationed because it was a shame to his family that he was a transvestite. So they put him as far away from the North State as possible. There were others that actually screwed up their military career, and there was even one character who actually did something very criminal, she was actually put there to die on duty. It was a way for the military to conceal this crime from the public, because that would shame the system. So it was easier to send her off to a distant region where she would simply die, due to some kind of minority person shooting or stabbing her to death. We also had stories about Ruby Towners who disappeared, for different reasons, for instance for not keeping to the rules, but there were definitely also military people that got killed or simply disappeared. This is another reason why it was good to stay in Ruby Town for a long time, because it was so rotten under the surface. And the Ruby Towners, they also got rid of their own people if they broke the rules, you know. To a certain degree they would cling to the fact that he or she is a Rubin, but there would also come a point where that person would simply be expelled from the society.

What was the position of the two black girls in Ruby Town; they seemed a separate group, sort of tolerated. And there was this little gypsy boy...

Signa: The gypsies were new in Berlin, they were not in Cologne. The Ruby Towners are a kind of gypsies themselves. My husband and I, we travel a lot in Romania, and you know gypsies are not just one group of gypsies. It is the same in Denmark, the immigrants are not just one group, the Arabs from the Middle East look down on the Somali people and so forth and so forth. There are a lot of in-between minorities. It was actually very interesting to bring the gypsies in, because it provided the Ruby Towners with people they thought of as lower than themselves.

The black ladies were accepted, because Joseph, who was very high in the society and had a lot of authority, was the one who brought them to Ruby Town. But there was always this tension: they are weird but we accept them. The gypsies just settled down there, they had nowhere else to go. And they were very scared of the gypsies. The child was sweet but... I played two characters. Sometimes I played Martha Rubin and sometimes I would be another character. Actually they were two sides of the same. That was also a complicated thing. People couldn't recognize me when I shifted...

It strikes me that all these storylines mirror each other in a way.

Signa: Yes

Somewhat similar to what you said about mirroring expectations as a champagne girl, perhaps?

Signa: As a champagne girl you mirror the desire of the men. But what I then always found very interesting to play with was to be everything a man could dream of and then suddenly surprise him. It wasn't always good for the money but it was definitely fun. In a way you say: yes this is how you imagined it. But it is also different than you expected. It is stranger than you thought, and it may be even more like you than you thought.

Theatre, fiction and reality

Do you feel it is necessary for your work to create this absolute fiction?

Arthur: First of all it is very necessary for the actors, this whole fiction, in order to stay within character. Next it is a little bit like a movie. In order to get into a movie, you have to believe a

certain emotion or atmosphere. If you break this emotion, or if the character is not what he seems to be, so you cannot put your hands on it, it can get too abstract...

Signa: It is also very real, to the extent that – although this is something that usually gets too much attention - an actor has sex with an audience member. This only happened rarely, but of course kissing and stuff happens a lot. You know that it can go that far, that is so real. And it doesn't make it more real when you say: hello my name is actually Claudia and I am an actress from Hamburg. I read an interesting comment, saying this performance was realer than real, because in real life you can't get that close. In real life you can't look into every drawer, you do not enter into a conversation so quickly. It is a quite hermetic universe. That means that if you stay there long enough you would kind of be able to go around into the corners of the universe. But if we were to add the actor's personal facts on top of that, it would actually puncture the presence. There is a very strong presence of a universe, that is there.

In theatre, the actors are sometimes called by their real name or simply playing themselves. That kind of showing yourself, or of the actors showing themselves, is not that interesting to me. I think it is more interesting to start from: I show you everything, I do everything, I give you everything, you can do everything, there is no limit on how close you can get. But the fiction is still there, always.

Actually the question of fiction and reality has become irrelevant to me, because in these performances we reach a point where the difference really doesn't exist any more. If I can speak for myself, there are a lot of moments with the other performers or with members of the audience that are real experiences to me, as well as to the audience and to the other actors. What is going on between us: I cannot say that is not real. The same goes for life itself. The facts of life, the writing of history, the bible, everything is a construction; there is no clear distinction between fiction and reality. You go into the social security office – it is a construction. A name, in itself, given to you by your parents, is also a construction. This name has a history as well. In a way, I don't want to divide between reality and fiction.

So you propose to skip the reality-fiction bias, a fine answer!

Arthur: I read an audience reaction by someone who went into a pizza bar, after *Ruby Town*. He wrote that it seemed just as unreal as *Ruby Town*. And actually it is. Because the guy working in the pizza bar is not telling everything about himself either. He shows a certain image of himself, he wants to make you believe something: buy the pizza, enjoy the pizza. When you meet somebody, you act differently, depending on whom you meet. You show a part of yourself and other parts stay hidden.

Your approach to the spectator is probably not motivated by certain ideas concerning a change of conventions of theatre, like isolating the spectator out of a mass audience...

Signa: I can say things about that but then again, I can say as well: theatre is not my world. It is not Arthur's world either. I must say I am not a great fan of theatre. Because the situation of real people that are in front of other real people is so rarely used in theatre. In conventional theatre plays in which the audience sits in the dark, I often think: what is the point? This could be a film, because it is repeating itself, night after night, and there is no contact. There is no purpose of this taking place in real time. I think this is strange.

Arthur: In conventional theatre I have much more the idea that I have to play a character; I have to play this silent character that is not supposed to be there, that is invisible. I have to take care not to cough, not to laugh, not to disturb other people, and I definitely have to take care not to stand up, go on stage and say: this is not right, or something. That would of course destroy the whole piece. The slightest thing would destroy it for everybody. That is a role I feel pushed into in theatre and this is something I really don't like. While in *Ruby Town* you are not pushed into anything. It is very natural, you are a guest in this village, you can do more or less everything

you want, according to the person you are. You are friendly to that person or you are not friendly to another person. You can think the military are assholes, anything.

Signa: But you know, sometimes the audience doesn't get that and they really get frustrated. We had that a lot in Berlin, because it was part of Theatertreffen. People came in with a certain concept or understanding of theatre. They went in there and just sat down on a bench and they just waited.

Like 'where is the show?'

Signa: And afterwards they complained that nothing happened. While in the meantime, the wildest things happened. But only if you actually ventured to go and look for it, take some kind of initiative. That really frustrated me in Berlin, this conventional theatre audience.

This reminds me of being bored myself, sometimes during the performance. This may be explained by my theatre background perhaps, but actually I don't mean this in a negative way. This being bored changed my state of mind; it stopped me from wanting to do things, chasing big adventures or things like that...

Signa: This was by the way something we also said to the actors: don't hunt for things to happen. Let it be at a natural pace. Don't think: it has to be drama, there has to be a conflict. Just let it be. Sometimes it is also fine for the audience to just sit for half an hour and then someone walks by with a bucket of potatoes and that is also very, very fine.

Arthur: It is of course also a matter of taste. We make things we like ourselves. I myself can sit there for five hours without anybody talking to me, just observing what is going on. But on the other hand, as they now have found out, it is good for children to be bored because otherwise they do not get creative.

I definitely agree.

Production matters

Will you be coming to the Netherlands?

Signa: We have been invited to Rotterdam, but it does not attract us very much. And we are in contact with Jeffrey Meulman from the Amsterdam festival, but our agendas didn't fit. We have been very privileged to get invited by the Schauspielhaus. We don't have a big organization to fundraise for us, so we let ourselves be paid for and be produced by the houses, where other groups raise the money, produce something and then they contact the house. That is not how we work. We only work where they give us the full package of money and of technical assistance, to a certain degree.

That would probably a bit of a problem in the Netherlands...

Signa: I mean if they have a Schauspielhaus they can probably put down the money. It is also convenient for us not to have to raise the money ourselves. We are fortunately well enough known that we can make certain demands now, because they trust us. We want artistic freedom; we want the practical things to fit our way of working. The first time it was harder in Cologne. We were not so well known in Germany at the time. We were asked to make an alternative project for the opening of Schauspielhaus Köln. But they didn't help us much. We even couldn't get a washing machine, or if it was inconvenient for the rehearsals next door to unlock the door to the toilets they didn't, so we couldn't get to the toilets. We were really treated like we were "das Nebenproject." A day before the premiere of the other project, if we asked something they replied: "are you crazy, we have a premiere tomorrow." And we replied: uh, but we also have a premiere tomorrow... We were kind of used by the house to show they were

brave enough to present something unusual, but they really didn't want to have anything to do with it. Afterwards came the invitation from Theatertreffen and then of course suddenly they were very helpful.

Arthur: Our way of working is very different from a conventional theatre production. So we need a lot of flexibility from the producers, and a lot of willingness, of course. They have to change all the time and they have to be open to respond to that. It is very important for us that the organization be flexible.

Conventional theatre groups work about two months on a project. How much time do you need?

Arthur: This is very different with each project. We may work for half a year on the larger shows, but we can also put up a show in two weeks.

How long did you work with the actors before the premiere of Ruby Town?

Signa: About half a year, but the intense rehearsals took six weeks. Before the rehearsals we were already in contact with the actors, but not regularly. We corresponded over the internet and some of the actors who wanted to be involved in the practical work were there everyday, working.

You mean practical work like building the set?

Arthur: Yes. We didn't have anything, we didn't have technical assistance. We made everything ourselves. We went to an empty coal miner's village, a ghost village from which we took the floors, the walls, the curtains and everything. Then the actors built it all up, and that was a hell of a lot of work.

Signa: We drove with a small van to this abandoned village, taking all we could find, there were animals all over the place; everything was dirty. Thomas, who played the captain, was the main set designer and he directed all the work and told the actors what to do.

Arthur: It takes a lot of energy to do all this. That is also why we need to feel, if someone asks us to do a performance, that it is really going to work. If I send an email, for instance, and I don't get an answer for a week, or two weeks, it is not a good sign. After those two weeks I may already be involved with something else. If the organization is like this, than maybe it is not the best place to work. But if somebody is very concrete and says: this is the plan, and we want you to do that and that, and because of that... and if they ask what you need and they listen to what we need, if they are interested in how we work, then we have a basis. Otherwise we are going to be irritated throughout the production and that is no fun.

Signa: Now we are privileged to be able to choose and we are happy to work in Germany. In the beginning of next year we have a big project in Copenhagen which is nice, because we can actually live in Copenhagen for a while. Otherwise we travel back and forth because we have children at home. But I am very satisfied with working in Germany.

Is the cultural climate better in Germany?

Than in Denmark? Yes. Denmark is a very small country. It has five million inhabitants. Theatre is not a big issue; it is not so much part of the culture as it is in Germany. A while ago the cultural political climate in Denmark was very much against us. No matter how many good reviews we got, they wouldn't give us a dime. They have something called a Theatre Law and it defines what is theatre, and what is not. They also have a law for Visual Arts. It is called the Art Law and it describes what an exhibition is: an exhibition is this, this and this... a theatre is this

and that ... Only now they begin to recognize us, after the Theatertreffen. And there are some new people in the board. But before that they would reply: this is not theatre, it doesn't fit. And this is very characteristic for Denmark.

Arthur: But we always had a lot of success with the audience.

Signa: We had a huge audience, in Sweden and Copenhagen. At a certain moment, having success after success, and still not being recognized by people who give funding, I said: fine, I leave.

This might be a stimulus to change policies? If they see the good people leave...

Arthur: I think this is happening now.

Signa: But it is so typical of Denmark. People abroad have to say it is good, before they believe it. They are not able to recognize quality or something good by themselves.

Is it a lack of self confidence?

Signa: Yeah, but the Danes do not have that you know, self confidence. And there is this mentality of "don't think you are something." It is part of the Danish culture: don't think too much of yourself. You can't say you are an artist. It is like saying you are a god. If you say you are an artist, they get angry. Of course, it is better in Copenhagen than in the rest of the country. And Arthur may call himself an artist, because he has a paper from the Royal Arts Academy. Then it is okay, but if I say I am an artist, they get angry.

*Liesbeth Groot Nibbelink (theaterwetenschapper)
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