

## What we get out of watching

– Reflection on the qualities and limitations of observations



Dangerous Liaisons. Foto: Costin Radu

As part of our methodological explorations it seems inevitable to also examine the qualities and limitations of one of the most basic methods within qualitative inquiry – observations. Observations on performance art has obvious limitations especially when carried out on a traditional theatre setup, with the audience placed in a dark auditorium. The elements you would traditionally examine during observations (body language, movements, facial expressions etc.<sup>1</sup>) will in this setup only give limited information. Partly because people cannot move around freely, they can't talk to each other during the performance, and because body language and facial expressions are nearly impossible to read in the dark auditorium.

Nevertheless, we wanted to see specifically what type of knowledge we could get from this basic method as we tried it on two very different productions: open rehearsals on *Dangerous Liaisons* (Farlige forbindelser) and the dance performance *INTERPASSIVITIES*.

### About the productions

*Dangerous Liaisons* is a classic story of the two former lovers Marquise de Merteuil and Vicomte de Valmont written by Pierre Choderlos de Laclos in

1782 and directed in a film version in 1988 starring Glenn Close and John Malkovich.

In the Royal Danish Theatre's version, ballet and acting/text is merged as choreographer Cathy Marston tells the sequel of the fatal tale ten years

---

<sup>1</sup> Observations are often a part of a mixed-method approach to research in cultural experiences, and it can also be a fundamental part of grounded theory, which we have written more about [here](#). For information about observations see for instance Wadel, Cato (2014): *Feltarbejd i egen kultur – en innføring i kvalitativt orientert sam-fundsforskning*, Flekkefjord: SEEK and Mack, Natasha a.o. (2005): "Participant Observation" in *Qualitative Research Methods: A Data Collector's Field Guide*. Family Health International. USA.

later. In addition to dancers from the Royal Danish Ballet, *Dangerous Liaisons* also features actors Marie Dalsgaard and Mads Rømer Brolin-Tani from the theatre's drama ensemble.

When this open rehearsal took place there was a week until the premiere and Cathy Marston wanted to make the most of the rehearsal time. She had a lot of notes and corrections for the dancers and actors, and therefore the audience experienced a very intense and authentic rehearsal.

*INTERPASSIVITIES* is created in collaboration with artist Jesper Just, Eventministeriet and Corpus (a contemporary dance company within the Royal Danish Ballet). The performance explores changes in space, labor, communication, and experience in the wake of contemporary society and technology. Dancers and audiences are throughout the performance drifting in and out of physical formations navigating in a scenography, which constantly is being built up and teared down by workers that move around amongst the dancers and audiences.

On the Royal Danish Theatre's website the performance is described like this:

*Entering the performance space, media and dimensions overlap and fold into one another, drawing the viewer into a universe where it is impossible to distinguish the real from replica, and experience from illusion... As mediums and dimensions collide, the inherent boundaries and hierarchies between the real and the virtual are challenged:*

*INTERPASSIVITIES* challenges the conventions of a traditional theatre visit as the audience is asked to meet up at the loading dock at The Royal Danish Theatre's Old Stage in between containers and different theatre probs. Here we are guided into an

elevator for large goods and from there into a large, empty, white auditorium. There are no chairs, no stage, and nothing that gives the audience a clue about how to react, or where to place themselves in the room. Little by little the dancers, who imperceptibly have mixed with the audience start stretching and in various ways reveal themselves as dancers.

As the performance proceeds, the dancers form various formations in different places within this white space. They continuously "disturb" the audience by dancing close to them or even into them, thus making them move and change their spectator position. *INTERPASSIVITIES* thus challenges the traditional relation between auditorium and stage, between audience and artist and forces the audience to stay alert in their perception and experience of the performance.

### **Research design**

The aim of both observations was to openly explore what type of knowledge this method could result in when applying it to the theatre and the field of audience research. Thus, there were no specific questions we wanted answered.

In *Dangerous Liaisons* and *INTERPASSIVITIES* I started observations in the foyer and the loading dock half an hour before the rehearsals and the performance respectfully. I continued throughout the performance (when it was possible) and until approximately half an hour after the performance/the rehearsal.

The observations were carried out by moving slowly around the foyer between audiences (and around the white room in case of *INTERPASSIVITIES*) paying attention to comments, facial expressions,

movement, body language, (awkward) silence etc. The insights were documented as written notes immediately after the observations.

In case of the open rehearsal, I supplemented the observations with mini interviews with three groups of audiences and a brief chat with two ushers. I asked the audience openly about their experience and the ushers about their impressions of the audience this day in comparison with other open rehearsals.

### **Reflections after *Dangerous Liaison***

During the observations in the foyer, there is a calm and positive atmosphere. The audience seem familiar with open rehearsals in the ballet. This contrasts with our previous experiences with open rehearsals on various plays, where the audience have been somewhat confused regarding what to experience and how to act.

When the audience are let into the auditorium, you can hear them chatting in low voices. This is normal. Today, however, the ushers ask them to be quiet, which seems to confuse them, as there are no actors on stage and it seems like nothing is happening. I hear ushers tell each other that the stage technicians are working, and that they need silence in the auditorium, in order to hear each other. This is not communicated to the audience until the rehearsal starts half an hour later. In the meantime, I hear a woman in the audience say: "There is such a serious atmosphere in here even though it is just a rehearsal. That's a real shame."

During the rehearsal in the auditorium it is difficult to get a good sense of the audience and their reaction, but I hear frequent verbal reactions to what

happens on stage, which I take as a sign that they are attentive and entertained.

After rehearsals, as the audience drift back into the foyer there is a light and positive atmosphere. I overhear a couple talking about how exciting it was to see the dancers work in this way, and that they find it concerning that the premiere is only a week away. They could see how many adjustments that were still needed.

In order to get more detailed information about their experience I decide to carry out three mini interviews with three groups of audience. They all confirm my impressions from the observations, namely that they see it as a privilege to be invited into the rehearsal space and actually see how the choreographer, the dancers, and the actors work up to a premiere. These groups were also concerned whether the production would be ready for the premiere.



Dangerous Liaisons. Foto: Costin Radu

These comments tells us that experiences with open rehearsals give the audience an exceptional insight into the world of performance arts and therefore (as one of them said) they gain a greater appreciation for it – for the craftsmanship, and for the hard work that is put into a production. For reflections on our work with open rehearsals see our [report #8](#).

## Reflections after *INTERPASSIVITIES*

The audience is standing in the loading dock. There is a nervous and slightly excited atmosphere. I hear a lot of nervous laughter and see many people standing uneasily and fiddling with either keys, their hands or a folder about the production. Most of them seem curious and nervous as to what will happen during the next couple of hours. This somewhat absurd space (the loading dock) annuls the codes that traditionally is part of a theatre visit. There are no ushers, no obvious lines, and therefore no one knows exactly where to place themselves or how to act in this somewhat unusual space.

The nervous but excited atmosphere intensifies as we are guided into the lift and further into the white anonymous space. The people who appear to be the most comfortable with the situation walk slowly around the room, but most of the audience place themselves by the wall and wait for something to happen. The suspense in the air turns into smiles, laughter and mild anxiety as the dancers slowly reveal themselves among the audience.

A middle-aged man, standing right beside me realises that the dancers are spread across the room. He whispers in a somewhat desperate tone to his companion: "They are everywhere, they are everywhere!" A couple of minutes later a young man discovers a dancer right by his side. He leaps with a hint of panic in his eyes but a smile on his face across the room away from the dancer while whispering: "Oh my God, Oh my God, Oh my God!"

Because the dancers are moving around in between us, we – the audience – can never rest in our position as spectators. This results in two things: 1) An audience that is particularly alert towards the dancers' movements and position in the room, and 2) an audience that is very self-aware. In part

because they are constantly confronted with their own physical position in the space, and because they seem very aware of the possibility/risk of suddenly changing position from being a spectating subject to becoming an object of others' spectatorship, if one of the dancers somehow use or include them in a movement.



*INTERPASSIVITIES*. Foto: Miklos Szabo

After the production, the atmosphere is quite different. The audience seem relieved and excited by the experience, and the nervous glances have now turned into warm and open facial expressions.

## What did we learn?

It is clear that observation on traditional theatre carried out in a dark auditorium (as was the case with *Dangerous Liaisons*) has many limitations. I am able to overhear a few conversations, and I can get a sense of the atmosphere. But there is very little movement to analyse, because people are placed in their seats, and it is generally difficult to observe any details in the auditorium space.

In the very different staging that characterises *INTERPASSIVITIES* I get a better feel of the audience, what they experience and how they are feeling and acting in the moment of their experience. Here it is important to note that my observations are always a result of my personal interpretation of what I see

and hear. As is the case with every qualitative exploration, – the researcher is part of the result. I cannot change that, but I have to be aware of it, when working with my data.

What we get out of observations thus depends a great deal on the production. Nevertheless, my impression is that observations can give us a good idea of the atmosphere especially before and after a performance.

Observations are thus useful as preparation for interviews or in other ways as a supplement to other methods. After testing observations, it is clear that the quality of this method lies in this way of being alert and awoken with all your senses towards general information about movement, body language, comments, atmospheres etc. This approach and these parameters are relevant when doing all other forms of qualitative analysis. In order to get as much information out of a situation and a meeting with the audience as possible we need to be aware of both the exact words in a conversation but also the more subtle details that sometimes contain a lot of relevant information. In this sense, observations should be a part of every study as a basic approach that complements other methods.

In addition, it seems important to state that we consider the knowledge collected during a study like this to be part of a discussion and a further exploration into the field of what theatre and performance art means to people. As is the case with all qualitative analysis, what we learn is connected specifically to the production and the people involved. Nevertheless, by taking a focussed qualitative, observant look, we gain a bit more knowledge about what it means for the audience to learn more about the crafts involved in performance art, and also about how a group of audiences react

when almost all traditional theatre codes are annulled and everything is up in the air.

You can see the immediate reactions after the open rehearsals on Dangerous Liaisons [here](#).

### **Appendix – Results from an online questionnaire**

INTERPASSIVITIES is in many ways an untraditional production. Therefore, we wanted to know more about how the audience perceived this production and thus, in addition to our traditional short online survey, we created an extra survey especially for this production. We wanted to know what made the audience choose this particular production and understand what elements were determining for their overall experience. By the end of the survey, we asked:

*Is there anything else about your experience that you would like to share with us?*

This very open question gave us interesting replies and useful insight. We got a few brief replies such as "beautiful", "I would like to see it again", or "It should have been shorter". But what is interesting is that simply by asking people to write down any additional thoughts about their experience we get information very similar to the data from the observations:

*The slow transformation of the dancers, the formations and the small, particular movements made for a special experience. The dancers were not 'smack in your face' from beginning to end.*

*The way everyone, including the dancers, rode the large elevator together made the experience very special.*

*A crazy setup with the dancers unnoticeably infiltrating the crowd and everyone taking the large elevator together. It*

*was a fun element with the Polish workers, who literally created the space for the dancers to romp around in.*

These comments are all in accordance with the results of our observations. It seems that the elements noticed in the observations, which mainly revolved around the physical interaction, the space, and the atmosphere, were also important and determining factors for the audience's experiences.

The two methods thus complement each other as the survey confirms and elaborates on the information of the observation. Again, this leaves us with the conclusion that observations (especially in a setup like INTERPASSIVITIES') can work as a point of departure for further explorations, for instance by providing inspiration to what questions could be relevant to ask in a survey, interview etc. In addition, the survey gives us the audiences' experience in their own words and from their own individual perspectives. This way of working with mixed methods requires even more awareness of the different biases that each method entails, but it also gives us a larger variety in the information about a single area – in this case the experience of a theatre production.