

A day on hospitality and multi-sensorial performance making

Or in other words: On resisting assumptions and language(s) as access

Notes from the author:

Note 1 Upon rereading my notes of the day, I realized they were written in German, English, French and Spanish. At the end of this article, I look shortly at the concept of heterolingualism in relationship to access. Throughout the text, words in different languages will appear. It is an informal and playful proposal, interested in generating small cognitive glitches, possibilities for glissement of thought and navigation between languages.

Note 2 Citations in *pink and italic* throughout the text come from written notes of things workshop participants expressed during the day. The wording/language might not be exact and they aim to rather give a general idea of what was expressed.

Since March 2023, Theater o.N. and Tanzhaus NRW have been collaborating to organize professional exchanges on relevant topics in the field of dance & theater for young audiences. On May 15th 2024 took place the fourth meeting at the Tanzhalle Wiesenburg in Berlin, a day of workshop and discussion with a focus on hospitality and multi-sensorial performance making. The event was titled: **„Wie laden wir ein? – Zur Verschmelzung von Access und Gastgeber*innenschaft in der künstlerischen Produktion“ / "How do we invite? - On the convergence of access and hosting in artistic production"**.

The interest for the topic developed as a natural continuation of the last meetings. The previous Fachaustausch focused on intergenerational work and pieces for audiences of all ages, as well as the notion of participation in choreography, looking at ways we can Grenzen auflösen between public and Künstler*innen, also questioning traditional hierarchies.

The last Treffen took place in March in Düsseldorf, on the topic of touch and respect, and around the programming of 'THINGS am Ende der Welt', choreographed by Alfredo Zinola. The piece worked on proximity and interaction without touch, or the idea of stimulating the sense of touch without haptic touch actually taking place. Zinola often puts a lot of attention to the moment an audience enters the theatre room, and the question of how we welcome audience in. Thinking about the role and responsibility of the Gastgeber led the two institutions to explore the topic of hospitality for the May Treffen.

Fachaustausch - Overview of the Day

Workshop on Hospitality

In the morning and afternoon, we are invited to a workshop on hospitality, led by Micaela Kühn Jara. Micaela wears many hats and has been working with dance and participation through different lenses, one as a lecturer at DDSKS - The Danish National School of Performing Arts, another one as artistic producer, dramaturge and Vermittlerin with the dance company for young audiences Alfredo Zinola Productions.

After an introductory round, the first thing she does is to position herself and clarify from which point and which experience she speaks. The second is to put forth the question of language, reminding us that not everyone in the room is a German native speaker, inviting us to use easy language, short sentences, and simple vocabulary. Already, the question of language in relationship to access appears, or as I'd be tempted to name it: language as access.

When one looks at access, the first question to ask is always: who is not in the room? As a non-native German speaker and as a non-European, I can't help but feel the lack of diversity: by this

point we are all white (one person of colour will join later), and in a field as international as the performing arts, language is often the first barrier. In attempts to lower this barrier, offers of translation are reiterated throughout the workshop. Not wanting to advocate for English — a dominant language that would also exclude some people in the room— I will look later at the concept of heterolinguism and its possibility to create a space of play, where everyone can contribute and where no one has the expectation —or can claim the privilege to— understand everything all the time.

Warm Up

To warm up, we start the workshop with a physical exercise in couples. One person gives a touch, to which the mover (with eyes closed) needs to respond by activating the body part at the point of contact and moving against the touch. The giver offers a suggestion (the touch), but the mover conserves agency in the way of responding, especially with the idea of the movement going *against* the touch and not *with*.

Als Gebender kann ich nicht richtig manipulieren.
- Workshop participant (see note 2)

In this exercise, the touch is the *Einladung*, a warm and comforting one. It asks: *wo gehen wir zusammen?* Just as the mover conserves some agency, the space between the invitation and the reaction will become our space of investigation for the day.

As a host, when you welcome an audience, you can prepare the food, set the table, set the mood, but controlling the environment only goes so far and in the end the guest also has their own agency. An interesting friction lies there. When working with children, how much agency are we willing to give? Letting go of control, or practicing risk management, how do we cater to this space of freedom, or create the illusion of it?

A Radical Invitation

The warm up is followed by an introduction to the concept of hospitality proposed by Derrida, as a political concept that can also be applied to performance making. Derrida speaks of two extremes when it comes to hospitality: what he calls ‘conditional hospitality’ and ‘unconditional hospitality’. While he speaks mostly about it on political terms — e.g. concerning borders and policymaking— Micaela proposes to look at how this concept could be applied to art making, and how to challenge the roles we traditionally assume when we consider a performance as a space for hospitality, whether in a theatre, a school, or site-specific. She gives two concrete examples:

Example 1: PELLE - Alfredo Zinola Productions

In PELLE, adults are blindfolded and guided into the room by the children. Once arrived on stage, there is an invitation to touch the performers, bringing them into movement. Again, the children serve as guides to the adults, facilitating their tactile experience.

In PELLE, audience members serve as activators. Without their participation, the piece doesn’t happen. This invitation is a risky one, and a lot of the research phase was about developing strategies for this risk management. To find the balance between giving agency to the spectators and bringing them to touch and play with respect. The setting challenges traditional roles and hierarchies between audience and performers, adults and children, putting forth the question of ‘who is responsible for whom’. PELLE is radical in its reversal of usual hierarchies and distribution of responsibilities, not only social hierarchies but also hierarchy of the senses, as it prioritizes a multi-sensorial approach where vision is dethroned. The children are suddenly being given the double responsibility to care for their caretakers as well as for the artists, and the development of the piece is in their hands.

*Wenn die Einladung völlig radikal offen aussieht, braucht es viel mehr Präzision von uns.
- Micaela Kühn*

Example 2: Domino Effect - Rapid Eye

In the frame of Dans for Børn, the circus company Rapid Eye was invited to do a version of their piece Domino Effect for schools. Dans for Børn was a specific format initiated by Dansehallerne in Denmark, which brought dance to schools in formats of 90 minutes. Initially, the time was distributed between a piece (or excerpt) followed by a workshop. Not particularly interested in giving juggling workshops or doing a 'watered down' version of their artistic proposal (in order to make it fit in a gym), the company decided to take the mediation format as a starting point for a modified artistic proposal. Together with consultant Micaela Kühn, they reimagined a format where participation was at the core of the work. Similarly to PELLE, the new proposal needed the children's help in order to move forward.

Rapid Eye starts with the performers playing on big wooden planks, which delimitates their stage. After a while, they start deconstructing this 'stage', and suddenly bring the planks to what was previously considered the audience's space. The children have to move, to help with the transport and the manipulation of the planks, and there is a complete deconstruction of the space and of the separation between audience and performer.

Here, the invitation is a very directive one. The audience's space is literally invaded. There is a wish to break the rules previously established in the space, den Raum zerstören. However, through the performativity of the cast, the playfulness transforms this invasion into a collaboration, and the children are invited to take on the role of helpers, becoming active builders of the stage, and eventually, the piece. The invitation hängt von der Performativität des Künstlers ab.

This example brings to the surface another recurring question of the day: the challenge of festlegen ohne zu beschreiben. Or in other words, how can *what we do* be stronger than *what we say*? A strong artistic proposal or an efficient invitation should be experienced rather than explained.

Gespräch on multi-sensorial performance making

In the afternoon, we will assist to a talk between Silja Korn, Daniella Strasfogel and Susanne Tod on the topic of multi-sensory work, moderated by Micaela Kühn Jara. Silja Korn is a performer, teacher, Erzieherin and a blind Beraterin currently collaborating with Theater o.N. on their new production. Daniella Strasfogel is a musician, performer and theater maker focussed on young audiences and families. Susanne Tod is an access-dramaturge, director and mediator with an expertise in sign language and a focus on projects addressing inclusion and diversity.

Sharing their experience with multi-sensory concepts, the idea is to look at the artistic potential that can unfold from pieces addressing different audiences with different sensory perceptions, for example a mixed audience including visually impaired or hearing impaired people.

*You can put a blindfold on and feel what it's like to not see for an hour.
But you can't know what it is like to live blind. For this you need me.
- Silja Korn*

What came out strongly of that talk for me was the imperative to *not assume*. Interestingly enough, I believe this imperative could be applied to the rest of the day, whether it be working with visually impaired people, hearing impaired people, people with disabilities or children. Treat your

audience as the experts, and invite them into the process as early on as possible. Do not assume, but question, try out, find out together.

When we do research, what if we consider the children as the experts.
- Working with Alfredo Zinola & Micaela Kühn

The second thing that came out was the central question of *why do you do it?* Here, I could denote two main tangents. One was about access being part of the artistic concept from the start: doing it out of real commitment, having it as a departure point or central interest for the artistic research. To not look at it as an added layer, or excess costs, but rather for the creative potential it can unleash and the discoveries that can be made along the way. Another perspective was that accessibility measures should become a normalized baseline. Addressing a general audience should also include addressing people with different abilities.

And so should working on a multi-sensory level. Coming from the performing arts, so much attention is put on being fully present in all of our senses. If the importance of perception, sensoriality and sensitivity is constantly reiterated in our training, why is it that performance making should suddenly cater only to the visual sense?

It was also noticed that although much is left to be done, great improvement was made in this department in the recent years by the city of Berlin, where the description of accessibility measure is now a mandatory section in the Bewerbungsformular as well as on the Spielstättenbescheinigung provided by venues. This sensitizes both artists and venues, and encourages them to take these measures seriously to increase their chance of a project receiving funding.

Example:

Spielstättenbescheinigung for Hauptstadtkulturfond 2024

**Welche Merkmale der Barrierefreiheit erfüllen Präsentationsort/
Spielstätte? (Zutreffendes bitte ankreuzen):**

- Menschen mit Sehbehinderung und Blindheit Menschen mit Hörbehinderung
- Menschen mit motorischen Einschränkungen Menschen mit kognitiven Einschränkungen
- Zugang für Rollstuhlnutzer ebenerdig oder über Rampe möglich
- Aufzug Behindertengerechte Toilette Taktile erfassbare Leitsysteme
- Zusätzliche optische Markierung von Glastüren und Stufen
- Wegweiser mit Piktogrammen zu Kasse, Toilette, Spielstätte, Gastronomie
- Induktionsschleifen, Halsringschleifen oder ähnliche Hörhilfen vorhanden
- Schriftliche Informationen in Großdruck
- Bei Bedarf personelle Unterstützung für Menschen mit Behinderung vor Ort
- Barrierefreie Website mit Hinweisen zu Ausstattung und Angeboten
Unsere Website ist teilweise in Leichte Sprache übersetzt, wir weisen außerdem auf der Website direkt auf Angebote wie bspw. Audiodeskriptionen hin.
- Nichts davon zutreffend. Bitte erläutern Sie:

Finding Resonances

All in all, the day was very rich in exchanges, and since many of the topics of the morning and the afternoon resonated together, I will try to give a topical overview about questions that were discussed throughout the day, whilst finding resonances between the different interventions.

Roleplay

If we take Derrida as a source of inspiration, it is interesting to take a closer look at the different roles artist, institutions and audience take on within the context of performance. In a traditional theatre setting, the roles are often fixed. The audience comes to the theater, they are the guests. The institution and its staff play the host, and one could almost say the artist (or the dance) is the meal, or what is served. Depending on the type of play (for example when the fourth wall is very strong), it is not always the artist's responsibility to host and I am always astonished to see shows (often for adults) where the artist doesn't seem to consider the public as an essential element.

In plays for young audience though, facilitation and hosting become a much more necessary part of the experience, and although the performance of hospitality is most often a conditional one, the workshop encourages us to perceive the different roles as more fluid.

A lot of performances for children happen in schools, often in the gym-hall. The question of ownership of the space then comes up. Whose space is it, who is welcoming whom? When artists enter a space that is usually inhabited by the children, they are confronted with a set of rules and behaviors that already exist outside of their artistic proposal. In order to compose with these – as trying to deny them can lead to chaos or enormous amounts of disciplining needed— it can be interesting to perceive ourselves as guests, and consequently adopt a different set of behaviors.

Considering ourselves as guests also invites us to reconsider other roles, where teachers will hopefully become allies, and some more experienced children can be given responsibility, invited to become 'satellite helpers'.

Der Ort as point of departure

This example of the gym-hall invites us to consider the specificity of the place where the performance will take place. Some participants suggest taking the 'place' as departure point. It is the case of Daniella Strasfogel for example, who experimented with creating scores for families and kids in playgrounds. Ironically, she discovered that kids in a playground often just wanted to play, rather than follow contemporary dance scores.

CONDITIONAL HOSPITALITY

- Reciprocity (certain expectations towards guest)
- Right to visit but not to stay
- Requirements (border control, ID check, etc.)
- Roles are fixed (the host stays the host and the guest stays the guest)

UNCONDITIONAL HOSPITALITY

- Open doors
- Nothing is expected from the guests
- No border/door/key, no ID checks
- All are welcomed, also unexpected guests
- The roles are fluid (ex: the guests can perform hosting, etc.)

"It's between these two figures of hospitality that responsibilities and decisions have to be taken in practice."
- Derrida, *Paper Machines*

We wanted to allow them to inhabit the Spielplatz differently, but then they just wanted to play. (laughs)
- Daniella Strasfogel

Each place — the theater, the gym-hall, the Spielplatz— comes with its set of rules. When we aim to infiltrate a place with art, we must decide where we want to play along: which rules are necessary, which ones do we want to break or establish, and what knowledge do people already arrive with. The more established the rules, the bigger the performative shift will have to be, or the more radical the artistic proposal, in order to allow new behaviors in.

“The more a path is used, the more a path is used.”

- Sara Ahmed, What's the use?

This sentence from Sara Ahmed approaches *use* as something that can bring quite conservative behaviours. For me, when we think about the ‘place’ as departure point, it’s interesting to think about the way a place is used, and the set of behaviours ‘use’ produces. In the context of performing arts, I find Ahmed’s concept of *queer use* quite inspiring:

“Queer uses, when things are used for purposes other than the ones for which they were intended, still reference the qualities of things; queer uses may linger on those qualities, rendering them all the more lively.”¹

While using the qualities and initial functions of the place to its advantage, queer use also poses the question of ‘who?’ gets to use a place/a thing, much in alignment with notions of access: *“queer use might refer to how things can be used in ways other than how they were intended to be used or by those other than for whom they were intended.”²*

When we talk about access, programs that bring arts to school and to different neighbourhoods are essential, and many insist on the importance of bringing art to ‘vulnerable’ or less privileged populations. Others insist on the importance of inviting kids to the theatre place, on making the event or art ‘special’, or ‘extraordinary’.

We once collaborated with a school from Marzahn. For some kids, it was the first time they were entering the city of Berlin. The whole experience was extraordinary, door opening.

Alternatively, if the theatre belongs to the artists, and the school or Turnhalle to the kids, some participants propose the possibility of investing a third ‘neutral’ space, where the question of ownership can be momentarily suspended, flattening hierarchies and putting audience and performers on a more egalitarian point of view, where a set of rules isn’t pre-established.

Communication & Preparation

In the context of performance for young audiences, the question of the invitation —normally a direct one, i.e. would you like to come to my birthday?— becomes an indirect one, where communication has to go through third parties such as parents, school, teachers, etc. In this tri-party relationship, who should the communication really address and how? What would happen if we would send letters of invitation directly to the children, and how would the text differ?

*What if children choose which pieces are programmed?
Last year we organized a prize for which the jury was constituted of children.
It could happen more widely, but the logistics can get complicated.*

Since guests are here only partly responsible for themselves, it is important to make the contract clear. What will happen, what can one await. Often, on one hand, institutions want to give as much information as possible, preparing guests and reassuring their doubts. On the other hand, artists at different production stages might not be ready to give this information, or might also

¹ AHMED, Sara. (2019) *What's the use? On uses of the use*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, p.26

² *Ibid*, p.44

want to protect the mystery of the creation, leaving space for the experience to happen. When thinking about accessibility, the need for information can sometimes go both ways:

When I don't know who comes, wie kann ich mich gut vorbereiten?

When dealing with diversity and inclusion, one quickly encounters a tension between the wish to make a piece for all, whilst simultaneously recognizing that specific audiences have specific needs. What makes a performance feel safe for someone might make it exclusive for someone else. How to deal with this dichotomy? Here, specificity is key.

Wenn die Zielgruppe nicht genug definiert ist, kommt niemand.

Gleichzeitig, it's crucial to leave room for poetry. Especially if we are interested in providing multi-sensorial experiences, it's important to not over-explain the art and trust people's capacity to absorb a work in different ways. In other words, when you host, you need to leave space for the party to happen. No one likes a control freak.

On one hand, giving information gives agency and allows different parties to feel prepared and safe. On the other hand, giving room for imagination leaves space for the magic to happen. It's about finding that fine line. When it comes down to the experience, to not prescribe but offer.

Foyer as Zwischenraum

Following the steps of communication and preparation arises the importance of the initial Begrüssung: who welcomes the guests, and how are they prepared, informed and trained.

Speaking in smaller groups, we arrived to the concept of the foyer als Zwischenraum. The foyer is specific to theatre, but the concept can also be transferred to other places as this liminal space of tampon between 'reality' and entering 'the fiction of the theater'. More practically, we could call it the outside and the inside, this in between space where we can operate towards the suspension of disbelief, and if wanted/required, the suspension of hierarchies or traditional roles.

What we learn from work like PELLE is that how we operate in this space can be determining for the rest of the performance, therefore it is important to conceptualize this space and time as an integral part of the work. To give it the proper importance it deserves, as it will set the mood for the rest of the piece, affecting people's availability, ability to relax, to be critical, and in the end their capacity to receive and appreciate the work.

In this Zwischenraum, one of the central questions revolves around trust. Trust can't really be built or established in 5-10 minutes, so it must be an artificial contract, a proposal. In PELLE for example, the performers offer transactional trust: "hey, please trust us, we are trusting you". The risk goes both ways, there is a reciprocity. But to be able to take such a big risk, much research and practice is needed beforehand. In Zinola's work, risk management becomes a craft, a skill, not only relying on the formality and clarity of the entrance proposal, but also very much depending on the performers ability to be inviting and welcoming whilst conserving clear boundaries.

Other more traditional example of the use of the foyer as a mediation space would be the warm ups proposed in Tanzhaus NRW, where informed mediators invite audience members for a collective *mise en corps* 15 minutes before the piece. Here, the idea is to familiarise an audience to the content of the piece, whilst activating the body, therefor putting it in a more receptive state to see, perceive and feel dance.

The importance of context

Cintia Rangel: *I presented a try-out of my work 'Baobab' in Nigeria. There is a part in the piece where I get children in the audience to manipulate my hair. [Cintia is a black choreographer from Brazil and has dreadlocks.] It is a very nice and easy interaction in the play. But when I came back and performed it in Germany, I was suddenly confronted with all the context coming with that image. I suddenly couldn't perform it in the same way.*

Julia B. Laperrière: *So what did you do? Did you find a solution?*

Cintia: *I looked for the person of colour in the room and went to them, but I felt a bit bad about it.*

Julia: *I don't think you need to feel bad. It's important to protect yourself, your subjectivity and your vulnerability as a performer. It's also important to protect the original image you wanted to communicate.*

Cintia: *It's true. Also, the piece is about how we can use ancestral knowledge to build the future, and this part plays with the ancestral image of the old person doing the hair of the young, in specific cultures.*

The next day - Über Überüberübermorgen

The day following the Fachaustausch, I assisted to a theater play in Theater o.N. called Überüberübermorgen. The Gastspiel was a production from Cécile Bally & Cathy Walsh in coproduction with the FELD Theater for children 5+.

Here again, translation as access came into play, and the normalization of addressing people in different ways. Offering many entries to a concept, the beginning of the play associated a sign (SL), an object, and a movement to a word — in this case “past, present, future” — and then went on to question our notion of time with some intricate dances and wordplay.

Later on, a character who can't speak German nor English expresses themselves through sound and movement. Their words are then translated into emojis (through a video projector), thereafter reinterpreted and translated to all by a third character. Are emojis the new universal language 🤖?

Whilst normalising the integration of sign language and offering different sensorial input for one same concept (majorly visual and audio in this case), the piece unfortunately missed the opportunity to stick with the concept past its rather strong opening section.

Translation as access — practicing heterolinguisms

Looking at my notes from the workshop, I noticed they were written in French, English, German and Spanish, as well as accompanied by signs and drawings. I realized that between the Fachaustausch and the Überüberübermorgen Stück at Theater o.N., I experienced in two days a multitude of different languages: those named above but also sign language, Brazilian Portuguese, audiodescription, tactile and movement based communication, music, visual communication, etc.

Whether it be from a language to another, from a sense to another, from a context to another (i.e. in Cintia's case), I consider translation to be a means of access, and a political one too.

In this perspective, I would like to take inspiration from the concept of heterolinguisms, a term coined by Rainier Grutman in 1994 and more recently studied, defended and given body to by

Myriam Suchet, professor and researcher at the Sorbonne University in Paris. Suchet writes: “Unlike bi-, pluri- or multi-linguism, which leave each of the idioms present untouched, enhancing them at most by virtue of a diversity that remains external to them, the prefix ‘hetero’ emphasizes the difference that transforms them from within.” For her, it’s about radically modifying the imagination around “the language”, rather than merely adding or juxtaposing different ones as if they were stable and homogenous entities that could avoid contamination.

In the context of the Fachaustausch and the *Überüberübermorgen* play, I find interesting how multi-sensorial approaches and the presence of different languages —and when I say language I mean it in an expanded way— can create frictions, and how these frictions allow interpenetration, possibly creating new hybrid languages —propriété of no one and façonnés par chacun (toustes)/ property of no one whilst potentially crafted by each—. Moreover, I’m inclined to perceive these frictions and plurality as something that we can learn from and that can profoundly change the ways we communicate and approach or consider others.

If everyone steps out of their comfort zone, we might land on a more equal playing field, rather than able people being the comfortable ones all the time. We could practice getting used to other people’s needs being attended first at times, or other languages than ours being spoken in the room — whether spoken, signed or multi-sensorially addressed—. To not assume the world is made for me, should cater to my needs, but rather recognise the multitude of needs. To practice de-centering my experience and to recognise how other experiences can affect mine and how I can grow from it. To cultivate porosity, welcoming the affection, the contamination, the discomfort perhaps, and the heterogeneity.

4 short prompts I leave with:

DO NOT ASSUME

Research, try out, invite early on, ask, test and find out *with*

ESSENTIALIZE YOU AUDIENCE(S)

Make them essential, they are your experts

REFINE YOUR INVITATION

Information gives people agency

BE A COOL HOST

Leave space for the party to happen