

## **EDN Atelier: Gaining New Perspectives**

### **Report written by Annette van Zwoll**

*'You guys are so obedient, you do everything you are asked to do!'*

It's the second day of the Atelier Gaining New Perspectives at Dansateliers Rotterdam and during lunch I'm having a conversation with keynote speaker Efva Lilja from Sweden (currently artistic director of Dansehallerne in Copenhagen, Denmark). I start laughing. Her observation is so true. We've been carefully touching and acknowledging one and other in the physical warming-up sessions of choreographer Ingrid Berger Myhre, we have drawn and written on white papers, we thought of questions when we were asked to, we listened and spoke up when needed.

When I look around to this bunch of dances, choreographers, producers, dramaturges, artistic directors and more they don't come across as the obedient kind. We're gathered here in the old building where Dansateliers is based, to celebrate the 25th birthday of this organisation that generously and vigorously supported many burgeoning careers, including my own as a dance dramaturge. Many of us connect to this house and embrace their attitude of questioning, reflection and dialogue.

The atelier was organised from a need of initiators Kristin de Groot (artistic director) and Merel Heering (dance dramaturge) to share values, practices and responsibilities. To evoke change in the dance field holistically and to empower individual responsibilities. The atelier doesn't aim for consensus, but allows disagreement to exist. It wants to gather a multitude of voices, to have a stronger voice as a whole. It's form-based, exploring different ways of engaging dialogue and new perspectives. The form is the content and offers the possibility to step into the research with our own questions as well as with collective ones. This set-up makes us willingly and enthusiastically commit to what's proposed to us.

### **Creating strong, credible alternatives**

The keynote *Sing a Song or Scream out Loud* of Efva Lilja is a perfect example of that.

*'It is not just about making resistance – the key is to create strong, credible and engaging alternatives.'*

'There is a wind of right wing populism blowing, a wind that demands sure feet if you do not want to be blown away.' is how she starts. 'It is not just about making resistance – the key is to create strong, credible and engaging alternatives.' She offers those alternatives on the spot, supporting her words with dance movements, silences, but also by spoken word and reading poems. She lets us draw and write on the sea of white paper she is standing on. She sings a song. While she continues telling us about the value of art and the initiatives she and her colleagues undertook to include the right for art in the Swedish Constitution I start to realise how incredibly brave and capable many of us are in the dance field. Capable of finding innovative ways of creating,

working, collaborating, researching and communicating, of being leaders and entrepreneurs. As Efva states:

*'Over and over again we make the impossible possible.'*

When she asks us to write down actions that we can take home that's what I write: to underline out loud, to myself, my colleagues and to others that we are so good at offering alternatives. Or maybe I'll sing it.

I take this perspective with me to the session with dramaturge and researcher Konstantina Georgelou. Based on an editing technique developed by choreographer Lisa Nelson she divides us in groups of 3. One of us talks for 12 minutes about a topic this person cares about, the second can intervene with a specific set of tasks (e.g. rephrase, summarize, pause, start over), while a third person associatively draws or writes on yet another white piece of paper. The uttering of my thoughts evoked by the morning session is quite refreshing, but I start to stutter when I feel my pitch is done.

The interventions force me into flipping my thoughts upside down, to zoom in or zoom out. Talking with my eyes closed brings me inside myself while connecting to the others: a tangible example of a practice for body and mind. The sensation of listening to the other person without responding through words is equally satisfying: to let the words sink in, have the opportunity for my thoughts to take different paths without letting it be disrupted by my own speech. These sensations vapour again when we collectively sit down to share our thoughts, ideas and experiences.

*We are invited to not search for consensus, to let disagreement exist.*

Within the proposition of tools described above, that's very workable, but within this more traditional setting there is not yet an alternative available to really do that. It underlines the necessity of looking for new tools to generate dialogue.

### **Collective search for new perspectives**

The second day starts again with a physical introduction of Ingrid Berger Myhre. We are allowed to be with ourself, creating circles with all parts of our body. It awakens the mind as well and I'm ready for the interview with choreographer Alida Dors and dance dramaturge and dance activist Peggy Ollislaegers. Alida is a black, female choreographer and talent developer and has become a strong voice advocating for the diversity of the stories told on stage and of a broader view on talent development, of what theatres should be and for whom. She is challenging the status quo by offering an alternative, e.g. setting up her own talent development program and laying bare the hierarchy within dance. She does so with Peggy on her side, who, with curiosity and joy, steps with her into the unknown. They embrace discomfort, find words for it, and provoke change by offering new perspectives and new alternatives. They connect to each other in their collective search for new perspectives, awareness and alternatives and impact their surroundings with it.

*When the words are flowing again, the body is flowing too, speeding up the words*

In the afternoon a session of choreographer Monica Gillette (UK) offers an astonishing proposal of how the body digests and communicates information. With a 'physical interview' she invites someone into a circle with his eyes closed. He starts moving and physically guided by interviewer Monica he starts answering her questions. Movement and words become intertwined. When he needs time to think, the body stops moving, even if it's upside down. When the words are flowing again, the body is flowing too, speeding up the words. His path of thoughts follows a multitude of branches, coming back to what has been said before, shifting from his personal life to his working life and making both political. I'm mostly touched by the attentiveness of us around him, the willingness to engage with his story and to connect that to ones own stories. In the talk afterwards, not everyone feels the same. Some feel resistant to this attentiveness that was reinforced through the structure. And again, there is space for disagreement and discomfort, but like the day before, we don't have a tool (yet) nor the time to take that disagreement to a next level. How can we make it instrumental to gaining new perspectives?

This Atelier gave us methods to allow ourselves to explore different pathways, different side tracks and branches on a tree, without the need for connecting them all together. It increased our skills to constantly search for new perspectives, to look behind the obvious and to search for potential alternatives and take action upon that to inflict change. Because alternatives are political.