

Anne-Sophie Erichsen

Within the Walls of Our Theatre

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Some years ago at our theatre, we hosted a company from abroad that was going to perform during our annual international theatre festival. These people were extremely careful about protecting their work. They put up signs all over the place that we should be silent, we were not to enter the kitchen to fetch a cup of coffee when they were having meetings, etc. This somewhat changed the atmosphere at the theatre. We all tip-toed around and said “shhh” to each other, and their performance was absolutely wonderful. Later on, we hosted another company for the same purpose. They were loud, very social, drinking, partying, preparing for work in a somewhat chaotic way, and their performance was absolutely wonderful too. What kind of rules do we build around us in order to create a situation where we protect our work? And when do we change the rules?

When I started working in Grenland Friteater, the company had already existed for seven years. It doesn't seem like a very long time to me now, but it was a well established group with a lot of experience. I remember having a very respectful attitude towards the rules created by the members of the company. These were agreements to behave in a certain way, keeping the hours very strictly, never chatting privately in the work space, trying to speak as little as possible and rather solve problems through the work, etc. It was emphasised how important it was to have a good relationship with the town, so we were to be nice and polite to everybody, never steal from the shops, etc. Quite normal rules for a theatre company at the time (but probably unthinkable for a rock band, at least the ones I know). When I came to the theatre, I was told not to speak for two years, but to listen and learn. I thought it was a bit stupid, but I didn't dream of rebelling against it. They were already then past the stage where they forced themselves to start work at six o'clock in the morning and refused anyone who was three minutes late entry into the space. The people at Grenland Friteater were my age, but much more experienced in theatre than I was.

Many years later, we started having a few pupils at the theatre. They were a lot younger than us; like fifteen, twenty years younger - another generation. I was surprised by the self-confidence many of them seemed to have, being only in their late teens or early twenties. They were trained by us and they quite quickly started performing together with us as part of their education; quite tough for some of them, and a new situation for us.

We had more or less kept our rules. But with the younger generation now participating in the work, it was no longer possible to do so in the same way. I still remember the first time one of them entered the work space completely in tears because of an argument with her mother. What to do? This was absolutely unheard of, yet it was impossible to throw her out. The natural thing to do was of course to comfort her and wait for her to be ready for rehearsal. She was young, which made the relationship a different one. We realised we had to adapt to a new situation. It would be absurd not to listen to what was happening. We intuitively knew it would not put the whole theatre in danger, as we may have feared ten years earlier. We chose to open up to that situation there and then, not as a new rule, of course, but as an acceptable exception, a necessity, life.

I would never have dared to do that; not then, and not now.

There has been a change during the last twenty years in the way that kids are brought up. There is now a lot more focus on ego and personal needs, and less on obedience and respect for authority. Jesus! I sound like a school teacher! It is not only bad. What I am trying to say is that, to our great surprise, young people would enter the theatre and feel it their right to suggest other rules, and we had to deal with that, especially the part that had to do with discussions. They can speak for hours, and hours... They are much more serious about taking care of their phys-

ical and mental health than we are. They demand time for warming up properly, stretching out, a day off every now and then; something very important that we have been ridiculously "tough" about.

The young ones naturally brought in something new, and we had to accept that. They demanded to be taken seriously; brave people who did not blindly accept our habits without also questioning them, to our great surprise, and yes, also to our great irritation. I have been furious at times, but I never felt they lacked respect for us or the work - and we are still punctual.

I think if we had asked some of them to shut up for two years, they would have walked out immediately. Unthinkable...

When you are young and start a theatre company, you have a lot to prove. You are tough, but also vulnerable. You have to decide on certain rules in order to keep the discipline and to force yourself and your colleagues to go on, and to prove to the world that you can get up every morning and go to work, even if nobody really understands what it is that you are doing. After twenty years, it is a different scene. You can dissolve some of the strictness because you don't need it anymore; not in the same way. It is there in a sense anyway; it is in our minds, in our attitude, in the way we enter the space, and within the walls of our theatre. It is there as a hidden knowledge, and it is also true that we can never transmit exactly those experiences. For us, certain things are natural because of our history and we don't need to talk about them. So much has been proved. How should they know, being twenty years younger? How can we communicate it? We can tell them, but we cannot go backwards: it is history, our history. The next generation will have their own history.

Theatre Women Generation - Anne-Sophie Erichsen

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