

Author: Mrs Riikka Papunen

Affiliation: Faculty of Communication Sciences, University of Tampere

Contact details: [riikka.papunen@uta.fi](mailto:riikka.papunen@uta.fi)

tel. +358401909680

TamPub

This document has been downloaded from TamPub.uta.fi  
The Institutional Repository of University of Tampere

Title:

‘Permission to be looked at: A collaboration between Theatre Siperia and Wärijäämö, the Centre for Arts and Activity for disabled people’

Abstract:

The article describes the author’s subjective experience – as an actor-researcher – of being part of the performance of *Toinen katse* (the Other View). In the performance, the author worked as an actor and the project was the first part of her artistic research conducted for a doctoral degree at the University of Tampere.

The article explores the being with the other through two case examples in the performance *Toinen katse*. *Toinen katse* is a cooperation between a professional, independent theatre company Theatre Siperia and the Arts and Activity Center for Disabled Persons Wärijäämö both located in Tampere, Finland. The article introduces the participants, together with some information about disability and theatre in Finland. It also construes the process of forming the working group between the participants from Theatre Siperia and Arts and Activity Centre Wärijäämö and the efforts and the obstacles in creating the hybrid ensemble.

The main section of the article is based on the actor-researcher’s subjective experiences. It explores carefully two scenes from the performance in order to describe the perceptions of being and acting with the other, in this case with the colleague with learning disabilities. The scenes contain moments of looking at the other, as well as moments of being looked at by the other. In order to experience the interaction of looking, one must give oneself the permission to be looked at. The article suggests that, for the actor-researcher, the permission to be looked at pointed the way to act with the colleagues with learning disability. Moreover, acting with the colleague with a learning disability turned the acting for the actor-researcher in the performances of *Toinen katse*

in a more interactive, dialogical and other-focused direction.

Keywords:

Theatre, Finland, Acting, Learning Disability, the Other

Words in the manuscript: 2807

Manuscript:

In the spring of 2016, the Finnish theatre company Theatre Siperia invited artists with learning disabilities to join them on stage by participating in *Toinen Katse* (The Other View). The mission of this performance project was to make the audience members reconsider their views on otherness and disability. The process ultimately focused on looking at each other, and through the process, the interaction of the act of looking and especially the experience of being looked at became the essential core of the project. From the very beginning, then, it was clear that the members of Theatre Siperia did not want to construct the performance exclusively through the experiences of able-bodied artists. Therefore, the Siperians cooperated with a group of artists with learning disabilities to familiarise themselves with the topic. This starting point functioned as the guiding principle throughout the artistic process of *Toinen Katse*.

This article describes my subjective experience – as an actor-researcher – of being part of the performance of *Toinen katse*. In the performance, I worked as an actor and the project was the first part of my artistic doctoral research. My research, conducted for my doctoral degree at the University of Tampere, consists of two artistic parts and a monograph reporting its results. As a scholar, my ultimate focus lies on exploring acting *with the other*. *Toinen katse* played a formative part in this exploration, as it helped to elucidate the main research question: how does one act *with the other* (in this case a colleague with a learning disability)? Consequently, this article will depict not only the encounter between the audience and the ensemble but also encounters within the ensemble. Concentrating on describing the experiences, I have decided to exclude the larger theoretical framework from this article.

I will start by providing a brief introduction of the ensemble, together with some information regarding the state of disability and theatre in Finland. Theatre Siperia is an independent theatre company located in Tampere, Finland. During its ten years of existence, Siperia has developed a

method based on devised theatre. The thematic initiative behind most of their theatrical productions is a phenomenon that has captivated all the Siperians. A suitable working group is then gathered to explore the subject matter more intensively, and together the members start to write short stories and create scenes on stage. Most of the productions have a director, but it is important that the director works in close collaboration with the rest of the group. Some of the subject matters are considered to need extra information and, in such cases, the members of the theatre invite people with the required knowledge or experience to collaborate. In some cases, these 'experts' also end up on stage.

Toinen katse needed 'experts of otherness' not only as material, but also as performers on stage. Wärväämö, the Centre for Arts and Activity, is an activity centre operating under the auspices of the City of Tampere. It provides opportunities to 24 people with learning disabilities to work in the field of arts and culture. One option is to work in a performing arts group. This group comprises ten people and it was invited to collaborate with Theatre Siperia. The members of Wärväämö were excited to join the collaboration. The method of devised theatre was familiar to them and many of the members had previous experiences of devising theatre pieces, short films, or music. Wärväämö's priority is to support young disabled people in their independence, and the organisation considered the collaboration with Theatre Siperia to support this aspiration.

Today, in Finland, adult education centres are the main agents organising opportunities for people with learning disabilities to practice theatre. In addition, there are a couple of semi-professional theatre companies that include both disabled and non-disabled actors, and one ensemble, consisting of people with learning disabilities, that has permanent funding for its activities. This precise ensemble, the Helsinki-based DuvTeatern, even won a state prize for performing arts in 2015. Likewise, the Theatre Academy in Helsinki selected for the first time a deaf person to study acting in 2016.

Finnish society is working hard to fight against discrimination and to improve – among other things – disabled people's equal rights in living and working. However, the Finnish government only ratified the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities in May 2016, coincidentally in the middle of the performance season of Toinen katse. Finnish society is slowly learning to consider disabled people as more than just a group to be taken care of, protected, or rescued: it is starting to recognise disabled people as equal citizens. The collaboration between Theatre Siperia and Wärväämö took part in highlighting the issues to be improved in Finnish Society in terms of equal rights. It also represented an opportunity to question the state of equal rights between people in theatre – on stage, in the audience, and between the stage and the audience.

The performance was done using devised theatre. At the beginning of the project, the able-bodied professional actors and the director-playwright invited to the ensemble were named 'the core group'. The core group invited the participants from Wärväämö to the collaboration in the position of 'experts'. Initially, the core group and the experts worked together for five to seven days. The intention of these sessions was for everyone to familiarise themselves with each other and gather information about experiences of otherness. After this, the writing phase began. This writing phase, which lasted for a month, ensured that the core group had long and rich conversations about the working sessions and their own experiences. As a result, the core group ended up writing or sketching scenes for the stage.

The final rehearsal period started, when the core group invited four members from Wärväämö's group of ten to join them on stage. At this point, the core group had several sketches of scenes ready for the four members of the expert group to step in. In addition, the core group had some initial scenes for more non-verbal scenes to develop together. Thus, the core group was in a leading position compared to the experts. Although our intention was to form a new, single, hybrid ensemble, we realised that the circumstances made it impossible. The verbal method of writing the script, the time schedule, and the pressure to produce a production that would please the regular audience of Theatre Siperia were considerations that prohibited us from forming a balanced and equal ensemble. Obviously, this also left its marks on our acting, and I will return to this later on in the article.

Although we could not form the hybrid ensemble consisting of the performers with learning disabilities and the able-bodied performers, we observed that, at the level of looking at each other, we could experience equality. The act of looking and being looked at became the core of the whole performance. This was also the main point that we wanted to share with the audience. We wanted to remind the audience that looking at us on stage is an interactive process: when you look at us - we will look at you (and you will be looked at).

One of the scenes processed this theme carefully. The scene began with a line performed by a performer with a learning disability:

*"You may look at the other person curiously, wondering, interested. Sometimes you wish to have a proper look at the other person, but it's forbidden."*

After the line, the other three performers with learning disabilities joined the scene and all of them stepped towards the audience. Each of the four performers went close to an audience

member they had individually chosen. They looked at the audience member and described three things about the chosen person. These tended to be either neutral, e.g. 'blue shirt, long hair, a bag', or positive like 'you have a beautiful smile, you make me smile, you have a nice watch'. The performers repeated this three to five times and changed the target of their attention and comments each time. The reactions of the audience members varied from smiles to the shedding of tears and the selected individuals commenting back to the performers with kind words.

This was the fourth scene of the performance, but, in a sense, it acted like an icebreaker for the whole performance. We – i.e. the rest of the performers – watched the scene from the back of the stage. Witnessing the interaction between the performers and audience members, that is, seeing how the performers' words connected with their audience on emotional level was a transformative experience. We all felt that, after this interpersonal encounter, we had shared the space and the performance with the audience: we all had permission to look and to be looked at.

Another scene, and my experiences of performing in that scene, led me to these same perceptions but from another perspective. The scene I am about to describe and interpret is actually an exercise that was transformed into one of the scenes in *Toinen katse*. This was the only scene that I as an actor-researcher wanted to bring to the performance. I had used this simple exercise earlier when I had worked on stage with a colleague who has a learning disability. My former experiences still haunted me and I wanted to continue exploring them in the performance of *Toinen katse*.

Below, I describe this exercise carefully:

1. Two people – the performers – stand in an area they have decided to name the stage. Next to them is an area they have decided to name the audience. They imagine that the audience contains audience members. We may call it the imaginary audience.
2. The performers on stage stand in a face-to-face position, 1–1.5-metres apart. They look at each other. The imaginary audience is able to see the profile of the performers' bodies. This is the situation 1.
3. After a predefined period, the performers turn simultaneously to look at the imaginary audience. They are now side-by-side. The imaginary audience is able to see them from the front, their faces. This is the situation 2.
4. The exercise continues by repeating the situations 1 and 2. The performers make the decision to change between the situations together in silence.

When I had done the exercise before, I had noticed that the situation 1 was, to put it simply, a good experience for me and the situation 2 was a bad experience. When I was face-to-face with the other performer, I felt good, calm, and strong. When turning to the imaginary audience, I felt anxious, insecure, and weak. The situation 2 aroused in my mind questions such as: 'How do they see us?', 'Do I look too dominant?', and 'How should I be here so that they would see us as equals?' In *Toinen katse*, I wanted to explore how my experience changes when a real audience enters the exercise.

One of the four members from Wärjäämö and I performed the scene described above. The form of the scene meant modifications were made, including dim lighting, background music, and one performer reciting a piece of text about breathing while looking at the other performer. The acts and the intentions remained the same as in the original exercise. We agreed that we, as the performers, should focus on the exercise, on each other, and on the individuals sitting in the audience and allow the rest of the scenes to happen simultaneously around us.

During the rehearsal period, I experienced the same feelings and questions as I had earlier. In *Toinen katse*, I performed the scene with a male colleague who has a learning disability. My colleague proclaimed several times that 'it [was] fun to just stand and stare at each other.' My personal experience was the same as his when we were facing each other (situation 1). Indeed, I noticed that, during the situation 1, I felt every now and then that he was looking at me, not that I was looking at him. In those moments when I let myself to be looked at, I did not perceive that he was a man with a learning disability looking at me; instead I viewed him as an older man - or as an exceptionally intense colleague. These moments were fleeting, though momentous. The situation 2 was also somewhat similar to my earlier experience. I did not feel as negatively as before, but every time we turned towards the imaginary audience, I lost some of that effortlessness that was an important part of the situation 1.

When the première and the first performances for the audience began and the audience entered our scene, my experience altered considerably. Moment by moment, I became exceedingly aware that even in the situation 1, I was neither sensing the other nor encountering my colleague – I was simply performing the exercise. The presence of the audience made me worry about how I performed and what I told the audience through my being and my expressions: was I performing correctly? The situation 1 felt the same or even more anxious than the situation 2.

I felt embarrassed and realised that, from the first time the audience entered the scene, I had focused mainly on the preconceptions of the audience's approach to me. I encouraged myself to

focus on the exercise, and this also led me to focus to my colleague. As a result, for the first time in front of the audience, I felt how my colleague looked at me. I was able to give permission to be looked at in front of the audience in that moment. My body relaxed and I breathed deeply. For the first time, I felt good performing with my colleague with a learning disability in front of an audience.

In the following performances, when performing this scene, I continued to focus on my colleague. After a couple of performances, my colleague surprised me. During the scene, when we were looking at each other, he suddenly shook his shoulders and smiled at me. I smiled back. I wondered if he had felt solitary because of my introverted behaviour. After this moment, we tended to amuse each other during the scene by slowly lifting our eyebrows or carefully widening our nostrils. Performing with the other changed from being anxiety-generating to pleasurable. Furthermore, the situation 2 also became more comfortable to perform.

This could be explained by my poor skills of being present in the moment of performing. However, I consider there is more to it than that. When I look at my colleague with a learning disability, and I am able to give myself permission to be looked at, I am also able to give up the delusion of my authority over him, as well as the behaviour included to the delusion. Ultimately, this is my only opportunity in order to *perform with* my colleague, not to mention *being with* my colleague. In my experience, *being with* my colleague with a learning disability had turned my acting momentarily in a more interactive, dialogical, and other-focused direction.

I tentatively suggest that, the reaction of the audience members during the opening act of *Toinen katse*, and, the experience I had in the scene of performing with the colleague with a learning disability, had the same effect on us. Both the audience members and I gave ourselves permission to be looked at by a performer with a learning disability. In order to find another view of the other, we first needed to find the other view of ourselves. Unfortunately, this seminal moment of self-discovery was as ephemeral as it was significant. As the performance moved on, I experienced several moments on stage, when I struggled with the feeling of not knowing how to *be with* my colleagues with learning disabilities. Especially in scenes that included dialogue or were more active than the one described above, I felt insecure and powerless. It may be that the audience had the same experience, but I do think that, even those brief experiences, enabled the audience members to receive the performance in a more open-minded and open-hearted way.

At least for me, the perception of knowing how to be with the other encouraged me to explore it further and challenge my own acting habits and professional norms. In the second artistic part of my doctoral research, I focus on a more holistic concept of *being with the other*. The main

theorists I am in dialogue with are Sara Ahmed (*Strange Encounters*, 2000), Homi Bhabha (*Location of Culture*, 1994), Colette Conroy (*Theatre and the Body*, 2009), and Carrie Sandahl (*Bodies in Commotion*, 2005). I also cooperate with my aunt who has Down syndrome and a long history as an artist. I am interested in exploring more carefully how learning disabilities relate to my experiences of finding a more interactive way of acting and the essence of *being with*.