



Collecting Thoughts on Collectivity

Jesper De Neergaard, Aarhus #3

By: Ida-Elisabeth Larsen

Months back, I think it was during the winter of 2013, Fanclub approached me upon receiving confirmation that a Nordic tour of their latest production DEATH would be possible to schedule. They explained to me that they were concerned about the current culture of touring, which to them felt somewhat depleted – presenting work, but not having time to establish an understanding of the different contexts and cities visited under such circumstances. Fanclub was interested in doing something different – something that would in one way or another engage, or at least to some extent make conversation, with the local communities of makers and audiences. So, with this in mind we worked together to develop a little side project called Collecting Thoughts on Collectivity.

We imagined it manifesting itself through three different initiatives; a series of talks, a series of interviews and a subsequent article. Firstly, the series of moderated talks – between Fanclub, myself, and whomever else would be interested in participating – would discuss openly the way Fanclub functioned as a collective and how they organised themselves in periods of producing stage works. Secondly, the series of interviews with local artist collectives discussing their works, methods, etc. And lastly, the formulation of a small article, which would further expand upon some of the ideas about collectivity discovered along the way.

This is an excerpt from an interview done in May, 2014 with Jesper De Neergaard, the artistic director of Bora Bora, a venue for 'dance and visual theatre' located in Aarhus, Denmark. We sat in Jesper's office drinking that kind of coffee, which is only brewed in theatres; well bitter and well black. After a brief exchange around the Danish funding system for stage arts our conversation turned to touch the subject of collectivity. More precisely it became a talk about the more brutal aspects of working in a collective. Jesper has many years of experience in coaching collectives through different workshop formats and as an outside eye he says, you sometimes see better the complex psychological infrastructures that presupposes how collectives move.

IE: I often have difficulties in defining the concept of collectivity - that is, putting words to this idea of a social entity. In particular, I am referring to the invisible infrastructure, which governs collectives and creates movement in whatever a collective deals with. How would you define the concept of collectivity?

JN: You will make things more difficult than needed if you try to generalise about a collective as an entity – and the same goes for collective processes. Nevertheless, one may say that the good thing about a collective's set-up is that it engages everyone. It becomes unfavourable when, or if, any of the members within a collective begin to aspire to be a secret ruler, and believe their role is to outsmart the rest, making the rest perform what they want themselves. My conversations with collective groups have also shown that they always believe somebody in their group is being lazy. Several times, I have organised a kind of closed workshop for these collective groups, and in these workshops, the psychological structures have been examined, and the sore spots have been identified. Through such workshops, you end up with some very complicated maps of how a collective looks.

IE: How do you help collectives become aware of their internal structures?

JN: It helps the process when it is an outsider who inquires about the collective. The outsider will often be able to identify an enormous amount of waste, as collectives often spend more time on things than they do in more hierarchical structures. You often find situations in a collective where people are spending excess amounts of time debating, because there are large differences of opinion. Many of the different psychological situations in a collective are similar to situations within hierarchical structures. However, the difference is, in a hierarchical structure, you must put your personal desire and ambitions aside. In some situations, within a hierarchical structure, you might be able to keep your integrity as a performing artist, but there is the possibility of feeling compromised when performing another person's vision. It is crucial that a director pays attention to such psychological structures, and that they try to accommodate them. Whichever working method you are applying, it takes cooperation to solve conflicts.

IE: The collective machinery is often referred to as a revolutionary weapon, both because of its ability to mobilise a great amount of people, but also because the format of collaboration can potentially point out new democratic forms. It is, in many ways, a deeply interesting form to explore; but how do the members of a collective avoid cultivating the never-ending conflicts, and instead focus their efforts on caring for the collective, making sure it is retained?

JN: I feel certain that collectives often have to renew themselves in one way or another, whether it concerns their members or their mentality. You need to give each other different kinds of assignments. As an example, I think it can be beneficial for collectives to try out different working methods. It could be to work in a completely hierarchical structure, or to work in a structure where each member has a clearly defined role.

It is also a very good exercise to switch who is being the artistic director of rehearsals. In such an exercise, each member, who is given the role of artistic director, can receive fourteen days or six months to prepare for the role, as it can indeed be a difficult role to manage. Well, I believe it is important to test the rubber, so to speak: how elastic is the relationship of the members within the collective to each other?

On the other hand, it may become problematic to do team therapy because you cannot avoid that issues will surface that can be dwelled upon, which inhibit the creative process. You can end up spending a lot of time on such internal issues, but the question is, is it really a good idea to do so? If a wound has healed from a previous conflict, and it has even made the relationship much stronger, is it then really wise to begin poking at it again? The members may have resolved a speci-

fic set of issues, possibly in a rather unorthodox way, but the point is that such resolution may have brought a new common understanding to the collective.

I believe there is a clear risk of ripping open these newly healed wounds, in these team therapy types of processes. There will always be someone who will say something like: "Oh, but I can remember the day where I was not allowed to get any coffee", or some other trivial thing. This being so, one needs to be good in their ability to sense the boundaries of their collective; they should be able to recognise what is important and what is not.

IE: Yes, I also believe there is a kind of brutality in the fundamental premise of the collective, namely in the fact that you need to reach consensus to progress with the work. Some may experience that they have to compromise on their own visions or preferred methods. On the other hand, is it not true that it can be risky avoiding the goal of reaching general consensus?

JN: Yes, that can be the case. Especially if you have a careless way of engaging in the collective. You might end up cutting some umbilical cords, which are actually full of vitality and bring a necessary nutrition to the structure. It is probably right to state that if you are deciding to establish a collective, you're asking for trouble. Having said that, working collectively, is to me, the healthiest way of activating and engaging oneself within 'the collective art world'.

I use this expression because — even though you might find a choreographer or a director in an artistic process — stage art, is by definition, something collective. By activating and engaging oneself in the collective, you are actively putting yourself to work together with others' — and I don't mean 'work' as the job centre would, but instead it engages both your body and your mind. This means, that you are working with your art, and that you are working to find ways to convey it to an audience, and if you stop working for some years, you basically unlearn the knowledge that you have accumulated. It is terribly important to hone your skills.

IE: There is no real guarantee that a collective will endure in the long run. It seems to me, that sometime it is crisis that propels the development of the collective. But, is it fundamentally essential that a collective always experience some kind of instability?

JN: The collective – as a way of working – builds on the enormously strong relationships that humans are capable of creating between each other — this being the reason we have been able to survive so many years as species. These relationships consist of an intense intertwining of emotions and affiliations, which is also why we cannot live a life without pain. They are indeed of a powerful nature. As artists, we constantly try to give words to these relationships and to illustrate them; how do these relationships evolve, and under which conditions do they exist? We often go very much into details in our quest for perspective on our attachments; so, when working in a collective, it is beneficial not be afraid of the conflict or crisis.

IE: In many ways, you can find a special kind of sustainability in the relationships created within a collective - even though, at times, it can be tough to be a part of these relationships. One of the great benefits of working within a collective, which I have experienced myself, is that the collective can become a place to raise difficult artistic and personal questions. It can function, in an internal sense, as a team of dramaturges and advisors. For my part, my collective is often the first place I engage my artistic processes. Consequently, my collective is able to function as a relevant, critical body, because its members know my work and my methods.

JN: Yes, there is no doubt that the collective method of working has some great advantages. A well-functioning collective practises a sort of responsibility towards the other individuals - a respon-

sibility that involves a complete, and often brutal, honesty. If you are not able to be brutally honest, you are, in fact, betraying the essence of the collective. A well functioning collective can be the best and worst critic available - even if it can get quite relentless at times.

Because of the uncompromising nature of art, there are many who will say that artistic collectivity is impossible - on the premise that art only exists on the basis of a single thought, involving an uncompromising devotion to this thought. On one hand, these people are wrong in their belief, but on the other hand they are also right. I believe that a collective is actually able to reach this 'single thought' during the course of a process - it might be instantaneous or it may take years. There are an infinite number of decisions that come before this 'single thought' consensus - based on previous group experience and interaction.

Inevitably, many collectives undergo periods of discomfort as a result of one of its individuals carrying out a task in a manner different than they had originally agreed upon. But collectively, the group grows accustomed to this because of an overall need for consensus. As a result, a collective, becomes quite flexible in regards to accommodating diversity of thought and action. But on the other hand, it can be said that you attain a much purer expression when working hierarchically.

The key issue for an artistic collective becomes less about finding a method to define the 'single thought' so literally, and more about attaining a single vision based on a collective consensus. Can four brains have more insight than one brain? Are they able to understand and notice more? Are they able to make better decisions? What is being compromised on? These are interesting questions for a collective.

I believe the answers to these questions would be different for everyone. Many people that participate in collectives believe themselves to be more intellectually and artistic stimulated - this is not because they feel they are less capable working as individuals, but collectively they feel more constructive in defining how things could look. It is quite a diverse and colourful landscape that is painted when observing the relationship between collectivity and art.

When working in a collective, you almost have to be pragmatic to the point of cynicism, whilst cradling the fragility of the relationships that give the collective its artistic strength. Nevertheless, it is this pragmatism that judges the merit of the art - it gives the sharpest clarity to the work. This is challenging, because the practice of pragmatic thinking can be the wedge that drives a weak idea apart. Solo artists have a much stronger tendency to veer away from this practice when it becomes uncomfortable.

For more info on Bora Bora see: www.bora-bora.dk

For more info on Fanclub see: www.fanclubdance.com

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