

## IV. The *Festuge*: a Historical Theatre, Art and Community Experience

### 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

*Alberto Pagliarino*

The *Festuge* is a historical artistic work practice that involves an entire community of citizens, conceived by Odin Teatret in 1989. It is a well-established practice which has developed over thirty years of activity, and involves the entire town of Holstebro, Denmark, for nine days and nine nights, every three years. Odin Teatret referred to the *Festuge* as a working practice aimed at audience engagement within the *Caravan Next* project, with specific reference to the Holstebro Macro event that took place in June 2017.

The first *Festuge* was born as a tribute to the 25th anniversary of Odin Teatret's activity. The idea behind this first event was not to celebrate the international group of artists, but rather the city of Holstebro that had welcomed them.

Odin Teatret has been the engine and promoter of the week-long festival since its inception, but at the same time, it was important for the *Festuge* to be experienced by citizens as their own event. A particular feature of Danish local communities is *forening*, i.e. local associationism and co-operativism, a growing phenomenon since 1780. It is a spontaneous type of association dedicated to leisure time; each social group has its own association of reference, there is a student association, a military association, a rural association and so on. The idea behind the *Festuge* is to involve all the groups in the city in the realisation of a great festival made up of street events, shows, happenings, meetings, etc. Each

1. This introduction was written on the basis of an interview with Julia Varley dated 04.12.2018.

activity involves several groups and is supervised by an artist who takes responsibility for the staging of the proposed event. Behind all the work, there is a title that is shared by the entire initiative and changes with each edition. For nine days and nine nights, the daily routine is interrupted and all the activities of the city become part of the Festuge.

While every edition has its own title, all editions follow a single main theme, which has always been the same since the first edition of the Festuge: ‘Culture without borders’.

The main theme has become a *fil rouge* that connects all the Festuges that have been organised from 1989 to the present day. The idea suggested by the theme is that Danish culture also stems from the contribution of many foreign artists such as Odin Teatret’s. ‘Culture without borders’ is set against the wider background of other themes, such as welcoming the foreigner and being open towards what is different, and is based on the idea of showing that the apparent contrast between different identities is not necessarily a hindrance for the encounter, but can instead give rise to a great creative vitality. This idea has become the guiding light of Odin Teatret’s artists in their work with the citizens of Holstebro. In the following section, we are presenting part of an article written by Julia Varley of Odin Teatret – actress and director – about the Festuge, which effectively recounts the transformative vision that the artists have been putting into practice every three years in their work with the community of Holstebro.

## **2. Holstebro Festuge: Re-thinking Theatre**

*Julia Varley*

I was on tour in Mar del Plata, Argentina, in 2002. During a lecture I was explaining about the Festuge, the festive week that Odin Teatret organises every three years in Holstebro in collaboration with hundreds of local institutions. I was talking about a scene of the performance *Skibet Bro* that the director Kirsten Delholm had presented on the roof of a supermarket in 1991: «*Three military trucks full of unaware recruits arrived. The soldiers were in underpants. The officer ordered them to descend and perform a series of exercises. They had to change their different uniforms – summer, winter, labour, recreation, parade, battle – in front of the spectators, following the officer’s rhythm*».

I saw the surprised and incredulous expressions of the Argentinians listening to me. They had the same astonishment painted on their faces as the Danish spectators had at the original scene. I continued to narrate:

*Some soldiers had put dissimulation make up on, ready for battle. Others had painted false wounds on their body before lying down on stretchers to be assisted. Precision and efficiency characterised the action. A couple of metres away from them an Indian Kathakali actor, in the splendour of his costume, sat on a stool putting his make-up on to transform his face into that of a demon. On the opposite side, Odin Teatret's street performance characters were lined up guided by Mr. Peanut – the Death on stilts – who, as he danced, pretended to fall on the wounded soldiers.*

The performance on the roof of the supermarket – a succession of scenes that accompanied the building of a slightly futurist ship of Viking inspiration – lasted uninterrupted for nine days and nine nights. This is the duration of each Festuge and of its numerous events, be they cultural or municipal, religious or secular, military or athletic, didactic or recreational, political or folkloric. A performance frame is created around occupations that generally take place in separate environments – factories, schools, offices, sports clubs – and that often go unnoticed because of their everyday normality. By placing these activities in unusual contexts, they become visible and surprising, and the bemused inhabitants become curious as they are forced to reconsider what is familiar from a new point of view. The city transforms itself; it becomes unpredictable, magic.

This effect is the result of the alliance between Odin Teatret and the numerous local institutions and associations that prepare the Festuge for many months. It may be tempting to think that this happens because Denmark is somehow different, a progressive country prepared to immediately accept the disorientation that theatre can provoke in the efficient order and pragmatism of everyday life. In reality, the majority of Holstebro's population protested against the politicians who had invited Odin Teatret to move to their town from Oslo, Norway. In 1967, when the town's inhabitants saw a television programme dedicated to Odin Teatret, they were shocked by the images that didn't correspond to their idea of theatre. Many years of patient and continuous work were necessary to change this attitude.

I continued to explain the Festuge to my Argentinian audience by talking of another performance, this one from 1998, and staged by Tage Larsen, an actor/director at Odin Teatret. It took place on the lake of Holstebro.

*The soldiers helped us illuminate the whole scenery with light bombs. The red and green smoke reflected on the water gave the impression of the apocalypse. Enormous papier-maché puppets, moulded in the preceding months by children of different schools, floated on rafts. Canoes and kayaks danced around the puppets. Some archers struck them with arrows of fire.*

*Bronze statues appeared from the flames and from the incinerated remains. Underwater divers dragged the statues to the shore where a crane loaded them onto a truck to take them to their final destination. The statues had been bought by the city and the Festuge was presenting them to the inhabitants.*

Among the many associations and institutions that contribute their 'culture' and 'professional identity' to the complex tapestry of the Festuge are the soldiers, firemen and police. These civil servants are precious allies in the effort to surprise viewers, to break the prejudices and mental habits we form through everyday experience. One event included about ten policemen performing their road signalling accompanied by an orchestra; the ample and precise movements of their arms, conducted in unison with the music in unison, gave the effect of a ballet. Another time, we put an enormous *papier-maché* face on the tallest point of a fire truck's ladder. From the mouth of the giant puppet, a flow of water sprinkled a couple of old people dancing underneath.

I presented yet another Festuge performance to my sceptical listeners. This one took place in 2001 and the wonder that I felt participating in it was still alive in me when I spoke at Mar del Plata.

*The final performance had been orchestrated by Tage Larsen as a peasant wedding feast, accompanied by ballet and folkloric dances, young people of the different karate and taekwondo clubs fighting, and riders escorting the bride carriage in the middle of fireworks. The stage was an ample field between two hills just outside Holstebro. Some soldiers in uniforms of different eras appeared, followed by modern jeeps and a tank. The space filled with soldiers running in different directions, shooting against an imaginary enemy and rolling on the ground, pretending to be hit. It was a true military manoeuvre arranged with the barracks' commander. Then, in the silence after the battle, a family of immigrants and a Danish one, with two children each, walked slowly to the centre of the deserted field. They silently sat down close to each other for a picnic. Around them surfaced the heads of children buried up to their necks who sang a Danish psalm, while Mr Peanut – Death – walked in the background.*

I could understand that it was difficult for my Argentinian audience, with the memory of their military dictatorship still very much alive, to believe my words. But it was all true. During the nine Festuge that we have arranged since 1989 theatre has brought together the most unthinkable groupings of people, trades, crafts and organisations reducing the distance between the realms of reality and imagination.

That day in Mar del Plata, faced with the incredulity of those listening to me, I decided to invite actors from all around the world to a workshop

designed to introduce them to our projects and activities in Holstebro. Odin Teatret is known as a theatre laboratory. Our performances, pedagogical practice and research on theatre anthropology are familiar to drama students and professionals, but few are aware of our local endeavours and the work that we develop as a cultural and social laboratory. I wanted to demonstrate to the participants that the impossible can be achieved when actors weave lasting relationships with their community. Theatre can overcome prejudices and inhibitions, and instigate quiescent energies through the sharing of a common interest.

I wanted others to experience how a concert can take place in a Lutheran church in which Hebrews, Muslims, Catholics, Protestants, animists, devotees of the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé, Buddhists and Hindus sing to communicate with their own Gods, all under the same roof. Or how rockers with their powerful motorcycles, black skin jackets and tattoos, can plunge into a square that has just been disinfected and was still covered by firemen's foam, each carrying a blonde high-school student on the back seat. I wanted the sceptics to feel the sudden effect of the motorcycles' motors simultaneously turning off while a child plays a classical adagio on the violin, which in turn is slowly drowned out by the sirens of police cars converging on the square from all around town, and by the churches' bells announcing the arrival of hunters accompanied by dogs and a horn fanfare.

I organised the workshop for thirty actors and called it 'Ageless'. The first one was held for the Festuge in 2005. I was helped by August Omolú, the Afro-Brazilian performer of Odin Teatret, and Deborah Hunt, an experienced creator of masks, marionettes and enormous puppets, based in Puerto Rico. To have a direct experience, each participant was responsible for organising an event in a particular environment around town. An actor from Hong Kong chose the post-office. Postmen distribute letters; in contrast, the actor decided to write and personally deliver a postcard to each of them. The whole night he painted oil paintings in postcard format to which he added stamps, and at 5 a.m. we arrived at the post office with a parade of masks and songs. The five postmen at work were astounded. At receiving their postcards, they thanked the foreigners with shiny eyes.

Another actor, an Italian, prepared a visit to the bakery. He wanted to offer them a good espresso so they could taste the difference between Italian and Danish coffee. At 4 a.m., the time when one starts kneading the bread, the masked characters served coffee and a song to some of the town's bakers. In exchange, we received warm loaves to take with us for our next visit: breakfast in an old people's home.

For every Festuge, we do a night parade. One year, we departed at midnight from the corner of the park where the statues of Kai K. Nielsen

and Jens Johansen, the Mayor and the City Manager who invited Odin Teatret to Holstebro in 1966, are placed. Lit by candles, we greeted the stone figures with a poem and continued along the river, depositing small paper boats with lights on the water. There was absolutely no one around, but still along the way a few people saw us from their windows or from a passing taxi. This is how the legend comes about of a city animated by strange beings that appear at all times of the day and night. A municipal politician came to his window that night and saw people climbing over the parapet of the bridge, ready to jump into the river. His first impulse was to call the police; then he remembered Odin Teatret and felt reassured. He knew about us, although he only truly understood the consequences of what we do during a trip to Brazil, when someone said to him: «*Ah! You come from Denmark, the country of Odin Teatret!*».

At least once each Festuge, we make a visit to the cemetery. At times only one character enters to leave a flower and let loose a balloon, other times small groups of spectators follow different storytellers to hear about the lives of those who rest under the headstones; still others sing to serenade the dead.

One year we decided to go to the maternity ward of our hospital. The paper costumes of the big puppets worn by the Ageless actors produced a slight whisper that accompanied the gentle tambourine, giving rhythm to the stride of our procession. We would stop in the corridor while one of us would enter each bedroom to offer a seed to every new family. Later the nurses phoned us to share their emotions and those of the parents. Since then they always invite us to return to the ward. Afterward, we also visit the psychiatric hospital, where we are careful to create a relationship of intimacy with the spectators that maintains a respectful distance, allowing them to feel secure.

For each Festuge, there are an infinite number of anecdotes to remember: early in the morning at the arrival of trains, at the entrance of schools, in the factories' cafeterias, in gardens, museums, along the pedestrian street in the city centre or the empty roads of a suburb... Images go through my mind of buildings made of bales of straw that are rearranged at night to create a coliseum or a pyramid; of mountaineers that climb up the bell tower of the church; of Peruvian actors disguised as devils who run into the lake drumming and splash about in the water to reach the island where an Indian dancer is safeguarded by a group of elegant actors on stilts; of the burial of a boat in the park with the help of a municipal bulldozer; of the construction of a bridge over the stream that separates two villages of different provinces; of the Balinese and young punks' parades that invade a supermarket; of the ballet school pupil who pirouettes on a bale of straw lifted by a tractor; of the photo exhibition

of mixed marriage couples of Holstebro shown in the shop windows of the main street; of the nuptial procession of the giant beaver and penguin greeted by the parachutist dressed as a bride; of the flamenco dancer that converses with the sound of horse hooves...

What makes the Festuge special is the massive involvement of various sectors of the population during nine days and nights. The institutions, associations and individuals accept the interference of theatre in their daily schedules as a stimulus to their specific fields and a confirmation of their professional or cultural value. But this happens also because people like to be active when they feel inspired. They enjoy the collaborative availability of unknown people and milieus. They are touched and changed by aesthetical impressions, poetic scenes, poignant images and direct meetings with artists and other captivating people.

In Danish "*festuge*" literally means "festive week". These weeks are organised in other Danish cities as well, but the Holstebro Festuge is different because it does more than only offer a sequel of performances, concerts, exhibitions and lectures. It is the radiography of a variety of cultures that are active in a particular place – our town – and it is the consequence of half a century of partnership between Odin Teatret and the citizens of Holstebro. The Holstebro Festuge does not prove that the residents of a city can spontaneously unite in brotherly collaboration and mutual acceptance. The reality is that powers of separation still flourish in our society. We can fight against this tendency with thorough planning and years of experience. The army, shopkeepers, police, teachers, firemen, priests, pacifists, students, old people, doctors, immigrants, farmers, and others – they all participate in the Festuge to show their uniqueness, for publicity, to celebrate a particular way of being, to participate in a world that at least a few days allows itself to be guided by imagination and emotions.

As conceived and developed by Odin Teatret, the Festuge is a social laboratory based on *cultural barter* – an exchange of goods or services for anything but money. The participants' mutual interests and benefits are its motor. The actors play the role of negotiators, of knowledgeable builders of temporary performative dialogues between parties who usually ignore one another.

After 25 years of contacts made to plan the Festuge, Holstebro has changed. In the words of our current Mayor, H.C. Østerby, it is a city of great collaboration among disparate groups and minimal ethnic conflicts:

*Odin Teatret makes performances that we barely understand, but gradually we begin to receive other images and perceptions, because now the theatre has created an identity. There is no doubt that the fact of having Odin Teatret*

*has had an enormous impact in breaking down cultural barriers when it comes to the average citizen's understanding of other cultures. Although in Holstebro we have the Trekantsområdet where many immigrants live, we have not had 'ghetto problems' as in several other towns. Odin Teatret has helped to open people's eyes to that which is foreign, and Holstebro is no longer a small closed community<sup>2</sup>.*

2. [www.peripeti.dk/2011/12/02/kunst-ude-pa-kanten-0/#more-1524](http://www.peripeti.dk/2011/12/02/kunst-ude-pa-kanten-0/#more-1524) (2014). Interview with the Mayor of Holstebro H.C. Østerby. Evaluation of Holstebro Festuge in *Kunst på Kanten* (Art on the Margins), a project by Louise Ejgod Hansen and Erik Exe Christoffersen.