

The Carnival Project

General Considerations

The aim of the Carnival Project is to realize a series of productions which focus on the significance of the Notting Hill Carnival within the contemporary socio-cultural configuration of Britain and Europe. To characterize the Notting Hill Carnival as *Europe's largest street festival* is today common practice. The productions should try to make transparent what it really means when two million people celebrate a Caribbean-style Carnival in a European metropolis.

The abstract significance of Carnival in London as an alternative option on self-determined and participative cultural practice roots in the concrete history of Carnival which is the history of its producers: The history of the development of Carnival culture in Trinidad, the history of migration and the transfer of Caribbean Carnival culture to Europe, and the history of the development of Carnival culture in London.

If the Carnival Project wants to intervene in the existing socio-cultural configuration by highlighting the specific quality of the Notting Hill Carnival, it has to conceive the history of Carnival and its producers as a metatext for the productions, as the "script" which organizes the basic structure of the respective productions.

In the initial phase of the project we had suggested a combination of different art form areas:

- Carnival arts: design, music, dance
- British-Caribbean literature and poetry
- photography

We had imagined that the combination of these elements should take place in a *multi-media-exhibition* and a *live-performance*, two strictly interrelated events.

From our perspective, the combination of Carnival arts with literature/poetry is the core of the project, because this combination is based on a long and significant historical interrelation between these two forms of expression. As we will explain later, photography, the level of images, can function as a link between the two other forms whose interrelation is not obvious for everybody at first sight.

Meanwhile, the project process has established another level: the experiment to transform the *street theatre* of Carnival into a *Carnival theatre*, to create a new theatrical form that should contain the spirit of Carnival and reconstruct theatre as ritual.

It is the attempt to rediscover a *wider context* for contemporary theatre, the attempt to regain the lost spiritual dimension of theatre.

Our initial proposal did not go so far, and it was not motivated by the problem of the health of contemporary theatre. But we think it also does not fundamentally contradict this new dimension of the Carnival Project.

There is, of course, an interrelation between the theatre form and Carnival. When we trace back the modern theatre forms to their origins, we find the medieval *Fasnachtsspiele* (Carnival plays) and *Osterspiele* (Easter plays), we find the *Eselsfeste* (Celebration of the donkey) and the *Narrenfeste* (Celebration of the fool), ritual events where the entire population of medieval cities inscenated a cathartic play which displayed an image of the society turned upside-down. The integrative social character of ancient Greek theatre performances, with their specific sequence of tragedy and comedy, is also well known. These theatre forms were based on collective participation, they integrated the entire society (society in ancient Greece: male and free, i.e. no slaves) in a symbolic play which constructed and reinforced the identity and stability of the social organism.

The colossal medieval theatrical celebrations inscenated the tensions between the power elites and the popular sectors of the society from the popular perspective. They represented *the truth of the people*, as Bakhtin named it, the experience of natural cycles like death and birth, or the seasons of the year, and the immortality of these cycles in comparison with the temporary character of an artificially erected hierarchical order.

With the decomposition of popular culture in Europe along with the evolution of modern bourgeois society, theatre was banned from the street and locked into representative buildings which primarily served the bourgeoisie's need of self-affirmation and self-portrayal.

It is the change of format from total representation and universal contents to partial representation and limited contents, a transformation of quantity and quality, which is important in our context.

All attempts to change the function of modern theatre (for instance, Brecht's attempt to instrumentalize the theatre for the cause of the proletariat, Augusto Boal's attempt to construct a "Teatro de los oprimidos" in Latin America, Errol Hill's "Mandate for a National Theatre" in Trinidad, Dario Fo's attempt to construct a popular theatre of laughter in Italy) are confronted with the existing dominant theatre format which was historically developed in the course of the evolution of modern capitalist society.

The attempt to construct a Carnival theatre in London would face the same problem.

But maybe we don't have this problem at all.

Certain historical conditions have facilitated the reconstruction of Carnival in London. The Notting Hill Carnival is the recapture and reinstrumentalization of the public space for the inscenation of a huge participative street theatre. It *is* the collective ritual of joy and everybody who wants to participate can join in and play Mas. Caribbean-style Carnival is an offer to everybody which is accepted by an increasing number of people. Therefore it gets bigger every year. The Notting Hill Carnival is a growing process of popular culture, an accumulative cultural process.

Why should we minimize this format and lock the people's theatre into a conventional theatrical space ?

The only adequate stage for Carnival is the street. Only in the urban public space the Caribbean-style Carnival can display its full format and unfold its genuine aesthetical qualities.

The attempt to transfer Carnival to theatre faces the problem that the necessary reduction of quantity will inevitably reduce the quality.

The ritual character of Carnival cannot be reconstructed on a conventional theatre stage.

No conventional theatre and no conventional form of "play" is in the position to hold the format of Carnival. And there is no real reason to play Carnival in a theatre as long as it is possible to play Mas on the street. Plain-spoken: If traditional bourgeois theatre is dying, we should let it die in peace! It is not within the responsibility of Carnival to heal a sick and exhausted art form. A society which can transform hospitals into hotels should also be able to use theatres as discos, cinemas or amusement arcades. Real theatre will never die and it does not care where it takes place, whether it is on the streets in its modification as Carnival or in a small and obscure basement location, where we can find the most exciting theatrical experiments.

We just want to say that we should not try to achieve the construction of a Carnival theatre in one quick step. We should be aware of the risk that such an enterprise can lead to a repetition of the so-called "Carnival Extravanzas", exotic shows which attract those who are afraid of going to Carnival.

In consideration of the fact that Carnival and theatre are not directly compatible, we suggest to orientate the project concept primarily towards Carnival, instead of subsuming Carnival arts under the objective to invent a new concept of theatre.

In our concept "theatre" is not a form which we want to innovate, but just the neutral space, where an innovative experiment with different existing art forms could take place in order to transgress distinct cultural spheres which exist in contemporary society. Therefore we called the event, that can take place in a theatre, *performance*.

The same can be said about the specific concept of "exhibition". It is not possible to exhibit Carnival. Carnival exhibits itself in the streets once a year.

An isolated installation of costumes or a conventional exhibition of Carnival photographs would be a dead thing. The exhibition experiment has to construct a complex interaction between selected Carnival arts and other art forms which provides the possibility of a lively experience for the spectator.

In this light, *Carnival in mainstream venues* should construct, by the means of inscenation and exhibition, a *dialogue* between distinct cultural spheres and between art and public. It should be the destination of this dialogue to implant the reality of Carnival culture and Carnival arts into current discourses about society, culture and arts.

The productions which will be realised within the Carnival Project have to challenge traditional concepts of art and culture and to contradict preconceived expectations of what is expecting us when we go to the theatre or to an exhibition. This is how we understand the notion *innovative*.

This moment of intellectual provocation which is inherent in our conceptualization of the project, is an imperative which comes from Carnival itself.

The simple fact that Carnival exists in London stimulates and legitimates the experiment of a public reflection about the significance of this fact.

Performance

What is the difference between our concept of *performance* and the conventional concept of theatre?

Every action on stage wants to demonstrate something to someone in order to achieve certain effects. Stage and audience are two different areas, separated from each other by the famous *gap*. It is the gap between showing and watching, between speaking and listening, between producing and consuming. The attempt to bridge the gap between the active and the passive part of a theatrical situation has always been accompanied by the experience of the impossibility to reach that goal. But it is the attempt itself which has kept theatre alive, because enclosed in it we find the need to construct the artificial theatrical situation as an *experience of participation*.

With reference to this problem, we can distinguish two main lines of modern theatrical action.

In the Aristotelian tradition, we find the theatrical situation of *identification*. In an unspoken agreement, the audience and the artists on stage accept from the very beginning the artificial situation. The actors pretend to be someone else, they identify with their role and enact a fictitious story - the audience on the other side of the gap accepts the scenic imitation, it gets involved in it and identifies with the inscened story on stage. The gap is illusionary bridged by arranged identification. Participation is constructed as abstract reconciliation.

In direct contradiction to this line, Brecht conceptualised and practiced a theatrical situation of *distance*. For him, theatre was not a world on its own, it was connected with the outer world. The real cause for the gap within the theatrical situation were the gaps between social classes in reality. He rejected the Aristotelian *catharsis*, the abstract reconciliation, and tried to change the function of theatre and the theatrical situation by introducing special effects (*Verfremdungseffekt*) which should counteract the principle of identification and replace it by critical distance. He developed a special way of demonstrative acting in order to make transparent the distance between actor and role, thus characterizing the "play" as an artificial construction, and he tried to break open the usual attitude of the audience by purposeful irritations. Instead of bridging the gap by illusion, Brecht tried to show it, in order to stimulate the audience's critical capacities. In his concept, theatre is not a place of reconciliation of contradictions but rather an experimental space where adequate methods should be developed which contribute to the promotion of the principle of participation in the extra-theatrical reality.

We can see the difference between both concepts: While the Aristotelian line aims at the psychic disposition of the audience and constructs participation in the dimension of the subconscious, the Brechtian line aims at the level of consciousness and extends the theatrical situation to the extra-theatrical world. In the first model the *story* which is played on stage functions in a psychotherapeutical sense, in Brecht's oppositional model, the function of the *story* is educational.

The dramatic inscenation of a fictitious, artificially produced and paradigmatic story is what both models, in spite of all differences, have in common.

And here we see another reason why we cannot conceptualise our ideas about Carnival within the conventional concept of theatre.

We do not need an artificial fictitious story which represents a problem in the form of personalization because our theme, the history and the significance of Carnival in London, does not have to be codified in a paradigmatic "play". Instead of reducing the theme to a story, written by an individual playwright, we can use *existing elements* of the history which is produced by the "collective playwright", by all the people who make Carnival. We have to work with the product and the producers and select significant parts of the totality of Carnival. These parts have to be combined in a logical structure. The logic of this combination, the *ars combinatoria* which shapes the structure of the performance, is predetermined by our understanding of the history of Carnival and the interrelation between Carnival and literature.

If we start from the assumption that Carnival in London is the construction of a new cultural sphere in a modern western metropolis, we have to base the performance mainly on the immanent capacities of the Carnival culture. That means, the main characteristic of the performance has to be authenticity. Not only the products of Carnival have to be displayed on stage, the producers of Carnival themselves should discover the theatre stage as a platform for expression. This intention is based on the conviction that in *Carnival arts* the product and the producer are not separable.

The performance has to be conceived as an *experiment*. The core of the "play" is the interrelation between Carnival and literature, the "text of the play" is the *dialogue* between these two systems of representation, a dialogue which opens the historical dimension of both systems.

What we have to combine is the conventional form of "reading" with Carnival arts: costumes, music and dance.

The literary works which are used for the performance, are works which were produced in the Carnival context or contain significant characteristics of Carnavalization in their formal construction. Texts of *Earl Lovelace*, *John Agard*, *Amryl Johnson* and *Grace Nichols* fulfill these criteria. The work of Lovelace concentrates on a significant period of Carnival history in the Caribbean, while the British-Caribbean writers represent another perspective: the perspective of migration.

Of course, the inclusion of other writers is possible, dependent upon the final structure of the performance.

From the totality of Carnival arts we have to select representative forms which reflect the historical development of Carnival on two levels: we can inscenate the resurgence of historical forms which have disappeared during the Carnival process and we can contrast traditional technologies and aesthetical patterns of Carnival with innovative forms. The collaboration of excellent Carnival artists from both areas, tradition and innovation, is the basis to achieve this objective.

It is important that the structure of the performance combines literature and Carnival arts in a dialectical way: both forms of representation have to be put on stage simultaneously. They will have to act with each other in order to represent the historical dialogue between literature and Carnival in a lively interaction on stage in which both systems illuminate and explain each other mutually.

The performance experiment implies a change of function of all elements.

"Reading" is not longer an autonomous form of presenting literature, it becomes integral part of the performance. The producer of literature, the writer and poet, is transformed into a sort of "actor" whose role is the presentation of the literary work in the direct Carnival context. On the other hand, the display of Carnival arts has to be elaborated in a way that costumes, music and dance correspond with the literary context.

Both forms, literature reading and display of Carnival arts, have to be contextually modified, they have to be changed according to the requirements of the counterpart.

Thus, the production of the performance is an experiment of deconstruction and reconstruction. Literature and poetry have to be detached from their solitary paper form and established in a new communicative context. This operation should not be a problem if we take into account the oral qualities of British-caribbean literature. Conventional readings of the authors who will take part in the performance, have already the quality of performance. Our performance concept is based on this quality.

Carnival arts have to be carefully removed from their street context, where they unfold their full communicative potential, and redefined within the artificial performance context where they have to communicate with literature, with spoken words. A specific choice of masquerading has to be made, and the ones who wear the costumes on stage have to move in a *choreographically* elaborated way. Street dance has to be transformed into stage choreography, Carnival music has to be arranged and performed in a way that it fits together with spoken text and choreography.

The production of the performance has to focus on the element of *rhythm*: the rhythm of text, the rhythm of music and the rhythm of dance. The structure of the performance is mainly the combination of these rhythms.

We have to introduce now another level which is important for the performance: the level of *images*. The use of photography, slides and film adds another dimension to the interaction of Carnival arts and literature. The increasing significance of images in the contemporary cultural process legitimizes the use of images and image reproduction technology in our performance concept. But technologically produced images are not dominant in our concept, they function as a *structural link* between Carnival arts and literature and as a link between the inscened dialogue of these two art forms and the audience. Parts of the *scenery* will be produced on the basis of photographic material, the use of specific slides attempts to integrate the audience in the performance, the use of film material will connect different thematical parts in the course of the performance.

Beyond the concrete use of images, the notion "image" is helpful for the conceptualization of the performance structure in its chronological course. We suggest to imagine the performance as a sequence of *scenic images*. Each scenic image contains the combination of different performance elements and a specific "dramatic" structure.

If the history of Carnival culture and its producers is the metatext of the performance, we can structure the whole event in three blocks:

À Carnival in the Caribbean .

Á Migration and transfer of Carnival to London

Â The Notting Hill Carnival in London.

Each thematic block will be constructed by several scenic images which highlight specific aspects of the subject.

The performance is not only experimental in its structure whose final shape can only be elaborated by a collective effort, it is furthermore explorative with reference to the stage-audience relation. The dialogue between Carnival and literature performed on stage has also to establish a dialogue with the audience in order to represent Carnival's participative qualities in an adequate way.

We will have to find out how far the principles of *identification* and *distance* can be applied.

Presumably, the performance will realise a combination of both principles. Carnival history, the development of this form of Black popular culture, includes the experience of the audience, as far as it is Black and British. This thematic aspect will produce easy identification. The inscenated interaction between Carnival and literature, however, is unusual and will probably produce irritation and bewilderment.

It is the aim of the performance to inscenate the dialogue between two distinct but interrelated cultural forms in order to set free what they have in common: *the vision* which lies on the ground of both Caribbean Carnival and Caribbean literature, and which was transferred in the context of migration to Europe, where it is enclosed in the Notting Hill Carnival and in new British-Caribbean literature.

To understand the value of Carnival culture, to see the significance of Black culture in Britain and contemporary Europe, and to recognize the strength of the own cultural patterns and practices, these are the effects the performance should have on the audience.

The gap between audience and stage is bridged if the performance achieves its goal: to facilitate the experience of the own creative potential, thereby confirming and reinforcing the confidence in the own concepts.

If we have full confidence in the individual elements of the performance and the immanent logic of their combination, a logic which is only possible in the Carnival context, we have the opportunity to create an original and unique event for both the ones on stage and the audience. Audience and "actors" on stage will discover and celebrate the significance of Carnival in a joint venture.

The performance should be conceptualised as a module construction. The structure has to be flexible and variable in order to be used on different occasions. For the London event we have to construct the most elaborated and authentic form because here we can count on an experienced audience.

That means, the performance should as far as possible be realised on the base of active participation of the original producers of Carnival arts and British-Caribbean literature. The writers will perform their texts themselves and the Carnival artists will appear on stage: The performance experiment will provide the possibility for people who are used to wear costumes on the street to present them on stage. The steelband musicians will be the same who play at the Panorama Steelband Competition, and the Calypsonians are Calypsonians of the Calypso Tent at the Yaa Asantewaa.

We will have to achieve the appearance of key figures of the Notting Hill Carnival on stage: *Russ Henderson, Stirling Bettancourt, Vivian Comma, Lawrence Noel, Vernon Williams*, just to name some. Their participation will contribute to the understanding of the Notting Hill Carnival as an organic cultural-historical process and at the same time provide the possibility to pay homage to these protagonists and grandmasters of Carnival. Without their personal dedication and commitment there would be no Carnival in London.

For possible touring of the performance in Britain or its exportation to the Continent we will have to change the structure in order to adapt it to the respective local conditions.

For the production of the performance the collaboration with experienced theatre practitioners will be necessary: a director will have to co-ordinate the production, a choreographer will have to elaborate the dance elements in collaboration with the people in costumes, a musical arranger will have to elaborate the musical elements in collaboration with the musicians, the scenery has to be developed and produced by professional set-designers, stage technicians are required for the operation of the light and sound equipment and for the projection of slides and film. The use of the possibilities of light for the accentuation of the dramatic structure of the individual scenic images of the performance is highly important. The specific use of light will function as a means to combine the rhythms of music, words and dance.

Furthermore we will need scientific advice with reference to the concrete shape, the use and the significance of historical Carnival costumes.

Bearing in mind all the outlined elements of our performance concept, it becomes clearly visible that the concrete technical production of the performance is quite similar to the production of a complex conventional theatre play. The difference consists mainly in the absence of an individual playwright, who is substituted by the collaboration of experts and artists from different artistical areas.

The performance experiment will be successful if the *collective production* of the stage event will be complemented by an *active reception* from the side of the audience.

Perhaps the performance of Carnival arts and literature can be a basic step in the direction of a Carnival Theatre of the future.

To clarify our intentions and imaginations with reference to the performance, we will now provide an example.

The example of a more elaborated structure of the first part of the performance is meant as a suggestion which can be discussed. It demonstrates what we mean with "scenic images" as modules which compose a wider context.

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